



TREATMENT OF HYBRIDITY IN THE POETRY OF DEREK WALCOTT

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Article Info:

Article Received:30/05/2015

Revised on:02/05/2015

Accepted on:05/05/2015

ABSTRACT

Walcott's initial inspiration for writing verse came from the joy of being alive in the beautiful outdoors of the Caribbean islands, where the sea and everything related to the sea began to take on a special significance. With his artist's eye for detail, he portrayed the lights and colours that played in the scenes in the island of St.Lucia and words became specially significant to capture the sounds, the music, the beat of Caribbean life. He wanted to merge his personal inward experience of the rich tradition of the English Language and Literature of his education to enhance his love for the islanders and the islands with a love that only a poet can bring. He felt,

But islands can only exist
If we have loved in them.

The West Indies had experienced a history of slavery, colonialism, deprivation and alienation and tourism was on the ascendancy. Walcott did not feel the need to migrate to England or the United States like many of his contemporaries did. He was dedicated enough to realise that he could work from within towards a creation of the Caribbean culture, by tempering the Standard English idiom used predominantly in the major cities for all forms of discourse with a creolised English incorporating various patois languages. Coming to terms with his hybridity, Walcott was critical of those trying to propagate the Negro ideologies for he felt many politicians were exploiting the memories of the past.

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Recognising His Dual Heritage

In an interview in 1971, Walcott draws attention to the fact that "the problem is to recognise our African origins but not to romanticise them". Thus, he writes of himself

I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger and English in me,
And either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.

In his first collection *In a Green Night Poems*, 1948-60, Walcott appears tentative and innocent in his search for identity. Despite the uncertainty of tone, there is great ardour attached

to his work. He is conscious of the problems of his birth in the West Indies, and he is ready to confront the conflicts of his European and African ancestry. 'A Far Cry from Africa' can be seen as the most representative poem of a period that, despite its surface simplicity of language, is wracked by the violence of racial conflicts in the islands. He sees that colonisation has reduced the African people to the level of uncivilised savages or helpless animals that must be hunted. He perceives their transportation to, and exploitation on, the American continent through the suffering of the Judaic

People~ a metaphor in several poems. His people, too, are as “expendable as Jews”.

Walcott’s metaphors indicate his appropriation of a language that is at its unusual best because it is least restricted by clichés. To draw another parallel, he refers to Spain and the pity of the Civil War. He does pity them all— the black and the whites— who have chosen violence and are the victims of destruction they themselves have unleashed. If the conqueror is a “superman” and the savage is a “gorilla”, then he cannot deny his involvement and suffering in the actions of both races as he is

Poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the
vein?

The question cannot be resolved however much he is torn apart by the conflicts of history. Moreover, how can he choose between them—“this Africa and this England tongue I love?”. The just opinion would be to betray them both or accept his literary talent by admitting what he owes to his dual heritage—“give back what they give”. Though this last is a rhetorical question in his poem, it is also a statement that this identity comes from a flow of history and events that have taken his past and given him his present. He cannot retaliate without suffering immense loss in the future.

Walcott’s Dilemma

This dilemma is one that confronts all West Indian writers and many others of the post-colonial world. Walcott is perhaps at his best when he is most autobiographical. He seems to be working on his thesis— what is history? What is identity? For the Caribbean islanders as he composes, integrates and sums up his most mature thoughts, in each succeeding collection of poems. ‘Names’, which appears in *Sea Grapes*, shows his preoccupation with the same theme and Walcott starts the poem with a sense of his own history that is contained in the sea surrounding the islands. He negates the fact that identity can be named for he has “no nouns” with which to introduce himself. His race can be interpreted as his community or his tribe; it is also the personal race he is running towards an individual identity. The identity of a post-colonial poet in the English language is further compounded

by the fact that he comes from the French-speaking part of the islands. And he cannot deny his French heritage. As a twentieth-century poet, he tries to focus on various worlds— the reality of the present and its fantasy in reflection, and the past in his own imagination. Yet he is not able to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion.

Walcott develops his theme of exile and alienation through each collection bringing together the underlying distress of people—from the lot of Amerindian tribes, to the mixed races in the West Indies, and finally includes the tropical exile of the white conquerors. He sees his own people’s fractured identity against the topography of the islands, where the pictures of land and sea serve to stress the nostalgic loss. Walcott becomes more elegiac and sombre as his thesis unfolds further until he feels that there is no identity he can retrieve except what is recorded in the sea; so, ‘The Sea Is History’. The poem stretches his sense of disillusionment beyond his immediate origin. Walcott seeks answers in other histories of suffering and uses those as metaphors to describe the condition of his own people. He also debates the theory that Biblical events are not historical but mythical. Throughout the poem, he is aware that the blacks have little individual history they can reconstruct but must reverse to the year 1492, when as the essayist Sir John Squire describes “Columbus’s doom-burdened caravels” sailed to the West Indies by mistake.

Walcott admits that, more or less, all the African writers of his generation were natural assimilators as there were quite well-versed in Greek, Roman, and English literatures through their essential classics. In his poem “*The Sea is History*”, there are frequent references to the Bible when Walcott compares the journey of African slaves transported to the Caribbean shores under colonial rule to the flight of the Jews in the Old Testament seeking the promised Land. It is densely packed with various images from the Bible. He possesses a unique way of meditation upon suffering and death with an ironical perception of life. His framework resembles more or less, the framework of the masters English versifiers but his rhyme scheme is

not like theirs. Walcott's lines go on moving from one verse to another. "Goats and Monkeys" is an exercise of supreme irony. The poet turns Othello into an allegorical figure with whom he can identify because he, too, is black, competing for recognition in a white society.

The poet sees his Caribbean heritage as a set of collected values that he can use to challenge the materialistic, consumer society the islands have become, where individualism is only another brand of self-centredness. Even as he calls his poetic talents a "mulatto of style" Walcott wishes the multiracial, polyglot islander to liberate themselves and really celebrate their hybrid culture that actually represents all the world's major cultures. Walcott's deepest desire is to give his subdued society a voice of its own. He also perhaps wishes for a future where the dilemma of being black in skin and white in mind can be solved irrevocably.

It is interesting to know what Walcott's name was suggested as Poet Laureate in England as successor to Ted Hughes. In a sense, this has greater significance than the coveted Nobel Prize for it meant that Walcott would represent Britain as a multicultural society and reconfirm the link between the Crown and the Commonwealth countries. He remains, however, a "teaching poet" who alternates his time between Boston in the United States and his home in the Caribbean islands.

Walcott tries to focus on various worlds the reality of the present and its fantasy in reflection, and the past in his own imagination yet he is unable to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion.

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