

A POST COLONIAL TREATISE ON SELECTED POEMS OF DEREK WALCOTT

Loveleen Parmar,
Assistant Professor, PG Department of English,
Government Mohindra College, Patiala.

“Memory that yearns to join the center, a limb remembering the body from which it has been severed, like those bamboo thighs of the God” – Derek Walcott

Derek Walcott (1930-2017), a Caribbean poet and playwright who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992, published his first collection of poetry at the age of fourteen that is full of beautiful and rich landscapes of the Caribbean Islands. As Walcott understood his surroundings, he understood that the identity of a West Indian man was fraught with racial and colonial tensions. In his work, he confronts the conflicts of his European and African ancestry. The prime concern in Walcott’s poetry is to find out the various ways of the making of identity in the colonial and postcolonial Caribbean that is found in the complex connections between Caribbean identities and the Caribbean Sea and landscape. The natives were homeless, brought to an entirely unfamiliar environment, and forced to work. They were deprived from communicating with one another.

The sole purpose of this research paper is to bring out Derek Walcott’s feeling of polarity his dilemmawhich tears him between ‘Africa’, his indigenous country, and the English tongue and culture he loved because it gave him a voice in the post-colonial world. Walcott’s expression of ambivalence, duality, hybridity and postcolonial dilemma will be studied in context of five of his poems viz. Saint Lucia’s First Communion, White Magic, Elsewhere, Ruins of a Great House, and Far Cry from Africa.

In his poem *Saint Lucia’s First Communion*, Walcott finds himself in between the miserable masses. St. Lucia is where the author grew up. He was involved in its culture and traditions. The title of the poem at once suggests the Christian ceremony of communion, the act of sharing Christian sacrament in which bread and wine are partaken as a commemoration of the death of Christ. The impact of Caribbean can be seen on his writings. A critical perspective is offered on the traditional religious practices of Catholicism in *Saint Lucia’s First Communion* where he sees the children as innocent victims of an institutionalized religion. A quote from the poem,

“At dusk, on the edge of the asphalt’s worn-out ribbon,
in white cotton frock, cotton stockings, a black child stands. First
her, and then a small field of her. Ah, it’s First Communion! They
hold pink ribboned missals in their hands,”

The panoramic view of the atmosphere of the church at dusk is described minutely- the setting of one of the most important religious festivals of the island. This is an occasion when all across St. Lucia thousands of innocent children were arranged on the steps of the Church, facing the hot sun, ‘erect as candles’. The only purpose of the poet is to save the innocent children from their plight and misery. The poem has a powerful appeal of the poet over the inequalities and the evil forms of experience that time has unleashed. The poet prays to heal the wounds of the sufferers through reward of liberation. He expresses the misery of the children in the following lines:

So, all across Saint Lucia thousands of innocents were
arranged on church steps, facing the sun’s lens, erect as

candles between squinting parents,
Before darkness came on like their blinded saint's.

White Magic another well-crafted poem urges for the need to save the dying myth, folk culture and the old but great traditions of the West Indies. The major concerns in the poem are loss of history, myth, folk culture and tradition of the poet's native land and the impact of colonial invasion. The nocturnal atmosphere has been captured in which strange shapes move- the creatures of imagination. Walcott focuses that only simple people, like those of the Caribbean islands, can believe that certain things could happen.

"The island's griots love our mushroom elves, the devil's parasols who creep like grubs from a trunk's rotten holes, their mouths a sewn seam."

In St. Lucia, people often thought the hallucinogenic mushrooms would allow them to communicate with natural spirits, or with God. They believed the spirits spoke to them. Some believe the mushrooms are the voice of the Earth, or the Mind of God. The poem highlights the gap that has permanently denied acknowledgement to the native folk rhythms and folk figures in the Caribbean. *White Magic* in its compressed structure builds up an ironic contrast of these strange, animal like creatures appearing in the nocturnal atmosphere in the island's forests and grottos, with the more legendary figures in the 'white culture', and are denied their true identity. They are pronounced fake by the colonizer or are considered to be merely copies of 'white' originals, or translated figures. Walcott mourns the neglect and insult these figures have suffered often in being rendered as fantasy or monsters of imagination. This is the terrible cultural loss that centuries of colonial domination has presided over, eroding a people's natural rhythms, psyche, art and native traditions. The poem is not only a protest, but rather builds up an argument for restoring the pristine vitality of folk rhythms in order to see through the West Indian man's true antecedents in historical, mythical and broad cultural terms. The poem is also a reminder of how superior cultures like the White automatically ensure that all other cultural native forms are barbaric, degenerate and weird. The last line of the poem, *White Magic*, is perhaps the most telling.

"Our myths are ignorance, theirs are literature" is the conclusion of *White Magic*, and this line is accusation, not assent.

Derek Walcott's poem, *Elsewhere*, brings out the literal visions and psychological standpoints of the colonized people. The poem is addressed to Stephen Spender whose work was especially marked by several forms of protest, against oppression, poverty, political corruption, totalitarian regimes, the pressures and evils of modern industrial culture, denial of rights, the pitfalls of democratic setup, ideological warfare and violence against communities and races. Through imagery, rhyming patterns, repetition, thoughts and emotions Walcott depicts the colonized people's lifestyles. In *Elsewhere*, symbols portray how a third world country had colonized the island people. Walcott's language also expresses the torture and adversity the colonized people went through. Many kinds of oppression and hatred are depicted. Walcott wants intellectual freedom. The poem points out that violence and savagery that exists in all the countries. It is not here, but ELSEWHERE.

Walcott uses symbols that retain double meanings throughout the poem. Walcott points to the death, discrimination and brutal neglect of humans across the world, anywhere and everywhere. The poem has no set location but it conveys the features that are anti-human and detectable and are unleashed in the name of power and politics. Walcott creates scenery in *Elsewhere*, by illustrating the conditions of a colonized man.

"Somewhere a white horse gallops with its mane
plunging round a field whose sticks

are ringed with barbed wire, and men
break stones or bind straw into ricks.”

In the opening lines of the poem a cruel labour is portrayed through the line describing men breaking stones and binding straw into ricks in a field surrounded by barbed wire. The setting is prison-like, but not every aspect of the first stanza is depressing. As the men work in a field surrounded by barbed wire, the white horse that gallops around the field symbolizes a blocked hope. The poet presents the post-colonial era where a poet's identity and his art are compared and contrasted in terms of creativity to his European counterparts. He describes how much harsher living in America is, as opposed to back in Saint Lucia.

Ruins of a Great House is another masterpiece from the pen of Walcott that has been written in his perspective of the Caribbean in the Nineteenth Century. The poem opens by describing the ruins of a colonial mansion, the dust of the girls who once lived and worked there, the decaying statues of angels and the remains of coaches half-buried in the mud and cow-dung. Reference to dead limes and leprosy are also indicative of death and decay. Trees and plants that once grew in the fertile soil are no longer there. All it takes is probing with a shovel in the fallen leaves in order to find skeletal remains of animals as well as humans. The use of the words “leprosy of the Empire” also indicate the fall of the British Empire that once stood strong. This poem uncovers Walcott's frustration and anger over the wrong doings of the colonizer towards the African slaves. Walcott also references some historical writers in the poem. A wind blowing in the remaining lime trees reminded the poet of the writings of Rudyard Kipling, the great English author who described the decline of the British Empire while showing how the abuse of the colonized people was justified by quotations from the Bible and enforced by military power. Looking at the landscape of the Estate, the poet is reminded of various British explorers and poets who were the first British colonialists and whose talents as writers make their involvement in the murderous abuse of colonized people seem particularly paradoxical. Just as ash is blown away from a fire, stirred by winds, so the poet felt renewed pain on recalling the writings of John Donne, the great English author. He recalls Donne's words that “no man is an island entire of itself; everyman is a piece of the continent, a part of the main”. The poem's final lines suggest that the speaker ultimately feels compassion, rather than anger, when he looks at the ruined house and is reminded of all the deaths associated with it, even the deaths of the masters who profited from their now dead slaves.

Walcott's poem, *Ruins of a Great House* shows both attraction and repulsion towards the colonizer's culture. Lizards are compared to the dragon to synthesize the small things with the large. It evokes multi-layered meaning. Like an archaeologist, Walcott investigates the destruction of the colonizer's practices as well as their ruined empire. As a poet and colonial outsider Walcott assumes the role of “the padded cavalry of the mouse” who climbs the grill-work wall with his pen and poem to re-examine the ruins of a colonial empire. He experiences a racially mixed identity, a conflict which seems difficult to resolve. Though it expresses his repulsion towards the imperial practices, he is not opposing them rather is showing objectively, their tradition. He feels a kind of compassion towards the imperial culture. The poem ends with the ambivalent lines:

“All in compassion ends
So differently from what the heart arranged:
‘as well as if a manor of thy friend's...”

Walcott's poem, *A Far Cry from Africa* focuses on the racial and cultural tensions arising from colonial occupation of the continent. It explores the history of a specific uprising in Kenya, occupied by the British, in the 1950s. The local Kikuyu tribe, known as Mau Mau fighters, fought a violent 8 years long campaign against settlers, who they saw as illegal trespassers on their land. It is a powerful poem that sets out one person's divided viewpoint on the subject of British colonial takeover in Kenya, east Africa, and its horrifying consequences for local people and the poet himself. The first stanza is an overview of the situation, set in the present. Perhaps these are the winds of change come to disturb a once contented country.

“A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt
Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies,
Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt.
Corpses are scattered through a paradise. Only
the worm, colonel of carrion, cries:
“Waste no compassion on these separate dead!”
Statistics justify and scholars seize
The salients of colonial policy.
What is that to the white child hacked in bed? To
savages, expendable as Jews?”

Dead bodies are scattered in this beautiful landscape, seen as a paradise, an irony not lost on the speaker. The personified worm, made military, has a cruel message for the world – there is no use of compassion for those who are already dead. Officialdom backs up its policies with numbers. Academics point out the relevant facts and figures. But these mean nothing when one considers the human cost. There is a complete loss of humanity. The allusion to the Jews reflects the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis in World War II.

The opening four lines of the last stanza juxtapose historical reference with a visual here and now, embodied in gorilla and superman. The personification of brutish necessity, as it wipes its hands on a napkin, is an interesting narrative device. Napkins are usually white, but the cause is dirty, that of colonial settlement alongside injustice. By repeating what the worm cries in the first stanza - a waste of our compassion - the speaker is bringing extra weight to the idea of meaningless death. Compassion cannot alter the circumstances. A series of heart-wrenching questions are not, or cannot be, answered. The bloody conflicts, the deaths, the subjugation, the cruelty, the need for domination, all reflect the dilemma for the speaker. He feels estranged yet a part of African heritage; he feels a love for the language of the British who are the cause of such strife in the tribal lands. Perhaps the final irony is that, by the very act of writing and publishing such a poem and ending it with a question about turning away from Africa, the speaker somehow provides his own answer. The ongoings in Kenya magnified an internal strife within the poet concerning his own mixed heritage. Walcott had both African and European roots; his grandmothers were both black, and both grandfathers were white. In addition, at the time the poem was written, the poet's country of birth, the island of St. Lucia, was still a colony of Great Britain. While Walcott opposes colonialism and would therefore seem to be sympathetic to a revolution with an anticolonial cause, he has passionate reservations about Mau Mau: they are, or are reported to be, extremely violent—to animals, whites, and Kikuyu perceived as traitors to the Mau Mau cause.

Walcott's work as an ethnographic documentary stresses on the challenges and tensions of postcolonial societies, calling into question the place of colonial history and language in their contemporary culture and identity. For Walcott, past colonial and racial divisions constitute the crux of Caribbean identity. He has often quoted Jean- Paul Sartre's introduction to Franz Fanon's crucial text in postcolonial studies, 'The Wretched of the Earth', where Sartre stresses the duality of the colonial world between the white colonizer and the black colonized: "They must have both. Two worlds; that makes two bewitching; they dance all night and at dawn they crowd into the

churches to hear Mass; each day the split widens. Our enemy betrays his brothers and becomes our accomplice; his brothers do the same thing.” One finds the poetic creativity and imagination can serve to explore and at times unite and re-connect historical gaps, cultural tensions, and racial divisions. Walcott’s poetry probes, engages and at times transcends differences and divisions through poetic imagination. Several critics have pointed out that the Caribbean landscape is central to the imagination and creativity in Walcott’s work. His poetry could arguably be perceived as participating in the creation of an international wishful myth of a racial paradise.

Thus, Walcott was a mixed-race poet with anglo-centric education and thoroughly traditional knowledge. He became the Muse of West Indian history. Credit goes to him for not forgetting his native land even though he adopted the language of the colonizer. I would like to conclude this paper with the words of Derek Walcott:

“I come from a place that likes grandeur; it likes large gestures. It is not inhibited by flourish. It is a rhetorical society. It is a society of physical performance. It is a society of style.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ashcroft, Bill and Griffiths, Gareth *Post-colonial Studies The Key Concepts* Second edition: Helen Tiffin, Routledge 2007.

Baer, William, ed. *Conversations with Derek Walcott*. USA: University of Mississippi Press, 1966. *Google Book Search*. Web. 18 April 2015. Baugh, Edward, *Derek Walcott*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Breslin, Paul, *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. [ISBN 0-226-07426-9](#)

[Brown, Stewart](#), ed., *The Art of Derek Walcott*. Chester Springs, PA.: Dufour, 1991; Bridgend: Seren Books, 1992.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 2008. Print.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. India: Penguin, 2014. Print.

Thiong’o, Ngugi wa. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 2004. Print.

Walcott, Derek. “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory” (Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech). *The Nobelprize.org*. 7 Dec. 1992. Web. 18 April 2015.