

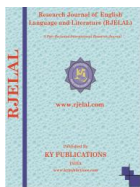


## AMBIVALENCE AND HYBRIDITY: A STUDY OF RACE, HISTORY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE SELECTED POEMS OF DEREK WALCOTT

Dr. H K JHA

Amity School of Liberal Arts

Amity University Haryana



Article Received: 09/02/2020

Article Accepted: 29/02/2020

Published online: 04/03/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.1.369](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.1.369)

### Abstract

This paper is based on the hypothesis that Derek Walcott, the celebrated Caribbean poet, and the recipient of Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992, reflects the deeply ingrained complexities of colonial experiences in his poetry. In his creative pursuit, Walcott continuously 'engages and grapples' with his traumatic background, and addresses the issues of post-colonial fragmented identity. Based on Walcott's selected poems, this study aims to explore Walcott's realization of the problems of colonialism, his unflinching love for English language, his ambivalence and hybridity.

**Key Terms** : colonial history, grapples, post-colonial, fragmented, ambivalence, unflinching, ambivalence, hybridity

### Introduction

Derek Walcott, the celebrated contemporary poet and playwright, and the recipient of Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992, was the first Caribbean poet to receive the prestigious honor. Walcott's family, which was of English, Dutch, and African descent, was part of the minority Methodist community. Born on the island of Saint Lucia in the British West Indies, Walcott's entire range of poetry revolves around the traumatic colonial history of the island, that had systematically eroded the concept of self-identity in the mind of the native Caribbean. In *the New York Times*, William Grimes, (2017) points out that "Walcott is known for highlighting the harsh legacy of colonialism and the complexities of living and writing in two cultural worlds." Walcott lived a nomadic life wandering between different cultures, which, eventually, infused richness and depth in his writings. Walcott's work reflects how racial conflict between different cultures can enrich one another to produce even more compelling work (Breslow, 2015).

As he grew up, Walcott became aware of his mixed racial ancestry, and when he understood his surroundings, he realised that his identity was fraught with racial and colonial tensions (Mahajan, 2015). The theme of 'roots divided' became a rich source of material for most of his poetry (Spacey,2019). Walcott's literature deals with the impact of western influences on the Caribbean culture. Most of his poems are characterized by allusions and a symbolic imagination which are, at the same time, personal and Caribbean (<https://allpoetry.com/Derek-Walcott>). Walcott has amalgamated "the rich and diverse landscape and its painful history with the classical tradition of Western civilization"(Breslow, 2015). His poetic voice reflects a blend of his ear for the English language and the muffled voice of his own people" (Grimes, 2017). In his article, *the Fame of Walcott*, Walcott claims that "nobody owns poetry. It can come from anywhere, including tiny islands bereft of substantial museums or monuments. With his mixed African and European blood, and the pidgin of the Caribbean streets, Walcott has been able to bring a

fresh Renaissance complexity to Caribbean literature”(Mason, 2014).

Though Walcott published his first book of poems titled *25 Poems* at the age of eighteen, his recognition as a mature poet came with *In a Green Light* published in 1962. These early poems depict Walcott’s “primary aim to create a literature that remains truthful to the West Indian life”(https://allpoetry.com/Derek-Walcott). Most of the Walcott’s poetry, composed in a variation of *terza rime*, explores the prime beauty of the island, the colonial burden, the fragmentation of the Caribbean identity, and the complex role of a sensitive poet in a post-colonial world” (Bixby, 2000). In his 1981 work *The Fortunate Traveler*, Walcott appears to be under the severe pain and agony as a black poet living in United States having a feeling of estrangement from his Caribbean homeland.

Walcott’s most ambitious work, *Omeros*, published in 1990, recalls Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the contemporary Caribbean setting. The major theme in this highly acclaimed work is the contemporary Caribbean life and the pain of loneliness and exile. The sea, memory, the joys and terrors of physical love, the close distance of family, black women surrounded by a touch of local colour, palm trees, the green earth known as home or elsewhere: these were his subjects (Als, 2017). The *Odyssean* figure of Shabine in Walcott’s *The Schooner’s Flight* explores his rage against racism and rejection of colonial culture (https://www3.dbu.edu/mitchell/walcottl.htm).

### Childhood and Adolescence

The experience of growing up in an isolated volcanic island, with a traumatic past, has had a strong influence on Walcott’s life and work. Walcott feels himself deeply rooted in the Caribbean society with its cultural fusion of African, Asiatic and European elements.

However, the adoption of a European cultural heritage, alongside his African ancestry, means that the creolized identity pervasive in the Caribbean island becomes one of Walcott’s chief concerns. Both his poetry and plays, written in English though

with some French idioms scattered throughout, enrich these complexities. There are references to the colonial classics with the language of the sea, the mountains, the villages, the winds and the phantoms. All in all, though written in English, Walcott’s poems revolve around the Caribbean ethos. Walcott’s poem *A Far Cry from Africa*, published in 1962, explores the history of a specific uprising of Kenya occupied by the British in 1950. The poem “expands on the thorny issue of colonial take over and its bloody consequences” (Andrew, 2019).

How can I face such slaughter and be cool ?  
How can I turn from Africa and live ?

*A Far Cry from Africa*, Derek Walcott

Known all over the world as ‘a black poet writing in English’, Walcott’s *A Far Cry from Africa* focuses on the racial and cultural issues arising from colonial occupation of that continent, and the subsequent dilemma, for the speaker, who was Walcott himself (Andrew, 2019). Throughout his life, Walcott is torn between his love and passion for the English language, with which he expresses himself poetically and the ancestral blood ties of his African family oppressed by the very people whose native language he has inherited as his mother tongue (Andrew, 2019). Most of the core themes in his poetry is rooted in the exploitation and oppression of his own people by the colonial rulers. The inherent irony is that he feels love for the language of the British who were the cause of such strife in the land, he belongs to. In an article entitled *West Indies II: Walcott, Braithwaite and Authenticity*, Bruce King remarks : “The poem *A Far Cry from Africa* is remarkable for its complexity of emotions”:

I, who am poisoned by the blood of both,  
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein ?

*A Far Cry from Africa*, Derek Walcott

By writing such a poem and ending it with a question about turning away from Africa “how choose / between the Africa and the English tongue I love,” the poet articulates his own dilemma. The arrogance of the colonizers has had victimized the entire generations of Africa. However, when the Africans turned violent, Walcott was torn, and could not so easily side with his own Kikuyu tribe. His life-

long conflict between his love of English and the knowledge that it is the colonizer's tongue and the oppressor's language, and thus part of its power, is a critical factor highlighting the depth and strength of Walcott's poetry. Quite often Walcott explored the problems of Caribbean identity against the backdrop of racial and political strife (Lee, 2017).

### Crisis of Identity

Despite exploitation and torture made by the colonizers, Walcott could not fully condemn them as he has received so much from them. His vocation, English, is the language of the colonizer, and yet as a moral human being, he feels he must condemn colonization (<https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/far-cry-afric>). Ripped apart by the inner conflict, violence and racial prejudice, Walcott terribly suffers from a crisis of identity. The severe pain and trauma that fills Walcott's heart is the pain of ethnic conflict, divided loyalty and fragmented identity. As he grew up and understood his surroundings he realized that his identity was fraught with racial and colonial tensions (Mahajan :2015).

To serve their 'imperial enterprise', the colonial masters brought an influx of migrants in the form of indentured labors from Africa, India and China. In course of time, the Caribbean island accommodated diverse cultures and languages. However, this multiculturalism always remained an inspiration for Walcott. His poetry celebrates the amalgamation of these diverse elements prevalent in the colonized world. In *The Schooner Flight*, Walcott says :

I am just a red nigger who loves the sun  
I have a sound colonial education  
I have Dutch, nigger and English in me.  
and I am either nobody or I am a nation.  
*The Schooner Flight*, Derek Walcott

Walcott's poetry is a dialogue between the Caribbean island and the world outside. He speaks from both sides without compromising either his Caribbean creole identity or his egalitarian Western education. His poems embody both these contexts. His cosmopolitanism is a unifying force that unites the old world with the new world while

simultaneously acknowledging the gulf between them.

### Melancholy

"Written with a precise language that echoed the classics of literature", Walcott's poetry maintains a thin undercurrent of tragic elements, which is a product of his melancholic relationship with past (Hanes & Schudel, 2017). His deep-seated trauma is depicted in his portrayal of history, landscape and his verse. There is a longing to reconcile his multiple cultural identity with Africa, Europe and the Caribbean islands. Throughout his work, Walcott establishes himself as a poet responsible for articulating the Caribbean's misery and agony at the loss of their cultural identity.

The entire focus of Walcott's attention is on restoring a sense of cultural identity. By highlighting the impoverished condition of the post-colonial Caribbean land, the poet is skeptical about the region's potential for progress. What remains constant is, however, Walcott's desire to repair and reconstruct what has been lost. (<https://ida.mtholyoke.edu/xmlui/bitstream>)

### Symbols and Images

Walcott's traumatic relationship with the history of the island becomes alive with the use of powerful symbols and images. He feels responsible for providing a voice to both displaced people and their past, yet, he doesn't seem to be satisfied with his contribution. This overwhelming sense of accountability contributes to the lingering sadness that is characteristic of Walcott's writings (Tung, 2006). Much of Walcott's imagery is concerned with the remains of the Caribbean and its inhabitants (Tung, 2006). The symbols like 'sea' and 'nature' are a reminder of the trauma as well as a healing factor. The pain to discover self and history, anchors on the fact that "sea is history". The sea is a symbol that has witnessed the destruction of roots with the huge influx from Africa, India and China (Tung, 2006). Walcott is sad to witness the changes modernization has caused to his land, destroying the purity of the landscape.

In Walcott's poetry, one can find an impression that the Caribbean has no true roots---

neither in England, nor in Africa. "Walcott's quiet and emotional tones are the haunting reminders of his grief over the loss of pristine history and culture. His technique of repetition, mesmerizes the reader with its subtle and compelling effect. (Tung, 2006).

Never to go home again,  
For this was home  
*Exile*, Derek Walcott

There is a haunting melody and the lingering sadness in these lines which have been created by a particular use of meter and rhyme (Tung, 2006). "With his mastery over the art of subtlety, and the tone of sheer devastation captured in his verse, elevate his poetry to the level of heartbreaking renderings. Though these metaphors are in English, they capture the natural landscape of the Caribbean Islands in an extremely vivid manner" (Mahajan, 2015). There is an obvious presence of tragedy in his work, which eventually intends to heal the emotional wounds (Mahajan, 2015). Besides the presence of melancholy, Walcott's frequent and particular use of repetition are the chief characteristics of his work.

There is a deep connect between his verse form and central themes. The loss of a homeland ravaged by its own tragic history, and the poet's longing to root himself are the crucial component of his cultural identity. (Tung, 2006). Sometimes, he feels disposed, and cries: "I cannot right old wrongs" (*Codicil*, Walcott).

#### The Biblical References

In the first part of Walcott's poem, *Names*, the arrival of the African slaves on the Islands is described by drawing a parallel with the events in the Genesis. Walcott, not only, uses Biblical allusions, but also extensively uses sea as a metaphor (Mahajan, 2015) :

My race began as the sea began,  
with no nouns, and with no horizon,  
with pebbles under my tongue,  
with a different fix on the stars.

*Names*, Derek Walcott

Walcott's symbols forcefully explores the themes discussed in his works that deal with the lasting scars --- personal, cultural and political.

#### Ambivalence, Hybridity and Identity Crisis

Walcott's *A Far Cry from Africa* delineates the colonizer's inhuman attitude towards the colonized people (Azam, 2016). Quite often, his poetry revolves around cultural instability and alienation from Africa. His attitude towards the natives is of compassion, absolute love and heartfelt patriotism. However, Walcott's ambivalence along with identity crisis and inhuman treatment by the White settlers deepens the depth of his poetry (Azam, 2016).

He feels agonized to remember how the European imperial powers destroyed the natural environment of the island and enhanced the human agonies. The colonized mindset has put the whites in rich and powerful position whereas the blacks, with sheer poverty, are the passive receiver. Walcott firmly denounces the exploitation of the Caribbean land by exploiting its virginal beauty (Mantellato, 2018). Throughout his life, Walcott has frequently articulated the emotional voice of the Caribbean land, its people and culture. Walcott's large and extensive work is marked by his radical attempt at finding a new 'voice' for West Caribbean experiences and their diversified communities and peoples (Mantellato, 2017). His writings deal with the lasting scars—personal, cultural and political—of British colonialism in his native land and the opposing African and European influences that characterize his West Indian heritage (Encyclopaedia, 2019).

Nevertheless, his dilemma is rooted in the appreciation for the Western society and his love for the universal appeal of the English language. Yet, he remains a vocal critic of the brutality of the colonizers for the devastations of the colonized world. This conflict, which is the crux of his poetry, gives space to 'ambivalence, hybridity and identity crisis.' His ambivalent love and hatred for the colonizers, and his unflinching love for his own people and land, confirms his 'divided loyalty and ambivalence' (Azam, 2016).

### Conclusion

Derek Walcott's work reflects the wanderings of a man who has produced rich, multilayered poems that draw on the poetic traditions of many nations, ranging from modern England, Russia, and Spain to ancient Greece (<https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/far-cry-africa>). Walcott's life-long conflict between his tiny native island and the wider world, between his love of English and his knowledge that it is the colonizer's tongue and the oppressor's language – and thus part of its power, significantly, portrays his divided and ambivalent attitude.

The poems *A Far Cry from Africa*, *The Sea is History*, and *Names* can, therefore, be effectively seen as representing an understanding of the complexities inherent in Caribbean history and identity. Walcott's poetry is an example of how a master craftsman can turn his ambivalence into a creative art ([encyclopedia.com](http://encyclopedia.com)). Even till the end of his life, his dilemma was not reconciled. Throughout his life, he remained torn by the inner conflict and the pain of having a fragmented identity. Though he celebrates hybridity and cosmopolitanism of Caribbean culture, he never loses sight of its colonial past and remains critical of the forces shaping its future.

### References

#### The Primary Text Books

- [1]. *The Poetry of Derek Walcott 1948-2013*, Selected by Glyn Maxwell, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014
- [2]. Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems : 1948-1984*, New York Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1987

#### Works Cited

- [1]. Als, Hilton, 2017, *Derek Walcott, a Mighty Poet, Has Died*, The NEWYORKER, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/derek-walcott-a-mighty-poet-has-died>
- [2]. Azam, Iftekarul, 2016, *Ambivalence in Derek Walcott's Poetry: A Comparative Study* IJELLH Volume IV, Issue V, May 2016

(<https://ijellh.com> › OJS › index. php › OJS › article › download)

- [3]. Bixby, Patrick, 2000, *Derek Walcott*, essay: Spring 2000, Emory University. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derek\\_Walcott#cite\\_note-Bixby-44](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derek_Walcott#cite_note-Bixby-44) Retrieved 30 March 2012
- [4]. Breslow, Stephen, 1993, *Derek Walcott: 1992 Nobel Laureate in Literature*, *World Literature Today*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Spring, 1993), pp. 267-271 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40149065>)
- [5]. George Lamming, 1984, *The Pleasures of Exile*, London: Allison & Busby Limited
- [6]. Grimes, William, 2017, *Derek Walcott, Poet and Nobel Laureate of the Caribbean, Dies at 87* <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/17/books/derek-walcott-dead-nobel-prize-literature.htm>
- [7]. Kamau Brathwaite, 1993, *Roots*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press
- [8]. Lee, Richard, 2017, *Nobel laureate, poet and playwright Derek Walcott dead, aged 87*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/17/nobel-laureate-poet-and-playwright-derek-walcott-dead-aged-87>
- [9]. Mahajan, Nidhi, 2015, VOL. 7 NO. 09 *Cultural Tensions and Hybrid Identities in Derek Walcott's Poetry*,
- [10]. Mantellato, Mattia, 2018, *Rooting Identities: Derek Walcott's Connection(s) with the Caribbean Environment*, *Le Simplegadi*, Vol. XVI-No.
- [11]. Mantellato, Mattia, 2017 *A CHOREOGRAPHIC DIALOGUE WITH CARIBBEAN ...*, *Lingue e Linguaggi* [Lingue e Linguaggi](http://LingueLinguaggi.unisalento.it) [index.php › linguelinguaggi](http://LingueLinguaggi.unisalento.it/index.php/linguelinguaggi) › article ›
- [12]. Mason, David, 2014, Review: *The Fame of Derek Walcott*, *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 67, No. 3, (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43488922>)
- [13]. Roy Osamu Kamada, "Postcolonial Romanticisms: Derek Walcott and the Melancholic Narrative of Landscape," *Eco poetry: A Critical Introduction* ed. J. Scott



- Bryson, Salt LakeCity : University of Utah Press, 2002.
- [14]. Spacey, Andrew, 2019  
(<https://owlcation.com/humanities/Analysis-of-Poem-A-Far-Cry-From-Africa-by-Derek-Walcott>)
- [15]. Stephanie Hanes and Matt Schudel, 2017,  
The Washington Post  
([https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/derek-walcott-nobel-laureate-whose-poetry-celebrated-the-caribbean-dies-at-87/2017/03/17/ce544178-0b20-11e7-93dc-00f9bdd74ed1\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/derek-walcott-nobel-laureate-whose-poetry-celebrated-the-caribbean-dies-at-87/2017/03/17/ce544178-0b20-11e7-93dc-00f9bdd74ed1_story.html))
- [16]. Tung, Jaime C. 2006 *The Sea is History, Reading Derek Walcott Through a Melancholic Lens*, an unpublished thesis submitted to the Department of English, Mount Holyoke College, Department of English, South Hadley, Massachusetts,
- [17]. Walcott, Derek 1930-----, 2019,  
(<https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/walcott-derek-1930>)
- [18]. [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu) (*Rooting Identities: Derek Walcott's Connection(s) with ...*)
- [19]. <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1141/cultural-tensions-and-hybrid-identities-in-derek-walcotts-poetry>
- [20]. <http://ida.mtholyoke.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10166/157.pdf?sequence>
- [21]. <http://www3.dbu.edu/mitchell/walcott.html>