

EASTERN AFRICA AND THE CARIBBEAN SPACE AND IDENTITIES: RETHINKING THE AFRICAN PRESENCE IN THE CARIBBEAN

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Abstract

Studies on African presence in Caribbean amplify the centrality of West African literature and history on the formation of the political, social, cultural and religious identities in the Caribbean. However, literary studies tracing the Caribbean-Africa connection have been conducted in West Africa. Although West Africa plays a major role in the formation of the Caribbean consciousness, this approach has led to a misrepresentation of facts about the contribution of other African regions towards the formation of the contemporary Caribbean space and identities. Tentatively, such literary studies are based on the assumption that the African presence in the Caribbean has everything to do with slavery; hence the connection between Africa and Caribbean is premised on slavery. This paper posits that the creation of the Caribbean social, cultural and religious realities is a continuous process that outlived the abolition of slave trade and slavery both in the Caribbean and Africa. Consequently, the study amplifies the role of Ethiopia in the formation of the Rastafarian Movement in Caribbean literature, the influence of the Mau Mau Uprising on Caribbean literature, and the significance of Edward Brathwaite adopting an African name. Ultimately, the paper argues that the Eastern Africa is a major influence in the formation of the contemporary Caribbean consciousness.

Key words: *African Presence, Rastafarian, Eastern Africa, Identities, Space, Slavery.*

Introduction

The African presence in the Caribbean is mainly a product of slavery which led to mass dislocation and relocation of Africans from Africa to the New World. Indeed, the Middle Passage particularly accounts for the formation of amorphous spaces and identities in the Caribbean since the abolition of slave trade and slavery led to the establishment of a black race in the Caribbean, which has retained a close connection with Africa for centuries. There are,

therefore, identifiable traditional African social, political, religious and cultural retentions in the Caribbean which have also been captured in Caribbean literary works. The African presence in Caribbean literature is therefore an important issue.

Although different regions in Africa have contributed differently towards the manifestation of the African presence in the Caribbean, some regions have been sidelined in literary studies. Notably, a majority of studies have been conducted in the Western African region at the expense of other regions. This study is premised on the need for specific studies on the role of Eastern Africa played in the creation of Caribbean literature. The study addresses an existing gap on the role Eastern Africa towards the growth of literature in the Caribbean. Indeed, the study foregrounds the Eastern African region as a key contributor to the theme of African presence in the Caribbean. The paper is divided into three main sections namely: Ethiopia, Rastafarianism and Caribbean Literature, the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya and Caribbean literature and the Naming of Edward Kamau Brathwaite in Kenya.

Ethiopia, Rastafarianism and Caribbean Literature

The Rastafarian religious group in Jamaica adopts African cultural and religious beliefs and practices. Africa takes the centre stage towards the conceptualization and performance of the various religious activities by the Rastafarians. In particular, the Rastafarian movement is inspired by the life of a former Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. Haile Selassie was the Emperor of Ethiopia from the 1930 to 1974. During his reign, Ethiopia engaged in national and international battles, specifically with the Italians, and came out victorious. It was during his time that Ethiopia became the first black country to join the League of Nations. Haile Selassie was therefore seen, especially in the Caribbean, as a symbol of black emancipation and the rise of Africa. His trip to Jamaica in 1966 is testament to the influence of Ethiopian political, social and cultural practices in the Caribbean.

Members of the Rastafarian group believe in Selassie, who was initially known as Ras Tafari Makonnen before ascending to power. They viewed him as their god. Haile Selassie claimed descent from King Solomon and Queen Sheba mentioned in the Bible, and this made him the best symbol of strength and endurance among Africans in the diaspora. His rise to prominence was also attributable to the biblical prophecy that foretold the victory of Ethiopians against the Italians during the battle of Adowa saying that a “princess shall come out of Egypt, Ethiopia

shall stretch forth her hands unto God,” (Psalms 68:31). Selassie was a symbol of hope for many Caribbeans who desired to go back to Africa as a result of the constricted spaces they occupied in the Caribbean. These Rastafarian ideologies, according to Murrel in “The Rastafari Chant”, originated from messianic hope held by Blacks in diaspora that a king would be born in Africa to deliver all Blacks from bondage. Murrel goes ahead to highlight the teachings of a Jamaican prophet Alexander Bedward who “foretold of a millennium in which Ethiopians will be specifically favoured by an African messiah,” (288). This prophecy was supported by James Lowe on the one hand who wrote about the “Revealed Secret of the Hamitic Race” in Ethiopia and James Webb on the other who argued that the “king” or messiah would liberate Jamaicans from British imperialism. Indeed, the coronation of the Emperor Haile Selassie set the stage for the publication of multiple Pro-Ethiopian texts in the diaspora including *The Holy Piby* (1924), *A Blackman Will Be the Coming Universal King, Proven by Biblical History* (1924), and *The Royal Parchment Scroll of Black Supremacy* (1926).

Rastafarianism is employed in Caribbean literary works as a symbol of blackness. Indeed, Caribbean fictional writers either represent Rastafarianism to depict blackness or to question the perceptions of the ‘other’ towards blackness. Sam Selvon, for instance, in his trilogy *The Lonely Londoners*, *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating* represents the perception of both Blacks and Whites towards the imagined character of Caribbean Blacks which alludes to the universal image of a Rastafarian. Moses, the main character in the three novels by Selvon, observes that white girls idealize and prefer dating Caribbean Blacks who embody the image of the inhabitants of the African jungle which by extension is a representation of Rastafarianism within and beyond the Caribbean islands. From London whites’ perspective, a typical black man as represented in Selvon’s works, wears a rough outlook and is ill-mannered. Universally, members of the Rastafari movement are known to wear dreadlocks as well as to adopt African traditional modes of dressing.

These attitudes of white characters about Africa and blackness subject black characters in Caribbean works to multiple forms of oppression. For instance, Selvon employs the characters of Harris and Bart to shed light on the liminality of black characters regarded as incomplete with regard to blackness either due to their multiple ancestries or their desire to be identified as white by their fellow blacks as well as White characters. On the one hand Bart is isolated from the mainstream black community by both whites as well as his black counterparts due to his black and white ancestries while on the other hand Harris who aspires to act and be identified as a

white man, despite being black, is ridiculed by fellow Blacks as well as despised by white girls who opt for more authentic Caribbean black men. White girls in Selvon's novels prefer hanging out with irresponsible black Caribbean male characters like Cap who don't work, have no income and are homeless to descent and hardworking black men like Harris. This might explain why most of Caribbean black male characters in Selvon novels lead self-destructive and reckless lifestyles in order to match the expectations of the mainstream London dwellers towards an authentic black man.

Rastafarianism in Caribbean literature also encapsulates the power of being black. Indeed, Haile Selassie is the key figure or image of blackness in the Caribbean literary world, and by extension a symbol of black power. The celebration of a black figure in Caribbean literature sought to uplift the image of a black person within universal cultural, social and political spaces. This is a stark contrast to the powerless black character represented by white writers, for instance Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, in African and Caribbean fictional works. The achievements of Haile Selassie put to question the representation of Blacks as the inferior race in African and Caribbean literary works. Unfortunately and ironically, the latter days of Haile Selassie emperorship offer a glimpse into the excesses and dictatorial tendencies of African and black Caribbean top leadership as represented in Maaza Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* and Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and *The Dew Breaker*.

There exists a clear-cut difference between the figure of Emperor Haile Selassie mythologized by members of the Rastafarian religious and cultural outfit as opposed to the image represented in Ethiopian novels by Mengiste and Dinaw Mengestu. In the novels, Selassie is represented as a tyrannical figure that disregards the suffering of his subjects in his desire to maintain the status quo. While the majority of ordinary and innocent Ethiopian characters are maimed or killed, the Emperor is focused on consolidating more power and in the process punishes and even kills all his political dissenters. As the Emperor, he has unchecked or excessive powers to condemn his subjects to death beyond any form of reproach. Ironically, the same guns used to terrorize his subjects are turned against him during the revolution. Characters who happen to be members of the Derg, a military faction, punish and later kill the character of Selassie as represented in Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*. This definitely not the image of the Emperor Selassie we find presented during the conceptualization and practice of the Rastafarian religion.

Sam Selvon, on the other hand, in *The Lonely Londoners*, *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating* questions black solidarity by poking holes into black leadership. Using the character

of B.P and Galahad, Selvon sheds light on the exploitation of blacks by fellow blacks in the name of black solidarity. B.P who happens to be a member of the American Black Panther Movement, for instance, steals party funds from members of the London branch before fleeing back to the United States of America. Galahad on the other hand uses party funds for personal needs. Galahad and his top leadership are always hosting meetings for fellow Caribbean Blacks with alcohol being the agenda in the guise for black empowerment. Instead of helping Moses to travel back to London after concluding his trip to Trinidad, Galahad is excited that the former would be barred from travelling back to London as a result of changes in policies on immigration of Blacks from the Caribbean so that he can take over the ownership of Moses's apartment.

These excesses and dictatorial tendencies of African and Caribbean political leadership subject ordinary Blacks to either live under deplorable conditions at home or to flee into exile as represented in Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* and Dinaw Mengestu's (Ethiopian novelist) *Children of the Revolution*. Caribbean Blacks are presented as outcasts in *Babylon* (exile) who long to escape from exile. This depiction of black characters in the Caribbean novel complicates the status of ordinary African and Caribbean Blacks both in the hands of the white and black political elite. Blacks are represented as victims as opposed to members of dictatorial regimes who are the victimizer. The Rastafarian movement is therefore a protest to both white imperialism as well black dictatorial regimes. In addition, according to Eric Doumerc in "Rastafarians in Post-Independence Caribbean Poetry in English (the 1960s and the 1970s): from Pariahs to Cultural Creators", the rise of Rastafarianism in Caribbean coincided with the birth of black aesthetics in Caribbean literature:

The Rastafarians with their striking hairstyle, Bible-inspired code language and general detachment from "Babylon", appealed to West Indian writers, who were trying to find their own voice at the time. These writers saw a similarity between the Rastas' status as Pariahs and the writer's lone search for a West Indian aesthetics. (1)

The "search for a West Indian aesthetics" had such great influence on Caribbean writings to the extent that some writers who were not biologically black, including Sam Selvon who happens to be of Scottish and Indian descent, felt the need to represent the impact of blackness in their works. This search for black Caribbean aesthetics culminated in the problematization of blackness in Caribbean literature whereby writers as well as critics became more critical of the presentation of Blacks as the inferior, incomplete and of undesirable racial orientation. Interestingly, even when being black is considered desirable, for instance white girl prefer to date black men to their white counterparts, it still leads to destruction. Therefore, the

problematization of blackness or African presence in Caribbean literary works has a bearing on the impact of Emperor Haile Selassie on Ethiopian and Black Diasporic literature.

Ethiopian fictional works problematize the African presence in the Caribbean by providing contradicting images of Emperor Haile Selassie who happens to be the hero and the symbol of power for most Caribbean Blacks. It is also a testament to the inevitability of cultural mutations on traditional African cultures towards the formation the contemporary Caribbean cultures. The novels offer an African perspective to the African presence in the Caribbean. Whereas Haile Selassie is presented as the ultimate hero in the Caribbean mythologies and culture, he is represented as the villain in the Mengiste's and Mengestu's novels.

The imagery of drought and famine represented in Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* contrasts the presentation of Emperor Haile Selassie by Rastafarian as a universal provider, a god. Selassie subjects his people to suffering and death through political killings and starvation. The lion which according to the Rastafarinism symbolizes the invincibility of Selassie, the 'King of Kings', is ironically represented as the symbol of fear and death. Ordinary citizens and political dissenters are on the one hand subjected to death by being thrown into Lion's den, and on the other prevented from accessing their Emperor since the palace is surrounded by lions. This leads to a powerful wave of discontent and opposition among the ordinary Ethiopians, hence the overthrow of the Emperor.

Mau Mau Uprising and Caribbean Literature

The Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya provided materials for consolidation of black power as well as celebration of blackness in Caribbean literature. A number of Caribbean novelists as well as poets used the Mau Mau experience to exhibit the suffering of black men in the Caribbean and Africa as a result of imperialism and colonialism. Blacks in the Caribbean are discriminated against just like their fellow Blacks in Africa. These racialized forms of oppression towards black characters is represented in their works whereby Caribbean writers and poets advocate for more accommodating spaces as well as better appreciation of the black identity within the Caribbean as well as African contexts. Therefore, the choice of African settings in Caribbean literary works testifies to the interconnectedness between Caribbean and African literature; hence the African presence in the Caribbean.

Derek Walcott in “A Far Cry from Africa” presents the Mau Mau experience as a universal black experience. Kikuyu, like all other Africans, are discriminated against based on their blackness. The suffering of the Mau Mau in the hands of white colonialists is, therefore, representative of the suffering and status of black people in Africa and the Caribbean in particular and the whole world in general. Blacks are “expendable as Jews”. Mau mau fighters are labeled terrorists based on the colour of their skin despite the fact that they are resisting White colonial intruders who seek to forcefully dispossess and dominate over members of the Kikuyu community. The Whites employ different strategies aimed at justifying their entitlement to the highlands which were formally owned by members of the Kikuyu communities which include discrediting black humanity against the backdrop of towering white supremacy. Apparently, the death of countless Mau Mau warriors and members of the Kikuyu community is nothing as compared to the death of a white child who is killed by the Mau Mau while in bed.

The flies symbolize the Kikuyu in particular and the Blacks in general. Although they are unwanted, flies have adapted to different environments such that they are present everywhere throughout the globe. They easily adapt to different environmental conditions despite being hated by many people because they feed on rotten things, prefer dirty surfaces and are known to spread many diseases. The Kikuyu are perceived as intruders in the ‘White Highlands’ just like flies, hence the killings. Just like the flies, they are unwanted and the owner of these spaces is obliged to eradicate them to restore hygiene and peace to these civilized spaces. This symbolism of the flies illuminates on the liminality of Blacks world over. Blacks are victimized at home and in exile.

A majority of Blacks adopt imagined identities to escape the reality of the harrowing memories of violence and trauma meted out against them by the ‘other’, including the Black elite in Africa and the Caribbean. Ironically, the Mau Mau freedom fighters are fighting for their land which has been taken by the British colonialists. They stand no chance because the latter employ the help of both Whites and Blacks from all over the world. In a way, the suffering of Blacks in the hands of colonial Whites and Black elite particularly during the decolonization process not only connects but also seeks to liberate Blacks in Africa and the Caribbean. Caribbean Blacks, especially members of mixed race, are torn between supporting the Whites or the Blacks who are being killed in large numbers. For them, Africa is their original homeland, their ‘paradise’ which is their ancestral home as members of the Black community from different parts of the globe.

This branding of Blacks in Africa as beasts implicates the Caribbean which is a product of Africa.

One way of interpreting this analogy would be to assume that the speaker is member of both white and black races, but is also possible to devise a different perspective which depicts the speaker as representative of the Caribbean. The Caribbean is a product of both the European and African historical realities. Some Caribbean nations opted to retain their attachment to their European colonial masters after independence. The speaker compares himself to a “drunken officer of British rule” who is tasked with choosing between “Africa and the English tongue” that he loves.

This relates to the story of Nebu, in *The Leopard* by Victor Reid, which illuminates on challenges of mixed ancestry. The story is set in Mombasa during the struggle for independence in Kenya. Nebu, an African, kills a white man who happens to be the husband of a white woman he had previously had sexual contact with. The murdered white man is in the company of a “half-bwana (of mixed ancestry)” who turns out to be Nebu’s son. When Nebu is pursued by a leopard the liminality of the young boy is highlighted having in mind that his white father is dead and his black father is in danger. To imagine the boy as Blacks in the Diaspora is to problematize the space and identities of the Caribbean as a result of the African presence. The boy wishes to cling to his dead white ‘father’ not knowing that the black man who has killed him and is being pursued by a leopard is his biological father. Indeed, this calls for change of attitudes towards Africa by the Caribbean. Africa with all its shortcomings holds the key to understanding Caribbean space and identities.

The Naming of Edward Kamau Brathwaite in Kenya

Brathwaite is undoubtedly one of the most vocal literary scholars with regard to identities and spaces occupied by black characters in the Caribbean literary world, especially with regard to the interconnectedness between Africa and the Caribbean. Indeed, Brathwaite employs literary works to reconnect the Caribbean and Africa, arguing that the Caribbean spaces and identities cannot be understood in the absence of an in-depth appreciation of the close-knit relationship between the Caribbean and Africa. The Caribbean, just like Africa, exhibits an intimate relationship between history, land, space and identities; hence the African presence in the Caribbean. Consequently, Westernized theories and approaches are inadequate tools of analysis

of the African presence in the Caribbean, which is heavily influenced by history of slavery and allocation of space for Blacks in Africa and the Caribbean.

Brathwaite was concerned about the status of the social and cultural fabric in post-independence Caribbean nations which according to Eric Doumerc in “Rastafarian in Post-Independence Caribbean Poetry in English (the late 1960s and the 1970s) from Pariahs to Cultural Creators” were “unable to provide their citizens with a sense of purpose and shared identity” (5). For Brathwaite, Africa was the ultimate shared identity. In his landmark seminar paper, “The African Presence in the Caribbean”, Brathwaite identifies African seasons in the Caribbean. Brathwaite argues that the season winds which used to propel slave ships from Africa to the Caribbean and back continued blowing to date, hence the intimate and continuous interaction and interdependence between Africa and the Caribbean. It was on this vein that Brathwaite proclaimed that Caribbean was going through a period of “Post-Independence depression” (Brathwaite 5-9). Just like Ngugi wa Thiong’o throughout his vast literary underpinnings, Brathwaite blamed the Caribbean education system which was commonly based on the study of European or American classics. Indeed, Brathwaite together with Andrew Salkey, Gordon Rohler, Wilson Harris and Orland Patterson spearheaded the movement towards the formation of a Caribbean aesthetic. His ideological stand might have drawn him closer to Ngugi wa Thiong’o who was also pushing for the Africanisation the literature at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. It is no coincidence that Brathwaite looked East in his search of true Caribbean black identity, in the presence of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, by adopting an African name—Kamau.

Therefore, it is interesting to find out how and why Brathwaite, a renowned scholar on Caribbean identity and space, decided to adopt a Kenyan name instead of Ghanaian one. Having been a postcolonial critic and a vocal advocate for decolonization of Black literature it is also clear that Brathwaite was aware of the power of naming or renaming. It is clear, however, that through the adoption of the name Brathwaite endorses the centrality of African presence in the Caribbean. The fact that he decided to adopt a name in Kenya during a period when he was being hosted at the University of Nairobi by a department which was metamorphosing from English Department to the Department of Literature also attests to an ideological shift on his side. The department of literature was prioritizing orature at the expense of Westernized curriculum which was also obviously a major ideological shift. It was against this backdrop of a changing host department that Brathwaite decided to adopt a new Kenyan name—Kamau.

Although Edward Kamau Brathwaite might have embraced the name Kamau as an act of goodwill towards the people of Limuru who had showered him with love, kindness and generosity of the highest order, it is also an acknowledgement of the interconnectedness between the East Africa and the Caribbean. Brathwaite spent more time in Ghana than in Kenya yet this did not stop him from adopting a Kenyan name rather than a Ghanaian one. The adoption of a new Kenyan name impacted on his future as a poet, literary scholar as well as a self proclaimed African in the diaspora. If the relationship between Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Kamau Brathwaite is anything to go by, the adoption of a new name by the latter was a clear indication of an ideological shift. During the celebration of the birth of Ngugi's daughter, Mumbi, Ngugi acknowledges the high level of orality demonstrated by Brathwaite during the invocation of the word Mumbi which depicted the latter as an African. Indeed, the East African experience heavily influenced Brathwaite as an acclaimed Caribbean poet and scholar as presented by Anne Walmsley in *The Caribbean Artists Movement*:

Edward Kamau Brathwaite thought that the function of the West Indian writer was to reach out to the people and to produce a type of poetry which would be based on their culture and traditions. Brathwaite saw the writer as an integral part of the nation's culture and as the one who would reveal to the people the value of its culture. (260-261)

These people that Caribbean writers needed to reach out to included both African and Caribbean masses which would act as an endorsement of the interconnectedness between Africa and Caribbean people, their cultures as well as literatures. Brathwaite opted to Africanize his name at the same time the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi was also Africanizing its curriculum as well faculty members which also points to the interconnectedness between Caribbean and African literatures. The fact that he was also in the company of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, one of the most celebrated scholars and critics of the decolonization process in Africa and the Black Diaspora, also adds weight to his action. The adoption of a new name symbolizes and endorses the African presence in the Caribbean. According to Eric Doumerc, "Brathwaite defended the idea of a West Indian aesthetic based on popular traditions and orality", (6).

Conclusion

This paper sought to open new grounds for multiple studies on the influence of Eastern Africa on the contemporary Caribbean literary imaginings. A number of studies have attempted to connect Caribbean and Africa but most of them have concentrated more on other regions outside Eastern Africa. The paper not only affirms the African presence in the Caribbean but also the place of

Eastern Africa in the formation of the Caribbean social, cultural and religious formations. In particular, the influence of Eastern African traditional figures has been brought out through an examination of both the Kenyan, Ethiopian and Jamaican political, cultural and religious practices in Caribbean literature.

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