



CULTURAL PLURALITY IN THE CARIBBEAN THEATRE: DEREK WALCOTT'S *TI-JEAN AND HIS BROTHERS*

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ABSTRACT

The historical dislocation of the Caribbean Islands has implications for the societies that have emerged. The accidental mode of the “discovery” of the place and the brutal manner of occupation by the colonizing forces have given rise to what some scholars refer to as a formless society. With the exception of the indigenous Indian population which was largely swiftly exterminated, the inhabitants of the Caribbean either migrated or were forcibly transported there. With this conglomeration of people of different races and religious beliefs and with different motives of being in the Caribbean, it was difficult to create a common Caribbean ethos, especially, given the fundamental inequalities created by the institution of slavery. The objective of this paper is to examine the implications these historical realities have on the Caribbean social system and ultimately on its literature, particularly with reference to the dramatic forms. The methodology is to first scrutinize the primary text –*Ti-Jean and his Brothers* – and then have recourse to relevant critical materials in an attempt to further elucidate on the subject. In the end, it is found out that these historical antecedents have given rise to the creation of a plural society with different sets of cultural values existing side-by-side the other. This cultural diversity as reflected in Derek Walcott’s play, *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* is discussed in this paper.

Key Words: Caribbean, Theatre, Cultural, Plurality, Walcott, Historical

INTRODUCTION

The history of the theatre in the Caribbean can be traced to the presence of various races in the area and the relatively unhampered practice of their rituals and festivals. The white masters felt little compulsion to effectively curb the cultural habits of the subservient elements of the society. And so, since the non-white West Indians still had memories of their various mother cultures and the attempts by the white masters to suppress individual differences was negligible, the non-white West Indians tried to make their mode of entertainment reflect such cultural allegiances by exploring African cultural expressions and largely ignoring or playing down the white presence and domination in the Caribbean, as far as the content of the drama was concerned. This was the more so in the light of the fact that there was the growing wave of nationalism in the West Indies which showed the Afro-Caribbeans trying to

deflate the influence of Western cultures on their life and convincing themselves of their ethnic and racial worth. The result was that their literature projected African rituals, myths and folklore in an attempt to re-activate black pride and belief in the African race since this was the culture of an oppressed people.

On the other hand, the theatre of the white genteel was articulated along Western lines. Practiced mainly by visiting foreign theatre companies and local amateurs who had time on their hands, their plays followed Western patterns. This reflected their prevailing lack of desire to project the unique identity of their mother- country because of their lack of nationalist attachment to the West Indies. The result of this interlocking of different sets of cultural values – traditional and Western – is that there exists in the Caribbean theatre, and indeed, in

Caribbean literature in general, several cultural elements existing side-by-side the other.

This cultural plurality as reflected in Derek Walcott's *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (1970) is what is examined in this paper. Born in Castries, St. Lucia, Walcott is racially mixed and he eagerly acknowledges his "mongrel" identity. This enables him to embrace both Western and African influences. It is Walcott's belief that for true nationalism to exist and for the authentic Caribbean personality to emerge, one cannot adopt one culture to the neglect of the other. This is why he consistently blends elements of both traditional West Indian and European cultures in his works. In coping with a changing contemporary world, Walcott, like Selvon, believes a judicious blend of both traditional and Western ways of life is what is needed.

METHODOLOGY

Being a literary research, the work is mainly library-based. First, Walcott's play, *Ti-Jean and his Brothers* which is the primary text in this study has been rigorously examined. Then, in a bid to strengthening the focus of the discussions, recourse has been had to such relevant reference materials as journal articles, reviews, critiques, books and reviews.

Cultural Plurality in *Ti-Jean and his Brothers*

Briefly summarized, the subject of *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (1970) centres around the traditional trickster figure who uses his innate cunning to outwit the Devil. The play is based on the myth of the duel between three boys and the Devil. Within the world of the myth, Ti-Jean is characterized as a lover, King and man in the moon. In the play, Walcott explores Ti-Jean's strong survival instincts and places particular emphasis on his potential as a possible West Indian leader.

The Prologue of the play provides background information about the characters and introduces the main source of conflict in the play. We are told that the play is about three boys who lived with their mother in abject poverty in a hut on the fringes of a magical forest. We are also told about the boys' individual attempts to take up the Devil's challenge. The Devil challenges the boys to make him feel anger, compassion or any kind of human emotion for a reward, while their failure to achieve this end will lead to the boys' death.

The Devil is described in awesome terms. He has dead eyes, his skin is as white as a leper's. He is also the owner of half of the world and the seat of intrigue, evil and destruction. In the play, he appears in the guise of the Papa Bois, the owner of the forest, white planter and colonialist. He has wrecked havoc on the entire world. He lures blacks into his plantation, exploits, outwits and finally eliminates them. By doing this, the Devil keeps the blacks perpetually in bondage. The Devil also tries to perpetuate the anonymity of the blacks as seen when he calls Gros-Jean everything except his real name. The implication here is that by imposing a name on somebody or something, one distorts that person's or thing's identity to suit one's own purpose. This is all part of colonial brain-washing which Walcott identifies and protests against in the play.

The Prologue also encapsulates the basic qualities of the three boys which inform their struggle against the Devil. Gros-Jean, the eldest son is described as being very stupid despite his immense strength. He is full of his self-importance and has boundless confidence in himself. To him, physical strength is the key to success. Gros-Jean refuses to accept his mother's advice, yet foolishly, later accepts the advice of the old man of the forest whom he does not know. He ignores his mother's injunction that he should identify with the other inhabitants of the forest, i.e., the bird, the frogs and the insects, and rather, acts very disrespectfully and aggressively towards them. As a result, when he later requires their help, they desert him. Gros-Jean's belief in the strength of his arm is no match for the white planter's cunning and the latter succeeds in irritating Gros-Jean to the point of anger and frustration and then devours him.

Mi-Jean is described as being only half as stupid as Gros-Jean. He is a fisherman with intellectual potentials and his ambition to rise from being a poor fisherman to becoming a ship captain and later, a lawyer, provides an index to Mi-Jean's intellectual ability and prefigures his slim chances of outwitting the Devil. Mi-Jean feels that in his encounter with the Devil, he is protected by his decision not to be aggravated into speech. His guiding principle is:

Debate is just a hook

Open your mouth, the bait in!

And is you they going to juck (1970, 122).

Yet, it is Mi-Jean's love for debate on philosophical and legal matters that is his undoing. He manifests signs of mental slavery and derives pleasure from identifying with the white culture. Mi-Jean is the archetypal mimic man who lacks respect for his roots as is evident in his antagonism of the creatures of the forest. His slavish mentality is a barrier to practical thought. So, the Devil easily outwits and devours him.

Through Mi-Jean's defeat, Walcott warns the West Indians of their impracticality of attempting to defeat the colonial master by imbibing the metropolitan culture and attempting to beat the whites at their own game. This is an illustration of what Walcott says in his essay, "What the Twilight Says": "Once the New World black had tried to prove that he was as good as his master, when he should have proved not his equality but his difference" (1970, 9).

This is exactly what Ti-Jean does. Ti-Jean is vastly different from his brothers. He is described as the man in the moon and by extension, the source of inspiration to West Indians. The strategy he adopts in his confrontation with the Devil is greatly different from that of his brothers. Ti-Jean seeks and receives his mother's advice and blessing. On the strength of this, he is friendly with the forest creatures and in return, they help him in his duel with the Devil. Ti-Jean refuses to obey the Devil and rather goes on the offensive and creates his own rules which undermine the Devil's authority and in the end, provokes the devil to the point of showing anger. Ti-Jean's guiding principle in this confrontation is to trust his instincts and exhibit rank disobedience towards any repressive and evil authority because as he says:

Who with the Devil tries to play fair,
Weaves the net of his own despair
(1970,17).

One of the questions raised in this play is: "what are the possibilities of the emergence of a Caribbean personality with the freeman's sensibility?" In addition to this is the issue of the circumstances under which the Bolom can free itself from the Devil and achieve life.

The Bolom is an unborn foetus which is the twilight zone of life. The outcome of the brothers' struggle

to outsmart the Devil will decide the Bolom's fate of life or death. So, this confrontation between the Jean Brothers and the Devil is of utmost importance to the Bolom. The Bolom is described in the play as:

The Shriek
Of a child which was strangled,
Who never saw the earth light
Through the hinge of the womb (1970, 97).

The Bolom is a symbolic reference to those historical mistakes which perverted the quality of life in the New World and debased the meeting between the Old World and the New. The discovery of the New World heralded an opportunity for the Old World inhabitants to start afresh. The New World held out a lot of progress of regeneration and symbolized something pure and vital. However, this dream was perverted by reality. The New World soon became an extension of the Old World and became characterized by greed and exploitation which led to slavery and later, the emergence of the plantation society.

The West Indies can, as a whole be regarded as an aborted foetus. In Walcott's opinion, the circumstances which can give life to the Bolom i.e, the new and free Caribbean man are explored in the encounter between the three boys and the Devil. By making Gros-Jean and Mi-Jean fail, Walcott rejects what they represent and their tactics of coping with the ravages of history. Rather, Walcott projects Ti-Jean's native wit and cunning as well as his compassionate heart and respect for advice and lower creatures as the qualities necessary to overcome colonial domination and erase the West Indian colonial mentality.

The play can also be seen as one of great revolutionary potential. Walcott implies in the work that the true revolutionary must seek co-operation from all elements of the society. Egoistic behaviour and emphasis on Western learning are shown to be of no use in this situation. In addition, the play asserts the themes of rebellion and liberation from white tyranny. It attempts to liberate West Indians from self-hate and myopia created by the colour-based ethic of slavery, as well as make them aware of the different ways in which they can look at themselves and their environment.

Nationalism involves the re-evaluation of the self and of old values. It also embraces certain new

yardsticks for oneself and abandoning colonial models. For Walcott, the substitute for colonial models should not solely be derived from Africa or Europe but should involve an amalgamation of both traditional West Indian elements and European values as the ideal form of nationalism since the West Indians cannot adopt one culture to the neglect of the other. Walcott in fact, insists that it would be abhorrent to him to say: "I wish we were English again" or "I wish we were African again" that the reality is that one has to build in the West Indies (1979, 285). To him, it is the duty of the West Indian to possess his land, tame and cultivate it and finally produce something original, for the West Indian "behind all his roles and faces possesses the possibility of a rich, complex and integrated self which is his by virtue of his experience" (1979, 285). In the play, the three different stages by which the Afro-Caribbean tried to come to terms with his exile and also fight his white oppressor are shown. His first response to oppression was violent as seen in the slave revolts. Next, the ex-slave attempted to overcome the white master by acquiring the trappings of Western culture, mainly through education. This response was also counter-productive since it focused on the imitation of Western models and revealed a fundamental lack of confidence on the black man's part. The third response was a combination of aggression and humility. It also heralded the triumph of the "small" man, i.e., the folk who were the most denigrated and under-rated members of the society. This forms part of Walcott's revolutionary vision. For Walcott therefore, the theatre is the preserve of the "small" people as he sees theatre in the everyday life of the people: in poverty, sex, obscenity and deprivation. His theatre is thus, that of victims and losers and one in which folklore provided the core of the drama as evident in the play.

Literature is generally accepted as the recreation and interpretation of life. It results from conscious acts of men in society and is the product of tensions, conflicts, anxieties and contradictions which make up the community. The West Indian literary artist seeks to clarify history and eliminate moral issues in a milieu where the history of the people has been characterized by slavery, colonialism, uprootment and dispossession. However, Walcott believes that

servitude to the muse of history can only result in a literature that is sociological, self-pitying and full of revenge. He has this to say about the literature:

Yet most of our literature loitered in the pathos of sociology, self-pitying, and patronized. Our writers whined in the voices of twilight. Look at this people! They may be degraded, but they are as good as you are. Look at what you have done to them". And their poems remained laments, their novels propaganda tracts, as if one general apology on behalf of the past would supplant imagination, would spare them the necessity of great art. Pastoralists of the African revival should know that what is needed is not new names for old things, or old names for old things, but the faith of using the old names anew, so that mongrel as I am, something prickles in me when I see the word Ashanti as with the word Warwickshire, both baptizing this neither proud nor ashamed bastard. This hybrid, this West Indian (1970, 9-10)

Walcott thus, regards history as fiction which is subject to the vagaries of memory and thus, open to misinterpretations or re-interpretations.

The play, on the whole, reflects Walcott's intention which is to show the cultural plurality in the Caribbean theatre. In the play, both traditional West Indian and European elements are fused together. For instance, while the chorus of forest creatures is reminiscent of the African animal fable that was transferred to the Caribbean through slavery, the very concept of the chorus derives from classical Greek drama. And so, the play tackles the issue of the West Indians' "loyalty" for at least two cultures. It is Walcott's belief that for true nationalism to exist and for the authentic Caribbean personality emerge, one cannot adopt one culture to the neglect of the other. Exhibiting this double consciousness, Walcott consistently blends elements of the two cultures in the play and even attempts to re-evaluate certain aspects of colonial history. Even the myth on which the play is based – the myth of the duel between three boys and the Devil – is derived from the traditional trickster figure who uses his innate cunning to outwit the Devil.

A popular motif in Caribbean literature is that of the “castaway”, i.e., a man ship-wrecked on a barren piece of land and bereft of his original cultural identity. With no past and a bleak presence and future, the “castaway” has to figure out how to reconcile the diverse cultures offered by the diverse “pasts” of the Caribbean. At the root of his dilemma is the problem of cultural identification with a particular set of norms and folkways which could provide the framework for everyday life. This is particularly important to Afro-West Indians because through slavery and subsequent colonialism, the Afro-West Indians have been taught to relinquish, or at least, disparage their original African culture or locally evolved black Creole culture, and through their response to the deeply inculcated feeling of worthlessness, they tend to identify themselves by an imitation of Western culture as can be seen in *Mi-Jean*. And so, Walcott tries to help West Indians re-assess their “castaway” status and overcome the pain of alienation and dispossession by “pushing” them into an acceptance of their original loss and moving beyond this void. To Walcott, the West Indian must dispassionately explore and make peace with his history and milieu and this cannot be done by adopting one culture to the neglect of the other. Rather, the disparate facets of the West Indian experience must be coalesced into the evolution of the new man and society.

Walcott, thus, considers the problem of being heir to several cultures occasioned by the diverse racial groups found in the West Indies. This is a common psychological dilemma of New World blacks. However, the author focuses his attempts on how to evolve the prototype of the ideal Caribbean personality from the various influences in the Caribbean social system. To him, the West Indians must possess a federated consciousness which will enable them to accept their complex history and different experiences. This complexity of the West Indian experience is reflected in his works where he draws his ideas and myths from both West Indian and European literary and cultural expressions as evident in *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*. It would seem Walcott agrees with Selvon on this point since the latter urges West Indians in *A Brighter Sun* and *Turn again Tiger* to possess a federated consciousness which will enable them to rise above trivial ethnic

considerations. Edgar Mittleholzer puts it more succinctly when he observes thus :

If the West Indies was to evolve a culture individually West Indian, it could only come out of the whole hotch-potch of racial and natural elements of which the West Indies is composed; it could not spring only from the negro. (1950, 215).

And so, it is Walcott’s belief that the West Indians must come to terms with their complex history which will enable them to embrace their dual racial and cultural heritage as demonstrated in this play.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that Walcott is a poet of reconciliation in as much as he accepts the dual racial and cultural heritage of the West Indies and also discourages the West Indians from confronting the past with rancour as evident in the play. Aware of the historical dislocation of the Islands and of the cultural, linguistic and psychological responses which West Indians had to make in the Disapora, Walcott tries to resolve the contradictions inherent in this experience by exploring how these disparate facets of life can coalesce into the evolution of the new man and society. He tries to help West Indians puzzle out their cultural and racial allegiances as well as find a panacea for their sense of displacement.

The concept of the “castaway” refers not only to the physical and psychological dispossession of the West Indians, but also to the spiritual dispossession of their homeland. However, to Walcott, the “castaway” is not helpless and despairing. He is encouraged to turn his isolation into something positive. Just as Crusoe learns to fashion something out of nothing and learns new methods of survival, the West Indians are urged to learn how to fashion a new relationship to their milieu and cast off the shackles of mental and cultural slavery.

Nationalism involves the re-evaluation of the self and of old values. It also embraces certain new yardsticks for oneself and abandoning colonial models. To Walcott, for true nationalism to exist and for the authentic Caribbean personality to emerge, one cannot adopt one culture to the neglect of the other. Rather, the best of both traditional and Western ways of life must be married together to successfully cope with a changing contemporary

world. This is why he consistently blends elements of both traditional West Indian culture and European culture in his works as is evident in this play. While the chorus of forest creatures in the play is reminiscent of the African animal fable which was transferred to the Caribbean through slavery, the concept of the chorus derives from classical Greek drama. Also, the play as a whole is based on the popular traditional West Indian myth of the duel between three boys and the Devil; the traditional trickster figure who uses his innate cunning to outwit the Devil. The Devil in the play is a composite representation of the slave master, white planter, and the Papa Bois. He is too formidable and complex an opponent to be overcome by mere brute force or mimicry but by an amalgamation of several suitable strategies as Ti-Jean does.

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