

CULTURAL HYBRIDITY, ANGUISH AND JOURNEY TOWARDS A NEW IDENTITY: A POST-COLONIAL READING OF DEREK WALCOTT'S POEMS

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ABSTRACT

Synopsis: post - colonial literature is heavily fraught with the sense of a hybrid culture. This inherent hybridity results in a mental anguish regarding one's place in the universe. The lack of pure culture and heritage often thwarts the artistic possibility in an artist. This paper focuses on the anguish and frustration as expressed in the selected poems of Derek Walcott and also establishes the emergence of a new literary tradition that befits the Caribbean identity and existence.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Hybridity, Anguish and Journey Towards A New Identity: A Post-Colonial Reading of Derek Walcott'S Poems

INTRODUCTION

The post-colonial discourse emerged as a conspicuous force in the theoretical world when critics like Edward Said, Franz Fanon or Homi Bhaba first gave the voice of resistance and spoke about the necessity of writing back to the European culture to show that there was and still is a cultural tradition before the period of colonization and that this culture is autochthonous and independent.

Africa, the heart of darkness, sits at the centre of the post-colonial discourse... It was a place that has neither prior existence nor a history. Prominent German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel almost echoes the collective disparagement of the Eurocentric cultures in his Introduction to the Philosophy of History, where he opines;

Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained shut up. . . . The Negro as already observed exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and mortality- all that we call feeling- if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character.

At this point we leave Africa never to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the world; it has no development or movement to exhibit. Historical movement in it- that is its northern part- belongs to the Asiatic or European world (Introduction to the Philosophy of History 99).

The post-colonial critics started answering back the issues. Edward Said that the colonialism is more a socio-cultural construct than a tangible reality Fanon in his Wretched of the Earth, states that the settlers and colonial governments could be displaced only by sheer violence and this raw violence can serve as a means of destroying the mental slavery and the sense of intellectual inferiority (13-20).

The negritude movement whose ideology was formed in the poetry of Césaire and was later developed and spread

by Senegalese poet and politician Leopold Senghor through his poems and essays was informed by a message of returning to the pre-colonial pure art forms. Senghor argued that African culture was completely distinct from but equal and complementary to European cultures. He based his arguments on the examples from the writings of Harlem Renaissance writers such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay etc. and the cultures of his native Senegal. He claimed that rhythm, emotion and humour were the distinctive qualities of African writing and 'emotion' is a Negro attribute, if reason is called European (Ethiopiennes 116). Thus, the negritude writers turned their faces to the pre colonial African cultures and histories to illustrate the achievements of Africans ignored by Europeans. They brought into focus the importance of Timbuktu as a centre of learning in the Middle Ages and the perfection the Benin sculptors reached.

Fanon acknowledged the psychological importance of this historical reclamation but he viewed as an ideology trapped within the European dialectic terms. Jean Paul Sartre has written in his preface to an anthology of francophone African poems edited by Senghor:

In fact, Negritude appears to be the weak stage of a dialectical progression- the theoretical and practical application of white supremacy is the thesis: the position of Negritude as antithetical value is the moment of negativity. . . . Thus Negritude is dedicated to its own destruction, it is passage and not objective, means and not the ultimate goal (Black Orpheus, trans. Samuel Allen 50-51).

Thus, the two streams collide within the same discourse. The questions that rise are - which way to follow and why should a third world author try to prove the literariness of the work? What will be scale to measure the worth of a post-colonial writing? There is but little doubt that there is hardly a nation that has remained unchanged or has retained the pre-colonial status. The literary genres prevalent in the world today- the novel, the drama, the short story and the lyric have been largely shaped by European standards. At this juncture the theory of hybridity, propounded by Homi Bhaba comes to the fore. Bhaba has used the term 'mimic man' to define the contradictory figure that simultaneously reinforces colonial authority and disturbs it. The colonial subject was produced through a discourse of civility. Bhaba argues against the fixity of essentialist signification that Said's study of Orientalism suggests. Bhaba proposes a mixed economy of not only power and domination but also desire and pleasure (Bhaba 156-161). For Bhaba mimicry is a troupe of partial presence that shields and covers a more threateningly racial difference only to reveal the excess and slippages of colonial power and knowledge. Bhaba writes: "the menace of mimicry is the double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority." (Bhaba 129). So in this theory every post-colonial writer is fated to produce a hybrid literature which cannot be free from the colonial influence and such writing, on the other hand is ironically fated to be a kind of writing back to the culture of the colonialist.

Derek Walcott was born in Saint Lucia in 1930 to African-American parents. He received his higher education from the University of Harvard. The predicament of the modern post-colonial writer - the lack of indigenous culture or collective memory of a culture free from colonial intervention- haunted him from the very beginning of his writing career. The colonial history of the Caribbean started with the arrival of Columbus in 1492. Two dominant indigenous groups, the Carib and the Arawaks, came to near extinction due to genocide, diseases and mass suicide as a result of the brutal treatment in the hands of the prospectors who came in search of gold in the coming years. As the Spanish and Portuguese colonizers faced the problem of labour they introduced cheap labour from Africa. The thriving economy then was dominated by two gold's - the white gold, the sugar and the black, the African slaves. The fall of the sugar market triggered the antislavery movement and in 1834 slavery was abolished. In the mean time many Indian and Chinese came

and settled in the islands. Saint Lucia was at first a French colony and then it changed hands when in 1814 the British got it. The result of the unique history is that the amalgamation of various cultures. The various African cultures, French, British combined to give a hybrid culture to its people and helped create the patois and the Creole.

The African people living in the West Indies were estranged from their soils, from their native culture and from their tongues for many generations. The theory of Negritude did not appear to them a promising one. Derek Walcott as a representative Caribbean writer represents the post-modern, post-colonial hybrid artist in search of an identity through many of his poems. The artist is racked with an angst regarding his adherence. As a member of religious minor group he was divorced from the popular belief and his spoken language was the Creole with its peculiar syntax and words and grammar. As a creative artist the lack of native literary forms pained him very much. He ruefully mourns this disadvantage - “. . . we are all strangers here, our bodies think in one language and writes in another”. As a result of his education and cultural upbringing it was possible for him to fully realize the significance of western education system and cultural heritage and what crucial roles they have played in shaping Caribbean identity. “Walcott’s wide reading in modernist literature”, Breslin writes, “is obvious in *25 Poems* (1948) and *Epitaph for the Young* (1949), both written before he left St. Lucia to attend the University of the West Indies in 1950. The influence of Pound, Joyce, Yeats, Eliot, Auden, Thomas and Spender appears as unassimilated borrowings and explicit allusions” (*Nobody’s Nation* 17). When to many artists hybridity is fraught with a shameful incapability to create a pure form, for Walcott it is something creative in itself. His origin in a true mixed world gives him the rare opportunity to relish the taste of a ripe mango, a tropical fruit while reading a western classic. But this advantage also inevitably brings a dilemma for Walcott – he cannot take a fixed stand in the post-colonial period.

This angst of inability, the frustration of a definite identity triggered many of his poems of them “a Far Cry from Africa” is perhaps the most famous of the lot. Walcott discusses the conflict between his loyalties to Africa and to Britain in this poem. The very title signifies the poet’s separation from his home and connotes a cultural alienation and instability, despite its concentration on African themes. Walcott juxtaposes the Africans and the British, focusing on each groups’ transgression. More significantly in this poem Africa and Britain have been depicted in their set colonial images of the vanquished and the conqueror. Yet this poem maintains its originality as it does not glorify Africa in the fashion of chauvinist patriotism when it unflinchingly portrays the inhuman exploits of the colonizers. The distance and impartial objectivity allows Walcott to probe into the faults of each culture without reverting to the bias created by attention to moral considerations. He characterizes the African Kikuyu warriors, so glorified in *A Grain of Wheat* and other literary works centered on the Mau Mau revolution, in a negative light. The poem commences with an urgent note:

“A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt
Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies,
Batten upon the bloodstream of the veldt.
Corpses are scattered through a paradise.” (Norton 1820)

The Kikuyu resembles primitive savages who abuse the fertile resources of their native plain. From this viewpoint, the entrance of the British may appear beneficial not only to the tribes living there but also to the land in general. However, this image of saviour with the proverbial ‘white man’s burden’ is pulverized by the suggestion of the British in the following lines:

Only the worm, colonel of carrion cries:

“Waste no compassion on the separate dead” (1820)

The authoritative figure of the British has been reduced to the ignominious status of a worm which belongs to a lower rung in the evolutionary ladder. The cruel treatment of the invaders towards their captives correlates with the agricultural and technological ignorance of the Africans. Walcott’s attitude and feelings about the two warring forces remain ambiguous. He is equally sorry for “the white child hacked in bed” and the dead Kenyans. In an evocative line he portrays the futility of an empirical comparison of the two cultures. The gorilla wrestles with the superman (1820).

The Africans are associated with a primitive, natural brute strength and the British have been portrayed as an artificially enhanced power but in the final estimation they remain equal in the struggle for control over Africa and in their bloodthirsty hunting instinct- an instinct so richly suggested in the image of beaters and flying ibises.

The Mau Mau revolution was not a simple battle for power and authority, it was the post-colonial paying back, an assertion of power and pride. But for Walcott, who is ‘poisoned with the blood of both’ cultures it becomes impossible to make a definite stand. He fruitlessly asks:

Where shall I turn, divided to the vein

This severely pessimistic image is the direct outcome of displaced isolation. It seems that Walcott feels foreign in both cultures due to his lack of pure blood. An individual’s sense of identity arises from cultural influences which define his or her character according to a particular society’s standards. In this case the poet’s hybrid heritage prevents him from identifying with one culture or another. As the inevitable result he suffers from isolation. In the final stanza Walcott further complicates his search for a legitimate heritage. The final stanza brings to the fore the respective aspects the poet admires in the two clashing cultures.

. . . How choose

Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?

Betray them both, or give back what they give?

How can I face such slaughter and be cool?

He is in a deep bond with the Africa and at the same time the language and literary cultures of England do not lose the charm. The magnetic appeal with each culture brings the tension which goes to the climax in the concluding lines. In this poem the poet blindly searches for an answer but the series of questions suggests that he is likely to find none. Walcott’s divided loyalties engender a sense of guilt as he wants to adopt the British culture but fails to condemn their suppression of nationalistic movements. “A Far Cry from Africa” then is the climax of the paradox of hybrid inheritance.

He is conscious artist and very well knows that it is almost useless and futile to invoke the image of a pre-colonial Caribbean, as the existence of modern Caribbean is inseparable from the colonialism and direct working of the colonialist’s cultures. Eminent post-colonial critic Helen Tiffin writes in the essay entitled “Post-colonial Literatures and Counter - discourse”-

Post-colonial cultures are inevitably hybridised, involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity. Decolonization is process not arrival; it

invokes an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversions of them; between European or British discourses and their post-colonial dis-/mantling (The Post-colonial Studies Reader 95).

The European masters of literature play a prominent and conspicuous role in shaping the poetic voice of Walcott. The European literary giants who influenced Walcott greatly are W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, James Joyce, Dylan Thomas etc. In *Epitaph for the Young* clearly echoes the influence of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a novel which also influenced Walcott's mature version *Another Life*. The early drama *The Sea at Dauphin* has been modelled in language, form and life vision on *Riders to the Sea*. The surrealistic dream poems with lyrical effusion remarkably follow the model of Dylan Thomas and the magnum opus *Omeros* is largely casted in the mould of *Ulysses*. In spite of all these Walcott remains single and retains his originality. C.L. Innes writes that Walcott writes in his own language- a Standard English with splatters of Native names and as his model he has Yeats, who also used Standard English with Irish names to voice a local concern and create universal works (The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English 78).

Walcott was conscious of the predicament in trying hard to define a culture. In "Muse of History", Walcott shows that the search for a tradition, a culture and ruins that support the claim of past is a morbid desire of the old world. By fighting the claim of European culture with another culture, the residents of the new world merely entangles them in a colonial discourse. He warns, ". . . by openly fighting tradition we perpetuate it, . . . revolutionary literature is a filial impulse, and that maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor" (36). So the problem a Caribbean writer may likely face is the absence of history which is able to remind him his rootless existence. What Walcott fears is the slavery to the Muse of history. This sense haunts the psyche of a writer who is aware that the nation is getting a name in history. He writes:

Thus, as we grow older as a race, we grow aware that history is written, that it is a kind of literature without morality, that in its actualities the ego of the race is indissoluble and that everything depends on whether we write this fiction through the memory of hero or victim. (What the Twilight Says 37).

The inherent problem in the literature of writing back has also troubled the psyche of Walcott in the same essay he explains:

In the New World servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge. Written by the descendents of slaves or a literature of remorse written by masters. . . . The truly tough aesthetic of the new world neither explains nor forgives history. It refuses to recognize it as a creative or culpable force. (What the Twilight Says 37).

The problem that now arises is how to make conciliation. The writer cannot rejoice in the nostalgia or in a failure of the Meta narratives. Walcott is a staunch believer in myths and holds that when the fear of recorded history blinds the creative expressions, the myth acts as the positive force by shaping the imagination and creative path. So the redemption comes through the figure of *Crusoe*.

The central figure of *Robinson Crusoe* in the eponymous novel of Daniel Defoe has been a butt of attack by the post-colonial intellectuals. In the novel *Crusoe* is the agent of civilization who does not only survive in a desert island after the shipwreck but also gives language to his slave, a former cannibal, *Man Friday* and gives the island a name. This attitude has drawn hostile remarks and reviews from the post colonial critics who view the novel as an overt propaganda of colonialist ideals. The master slave relationship and the male centric point of focus has been inverted in *Coetzee's Foe*, in

Bassie Head's *The collector of Treasure* (1977) and in *Pantomime* by Derek Walcott where the relation between the white man and the black man has been inverted. Yet, the figure of Crusoe has its positive sides at least for Walcott. In "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory" Walcott elaborately explains the crucial role of the shipwrecked Crusoe in shaping the mass memory regarding the problem of tackling a novel and unknown space.

Deprived of their original language, the captured and indentured tribes create their own accreting and secreting fragments of an old, an epic vocabulary, from Asia and from Africa, but to an ancestral, an ecstatic rhythm in the blood that cannot be subdued by slavery or by indenture, while nouns are renamed and the given names of places accepted like Felicity village or Choiseul. The original language dissolves from the exhaustion of distance like fog trying to cross an ocean, but this process of renaming, of finding new metaphors, is the same process, that the poet faces every morning of his working day, making his own tools like Crusoe, assembling nouns from necessity, from Felicity, even renaming himself. The stripped man is driven back to that self-astonishing, elemental force, his mind. That is the basis of the Antillean experience, the shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards of a huge tribal vocabulary, these particularly remembered customs and they are not decayed but strong. They survived the Middle Passage and the *Fatel Rozack*, the ship that carried the first indentured Indians from the port of Madras to the cane fields of Felicity, that carried the chained Cromwell an convict and the Sephardic Jew, the Chinese grocer and the Lebanese merchant selling cloth samples on his bicycle (*What the Twilight Says* 70-71).

So the figure of Crusoe repeatedly appears in the poems of mature Walcott who has realized the positive sides of Crusoe's role. *The Gulf*, *The Castaway* and *Another Life* frequently brings to the fore the image of Crusoe working with the salvages from the shipwreck to live in an alien, unknown island- an island that offers nothing but unbearable solitude, isolation and estrangement from the standard modes of living. If in "Muse of History" Walcott flatly states that Crusoe's shipwreck is the beginning of a new world, the same expression finds a more subtle, poetic and power outlet in the poems where the poet merges his image with the assiduous sailor working on virgin land to create life and perpetuate it. This Crusoe is unlike the Defoe's superhero, a man who has weakness and creative abilities. Who longs for company but never gives up the task he has undertaken. The men coming from far lands were denied the continuation of their native languages, the next generation had but a small worn out part of it. They lost the cultures and carried to the islands a meagre portion of it. As a result the poet is left with the remaining of a great wreck to prepare his tools and make literature and literary tradition with its help. The poem entitled "Crusoe's Island" describes Crusoe as the cultural fountain of the Caribbean.

Upon this rock the bearded hermit built
 His Eden:
 Goats, corn crop, fort, parasol, garden
 Bible for Sabbath, all the joys
 But one
 Which sent him howling for a human voice?
 Exiled by a flaming sun
 The rotting nut, bowled in the surf.

Became his own brain rotting from the guilt
Of heaven without his kind,
Crazed by such paradisaic calm
The spinal shadow of a palm

Built keel and gunwale in his mind (Collected poems 69). This anguish of creativity is also fraught with the question of language. It was inevitable that the Caribbean people would inherit the culture of the People of Crusoe with the beach parasols, the religion, the myths of sacrifice and exodus and above everything else the language which if handled properly may turn as a lethal colonial weapon. The conversion of the imported Africans, as viewed by Walcott in "Muse of History" was a crucial point in defining the Caribbean identity. The colonizer took the lands, the sugar fields and the profit but the imaginative minds of the Africans got the myth of Exodus, the myth of suffering in Egypt and the never ending search for a promised land (). So instead of remaining a negative force Crusoe becomes familiar and godfather to the inhabitants of the Caribbean.

As the vision gets deeper the poet working on the Caribbean islands is more and more identified with this mythic worker. In order to make a fruitful outcome the poet must have the guts of Crusoe. Walcott sums up the significance of his role in the following lines taken from "The Castaway":

Godlike, annihilating godhead, art
And self. I abandon
Dead metaphors: the almond's leaf like heart,
The ripe brain rotting like a yellow nut
Hatching
It's Babel of sea lice, sand fly and maggot,
That Green wine bottle's gospel chocked with sand,
Labelled, a wrecked ship,
Clenched sea-wood nailed and white as a man's hand (Collected Poems 58)

The people of the new world bear no burden of the past. So the acceptability of a western myth in an inverted way does not hurt their feelings. They are blissfully free from the fetters of History and can create and write their own narratives in their own way. The sea that binds their homes becomes the symbol of infinite possibility and openness. The figure of Crusoe is thus transformed into the national emblem of a nation trying to plant life in a place which has been allotted to them. With the aids of the wreckage of collective memory they are to create. In "Crusoe's journal" Walcott writes about this slow assimilation:

So from this house
That faces nothing but the sea, his journals
Assume a household use;

We learn to shape from them, where nothing was
 The language of a race,
 And since the intellect demands its mask
 That sun cracked bearded face
 Provides us with the wish to dramatize
 Ourselves at nature's cost.
 To attempt a beard, to squint through the sea-haze,
 Posing as naturalists,
 Drunks, castaways, beachcombers. . . (Collected Poems 94)

So the task of a new writer, as envisioned by Walcott is more troublesome and painful. He is given the task of Adam. The new writer is not a mere echo or imitation of colonial literary tradition nor has any burden to redeem a lost culture, a culture that had not nurtured him. The problem is not existentialist, for such a man is Adamic and such man is full of awe for the world he sees. His naming is the creation. The vista that lies before him is large and demands active originality not a nostalgic whining for the past. So the salvation for the artist, as it is suggested by Walcott, can only come from creating a new cultural index that would be his own and set him free from cultural bondage.

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