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## Towards an (“other”) Language: Syncretist Re-creation in Walcott’s Dramas

**Nirjhar Sarkar**  
Asst. Prof.  
Dept. of Eng  
Raiganj University

Derek Walcott’s linguistic practice not only enriches his dramatic craft but becomes a medium to stage his culture’s stories. With the instrument of language, he sought to overcome the boundaries of identity and confines of ‘class’ or ‘race’. As West-Indian people had suffered the centrist scorn for Creole and its continuum, Walcott deftly fashioned an (‘other’) language where words, forms and grammatical constructions testify to the overlap of several languages- one that can suspend nation and ethnic identification or social hierachization. Practicing extreme polyglossia his dramas decentre the hegemonic power structure and its monolithic and closed world. Before Walcott, few dramatists could utilise the post-colonial stage as the space to articulate resistance and claim cultural dignity. This paper probes further Walcott’s extraction from the whole language continuum and shows how it rebuts the polarities of standard and folk, oral and scribal to initiate an egalitarian style of performance for his audience.

St. Lucian poet and playwright Derek Walcott was strongly aware of the need of connecting his work to the larger outside world and at the same time of upholding West-Indies as a self-sustaining cultural unit. His plays unfold a fictional world laden with ‘realistic’ and socially diverse language communities, conflicting world views, intersection of formal and informal speech manners. The Anglophone Caribbean islands were part of the British Empire and as Walcott belonged to the “circle of self-civilizing, courteous people” (Breiner, 86), he was blessed to be nurtured by “sound colonial education”. As an artist in dialogue with the European tradition, his creative mind was drenched in Jacobean verse and alert to the sonorousness of English speech. But in order to assert the originality, he parted with the hypnotising spell of English; for him, language was neither a mechanism of power or enlightener. Instead, fidelity to the beauty and rhythm of speech of St. Lucian community enabled him to translate the collective utterance of theatre into an demotic expression:

“The smell of our own speech,  
the smell of baking bread,  
of drizzled asphalt, this  
odorus cedar...” (*Another Life*, CP, 185)

As the coloniser has historically denied the linguistic validity of the indigenous language, only by forging polyphonic utterance could be reclaimed autonomy and dignity of the native speaker. Distrustful of radical decolonisation, Walcott’s drama drew from a large pool of sources, popular and literary, native and classical and their influence remains flaunted in the dramatic texts. All these have fertilized his imagination so as to abrogate “the privilege of English in order to accommodate other tongues as well” (Tompkins, 201). Caribbean region presents rich assortments of Creoles and rich linguistic varieties of different European languages like Spanish, French or English. Caribbean presents dynamic linguistic

communities and multiple language societies had a formative impact on the artist Walcott. As Laurence Breiner has commented, “Walcott from the very beginning trained himself to be a part of the European tradition, but his linguistic setting in St. Lucia presents an extreme from the general West Indian case.”(173). As a consequence of different histories of colonisation over the centuries, it has become a region of extensive creolisation. Created from fusion of different languages, they underscore the syncretism of disparate cultures. Over time, writers have incorporated various local vernaculars, appropriated and integrated various language codes. While English has continued to be prime cultural medium and continues to be esteemed for its functional communicative value, unlike some of the Anglophone fiction writers of the period, Walcott broke away from hierarchization of Standard English. The liveliness and colourful speech of the underclass, the constant shift in language register could be best captured in the performance. In plays like *Mamaguy* or *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* the diglossic register often marked the boundary between informal and formal speeches. Walcott from the beginning was aware of the variations of pronunciation system, intonation patterns, syntax, and idiom, lexical inventory. He’s always sensitive to the speech culture of different islands; not for nothing, the dramatic works of Walcott are described as “microcosm of the gradual change towards greater exploitation of the language varieties available to the West-Indian writer” (31).

Linguistic diversity that informs the speech habits of the Caribbean people demands that the speaker uses forms belonging to a wide spectrum of the available linguistic levels. Walcott’s plays richly exploit indigenised varieties of English or overlap of creoles or what Gilbert and Tompkins call “broadly comprehensible linguistic continuum” (185). As outposts of several European powers in the Caribbean, different islands had different lexical base. He was fervent opposer of the purist model and by constant combination and recombination, he posed challenge to the notion of universal or ambiguous language. Walcott in his plays endeavoured to manifest these vigorous and dynamic linguistic varieties; he set himself the task to transform the paradoxes of Caribbean heritage into art. Some of his prominent contemporaries like Selvon or Braithwaite deployed all aspects of this continuum to decentre the ideological domination. Multiple voices and perspectives interplay of standard and non-standard or corrupt forms embodied the “powerful form of resistance to hegemonic cultures”. (186). It not only meant cultural self-awareness but at the same time vented ambiguity and uncertainty of self-definition. Working within this continuum, Walcott sought to dismantle the static model of language formations with English at the core and other regional variants as merely peripheral. The use of regional linguistic standards and distinctive Creoles has become a means of articulating shared communal values and the local cultural heterogeneity. And at the same time creole continuum could displace the privilege of the Standard English and the authority of the colonial power. Though creole variations largely derive from “appropriated and indigenised European words” (185), they “maintain significant pre-contact elements, particularly in their phonology, syntax, and lexico-semantic structures.”(Tompkins,185) Though Walcott did not endorse Creole or Patois as the only dramatic language because the limited comprehensibility and insularity of it across different islands. The use of creole even becomes a salient theme in his late work *A Branch of Blue Nile*. Maintaining poise between formal English and patois was not mere stratagem but also an acknowledgement of inbuilt cultural necessity. In exploiting his native cultural resources, George Lamming, also, modulates from Standard English prose to the open communality of dialogue carried out in Caribbean dialect as in the conversation between the boys, in the discussion in the barbershop, in the shared intimacy of the women. An important precursor of Walcott, V.S.Reid in his new novel *New Day* experimented with the artificial composite of Standard English and Jamaican Creole. Quite unlike Braithwaite, Walcott did not espouse

English based creole as the perfectly suited medium for producing verisimilitude as it had its root in oral culture and tradition. Instead he fashioned a linguistic register where through overlap of languages an expanding web is created and source languages get metamorphosed:

“There is no language in itself, nor any universality of language, but a discourse of dialects, patios, slangs and special languages. There exists no ideal competent speaker- hearer of language, any more than there exists a homogenous linguistic community”. (Qtd. in Tompkins,200)

Walcott, very consciously, turned away from the prevalent language choices between orality and the literary as they were split on class and race lines. Through a fusion of orality and scribality, he reconfigured his mentors like Synge or Kuroshwa. In 1954, Walcott made a major breakthrough with French Creole. During this period, French-based Creole was a primary language of the rural areas and of the poor people, while English was the language of towns-the language of British administration and law. For Walcott metropolitan French was a foreign language in school and French-based creole was the dominant language of communication. Thus complications of belonging to a many- languaged society and unique language situation of his homeland and problematic issue of choice faced Walcott with ambiguity of choosing literary medium. Many Anglophone writers had judged creole as unaesthetic and unsuitable for communication with the international audience. To Walcott belongs the credit of elevating the vernacular forms to an artistic medium. The language of a very early play *The Sea at Dauphin* has drawn critical comment and its analogy with Synge’s classic *Riders to the Sea*. A moving story of Dauphin fishermen’s lives, it aims to produce verisimilitude to the actual language of the fishing folk. Walcott, though aware of the trouble with St. Lucian idiom and syntax, employs local registers, blending Francophone patois elements with Anglophone creole; it is steeped in everyday experiences of the St. Lucian sea beach. Even when it was performed first in Jamaica, its idioms faced the Jamaicans with the problems. When it was published in the first major collection *Dream on Monkey Mountain and other Plays* it underwent revisions by removing some French-creole idioms. Inspired from Synge, Walcott stresses that his play would be a venture, a new experience in linguistic experimentation and much of it would be Caribbean equivalent of the Irish peasant culture:

“When I read Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* I realized what he had attempted to do with the language of the Irish. He had taken a fishing port kind of language and gotten beauty out of it, a beat, something lyrical.... If you know very clearly that you are mutating such and such work, it isn’t that you are adopting another man’s genius, it is that he has done an experiment that he has worked and will be useful to all writers afterwards. When I tried to translate the speech of the St. Lucian fishermen into an English Creole, all I was doing was taking that kind of speech and translating it, or retranslating it, into an English inflected Creole, and that was a totally new experience for me, even if it did come out of Synge”.(Breslin,85)

Some of the patois vocabulary are concerned with instruments used in fishing ‘calabasse’(calabash), cooyon(fool), grace(beach). In the 1970 edition the extended patois song of the Dauphin women is given glossing with English translation. Breslin comments that in this edition Walcott was more considerate for his international audience. In his analysis of the linguistic structure Breslin cites an anecdote from Walcott’s life. As Walcott was once talking with a group of fishermen, looking for the name of his fisherman hero, he misheard the name Arthur as exotically African name of Afa. He was concerned chiefly with rendering the vitality of the speech of the local fishermen or capturing the “form of language that can succeed on the page, when a play is printed.” (Breiner6). The St. Lucian life was often identified with French creole or patois but long before Walcott had noticed that French creole

or patois was not much considered in writings and it was in *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* that brought the experience to its centre. Sometimes straight French creole is accompanied by their Anglophone translation. Here he shows a remarkably inventively approach to St. Lucian vernacular speech. Local legends and folk life rooted in oral culture are given moving expression in sustained deployment of vernacular lines. Individual lines, especially in the speech of the Devil and the demon's voice. As for instance,

DEVIL: "Bai diable-la mnger un'ti mamaille"

(Give the devil a child for dinner) (69)

Or,

DEMON'S VOICE: Bolom, faire tout ca mwen dire ous"!

(Child, do all that I ordered you) (97)

Such glossing foregrounds the cross- cultural reality of the text. As the play opens with Frog, Cricket and Firefly, a Bird in the African storytelling tradition with allusion to the Greek dramatists, its cross-cultural character come to the fore. Ngugi also refused to gloss the song about Gikonyo and Mumbi which registers a sense of cultural difference and embodies a cultural situation. In the Prologue, wordplay alternates between folkloric and classical allusion, oral convention and Western literature. In *Malcochon* or *Six in the Rain* also such glossing is used for probably allowing some concession for the international audience. As in the very opening words of Chantal, the wood-cutter

"Me'me si'ous crier moin Chantal

Nom moin i'c'est Tarzan

Pis moin jetter ti m'ielette crachard

A dans yeux un magistrat

Eur mettaient moin la jaule!"

(Even is Chantal you call me

My true name is Tarzan

And just because I hawked and spat

In the eyes of the magistrate

They give me a year in jail. (Line: 11-15/174)

The musicians and Conteur easily move between English and creole. Walcott was always insistent on enforcing plurilingual perspective that can affirm the social-cultural resources and possibilities that may emerge with it. Such linguistic exploitation, as Glissant described in a lecture delivered at the university of West Indies on 30'th April, 1992: "resulting (in) something else, another way".

In his masterpiece *Dream on Monkey Mountain* the co-existence of multiple/ bi-lingual register forms the interface of cultures. The plot is informed by the schism between English, the language of the courtroom and other nodes of administration and patois, the language of

the marketplace. As linguists Le Page and Tabouret Keller points out: “in any community we find that language use ranges from highly inventive and idiosyncratic to the highly conventional and regular...poets and writers generally are particularly inclined to be so, since they feel more strongly than most... the urgent necessity to draw on every possibility language affords.”- *The Task of the Translator*. Inside the cell, Corporal Lestrade embodies the mechanism of linguistic hegemonisation. As soon as the Corporal assumes the official function as a representative of Law, his language switches over to Standard English, using the legal register. To all the inmates of the cell when he shouts his command: “let us hear English” the coercive power of the Western language is revealed. During his interrogation of Makak, Lestrade uses the register of Standard English and he converses with Makak remaining incommunicable and without offering any answer:

Corporal: What is your denominational affiliation”?

[Silence]

Souris: [whispering] Ca qui religion-ous?

Makak: [smiling] Car’olique.

Between Makak and Lestrade stands Souris who serves the function of an interpreter, translating to Makak in French creole and thus replicating part of black colonial officer translating the command of the white officer. As they sought to affiliate with the authoritative command. Language continues to be an important sign of racial hierarchy as in the Market scene we find vendors speaking in vernacular where exists a minimal difference of power. But when Lesrade visits them, he names a melon a pawpaw and the vendor has no choice but to accept it:

Inspectors: That was a melon.

Corporal: I know. But in the opinion of the pistol, and for the preservation of order, and to avoid any argument, we both satisfied it was a pawpaw”. (Part-1, Sc-3/ Line: 15-18/260-261)

On another occasion when Lestrade tries to rename a basket as ‘a nice set of cages’, the vendor resists. But Lestrade’s authority is propped up by “opinion of the pistol”, the ability to exert authority has endowed upon him the power to name the reality. When towards the end Makak has recovered his original name Felix, the racial abuse is redeemed.

Another highly acclaimed play, *Pantomime*, the celebrated comic skit of *Robinson Crusoe* inverts all the binaries that enforce the linguistic hegemony; it questions the linguistic features as stable markers of cultural identity. By speaking the colonial language while retaining an accent and diction that differentiate them from the colonizers constitutes an element of self-identification. And thereby the post colonial subjects disrupt and confront the authority of the colonial languages. The vivacious role-playing of Jackson through tonality, diction, accent constantly interrogate the privileged norms of Metropolitan Standard. Though the society deems Jackson(servant) to be inferior of Harry(master), the narrative charts how he acquires agency through language. In this flipped rendition of *Robinson Crusoe* Jackson emerges as the debunker of the stable assumptions that are borne out by the way a person speaks, intonates, changes register and communicates. What Gilbert and Tompkins find a quality of indigeneous speaker’s linguistic versatility in Robert Merritt’s *The Cake Man* sums up the part of Jackson:

“ A particularly effective form of subversion occurs when one character moves between registers, showing that s/he is quite capable of using all manner of linguistic codes but chooses certain ones strategically”(177)

When Harry has arranged/ interpreted the Crusoe lyrically with music and dance:

And a beach with its golden sand

There walks a single man

In the beautiful west indies.”(A I, Line: 7-10,132)

Jackson spells out his rejoinder in which the language is deformed and the sacred version is profaned by slang, innuendo:

“He not sitting on his shipwrecked arse bawling out... ‘O silent sea, O wondrous sunset’ and all that shit. No. He shipwrecked. He desperate, he hungry. He look up and see this and he see this fucking goat with its fucking beard watching him and smiling, this goat with its forked fucking beard and square yellow eye, just like the fucking devil standing up there... And Robbie ent thinking ‘bout his wife and son and O silent sea and O wondrous sunset; no, Robbie is the First Creole, so he watching the goat with his eyes narrow, narrow, he say blehhh in you goat-ass.”

If Jackson has slipped into slang, creolised vocabulary, his command of ‘standard’, perfect English is also assured so as to confirm his versatile performance. By appropriating the language of the imperial centre, he can redirect it for expressive purpose. His linguistic virtuosity is a sign of cultural freedom; in acts of improvisation he’s found the liberating discourse. Even though relegated, he seeks to reclaim a space of linguistic freedom. When he mimics the British speech, it not only re-enforces the static conception of essential speech pattern but also destabilizes the identity categories reified by the coloniser. Jackson’s effortless code-switching interrogates metropolitan coloniser’s monopoly of language and authority. He is driven by need to counter the easy assumption of affiliation to a particular social group revealed in speech-habits. As Ahern explains: “This sort of speech both affiliates the speaker with a particular group and expresses an inhabitable identity”.(4) In Earl Lovelace’s masterpiece *The Dragon can’t Dance*, the first person narrator’s voice shifts effortlessly between standard and vernacular which was West-Indian speaker’s natural practice in everyday speech situation. The racial and cultural tension is generated and it bears the impress of mass language. Walcott’s sailor protagonist, Shabine in *The Schooner Flight* also switches from the vernacular to the Standard English. This approach to the linguistic medium is less inhibited and more flexible. Jackson’s versatile linguistic gift enables him to evade the cultural domination of his master. He poses strong challenge to the on-going legacy of the post-independence days. Time and again, he steps over the panto script of Harry; he recombines standard and dialect accent easefully;

JACKSON: Mr. Trewe? (English accent). Mr. Trewe, you scramble eggs is here! Are here! (Creole accent) you hear. Mr. Trewe, I have wild your eggs(English accent) – (A-I, Line-11-14,133).

In a more manipulative way he spells West-Indian diction with British accent: JACKSON: (*in exaggerated British accent*) “I go and try and make it back in five, bwana... I saw a sign once in a lavatory in mobile, Alabama. COLORED. But it didn’t have no time limit. Funny, eh?( A- II, Line- 46-56, 147)

With such subversive strategies can the political power and dominance be rejected and essential identity destabilized. By such code-switch, disruptive mode of speech, Jackson pokes fun at the hierarchy of identity categories generally connoted by those linguistic features.

As comically played out in *Pantomime*, the tension between ‘high’ language and Creole runs through the plot of *A Branch of Blue Nile* (1983). Creative and energetic dialogue of cultures and two languages the text weaves together such disparate linguistic strand as rich African, patois, French, English and classical Latin. Like Murray Carlin’s *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona*, it addresses the question of how to replay the Shakespearean text, though its canonical target is Antony and Cleopatra. As in the opening scene while rehearsal is going on of a scene from Antony and Cleopatra, creole interventions disrupt and subvert the elevated manner of speech. The troop of the native actors while mounting a stage version of Antony and Cleopatra fails to maintain Shakespearean tone in appropriating the Bard’s tone. The actors slip into West- Indian dialect, it evokes laughter. As when Sheila, playing Cleopatra recites Cleopatra’s speech after Antony’s death in Act-IV, she manipulates the Bard’s language by modernising the tense:

“The soldier’s pole is fallen: young boys and girls

Are level now with men; the odds are gone”.( A:I Sc-I, Line:3-4,)

It is the English director who reminds him of the “correct’ form: “the odds is gone, singular, Marilyn, please”. But not only with the Shakespearean English but also when a parallel stage- product is attempted, the actors are having difficulty with the dialect as well:

“I know it’s beneath us now”.

“ Beneat! No It! You stubborn bitch! Beneat!

She ain’t from England”( A:I Sc-4 Line:3-5,)

Like *Pantomime*, variable speech patterns and intonations, differing uses of standard, slang and dialect drive the heteroglossia to a peak. When Trinidadian accent is injected into Shakespearean text, performer’s vernacular clashes with exalted language of Shakespeare. Amalgamation of performer’s natural language with the language of the staged text enact “an agonistic encounter between local and received traditions”. (Tompkins, 30). Director Harvey interweaves local, dialectical interweaving of local and dialectical intonation to fragment the production into subtexts. Though Gavin is reproached for his habits of American slang and Chris advises him for sticking to/ adherence to “your roots, your language, your childhood, because you ass, that’s where every artists start from”. (249). But more innovative attempt is made by Harvey who has re-written the clown’s lines in indigenous dialect even at the cost of incurring the critical banter :

“...since the Bard had swiped a prose hunk off old Plutarch and since in old Will’s day the clown spoke dialect, and since our dialect is so Jacobean” (A: II, Sc.3 Line: 8-10, Location-5647). He calls into question the ‘sacredness’ of the Bard’s language and its supposed ‘purity’ or homogeneousness. It underlines how Shakespeare’s multiple registers falsifies the claim of ‘pure English’. It is not merely replacing ‘standard’ for ‘dialect’ or producing some cultural exoticism. Any cultural form when transported to a new region, planted in new cultural milieu, it becomes full of new resonances, transforming it into a rich hybrid cultural product. Walcott in a conversation with Baer(110) has mentioned the high quality of intonation of Shakespeare of the West-Indian actors: “Some of the finest Shakespeare I have



ever heard was spoken by West-Indian actors. The sound of Shakespeare is certainly not the sound we now hear in Shakespeare, that androgynous BBC type, high –tone thing. It’s a coarse thing- a great range between wonderful vulgarity and a great refinement, and we have that here. We have that vulgarity and we also have the refinement in terms of diction”. Soyinka’s seminal essay *Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist* also argues for the attempts to locate him in a continuing conversation- a location that is neither wholly local and particular nor entirely global and universal. Walcott’s text like *A Branch of Blue Nile* exhibits how Shakesperean text, embedded within the Anglocentric discourses, could be re-formed and replaced within the new cultural zone/ territory.

Walcott’s plays with particular attention to the languages, linguistic registers, speech acts have projected new levels of authenticity of mood and awareness of Caribbean life. In Western education he had found a liberating energy which never tampered with his attachment with West Indian creole or French Patois. Multiple registers stamp upon his plots Caribbean life styles without any exclusionary politics and incorporate the wide varieties to narrow the cultural gaps. The Caribbean artist *per excellence*, his negotiation of the plural linguistic identity posits the on-going process of creolisation at the heart of artistic practice.

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