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The Poems of Derek Walcott : An Edge of Defiance; *Dismiss Me If You Can*

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Abstract:

'Dismiss me if you can' this edge of defiance in Walcott's poetry is the omnipresent theme. My study probes the fathoms of Caribbean literature, especially, the poetry of Derek Walcott. What challenge Walcott throws to readers, colonizers and his compatriot will be discussed in this piece of writing. The main point of discussion in Walcott poetry, I try to decipher is the theme of rootless, alienation and tyranny perpetrated in blood by British colonizers. The greatest and severest blow to culture, dignity and identity of West Indies and its habitants comes in shape of propagation of European culture language and religion. Uniformity generated by British blood, language and religion is painful to be accepted by Walcott who deeply loves his roots.

Walcott is all things 'a divided child' loyal to both 'the stuffed dark nightingale of Keats' and 'virginal unpainted world' of the Islands (*Poet of Two Worlds* by Helen Vendler, p. 27).

He desperately gropes for his culture and ancestral belongings in bleached white beaches, silently robed and used as a graveyard for migrant labours corpses, the sea bearing a silent but unofficial testimony to cruelty and tyranny of colonizers. Walcott's fascination for British language is biological and ironically, fascination and love for Island is also in his genes, most painful for him is the fact that he is torn apart in his blood only. He regrets his identity, rootlessness, his lost history and culture and genetic imposition of tyranny through merciless exploitation of women of his Island. The charm of his poems is his pain, sarcasm, beautiful description and also uniqueness of thoughts and their presentation. My paper, in a kaleidoscopic manner will discuss the poems of Walcott and his stream of thought in poetry.

Keywords : Caribbean, Colonizers, Genealogy, Cultural Schizophrenia, Nostalgia.

A retrospective consideration of the work of Walcott, taking rigorous excerpts from his book '*selected poems*' finds an edge of defiance in the poems of Walcott, his poetry stands out from the wash of contemporary American poetry for its mild, wild nature in form of devious apologies as if in half-whisper, silently spoken but boldly eloquent and penetrating. What makes Walcott stand apart from crowd of poet? – his crisp, tough, lyrical but crystal clear style of writing. Walcott maintains really very beautifully the paradox of revelation and obscurity, syntax used is elaborate, yields full scope to his frustration yet seductive and captivating.

Walcott, despite his fascination for his roots believes in expansion, as an expansionist he rejects the idea of being cubbyholed. He clings desperately to his heritage, his roots but also nurses strong flavour for British education and its refined taste whatever be his roots or nationality, he will be acclaimed as the first English speaking Caribbean poet of international acclaim, as he himself proclaims :

*He is a man no more but the fervour and intelligence of a whole country
(Another life).*

What he demands is to consider him as the whole man without assigning priority to his skin or age or prosody. National consciousness is so ingrained in the inner most recesses of author's mind that he is possessed and obsessed with its beauty, its desecration during colonial regime for instance, he writes :

... the variegated firsts of cloud
that gather over
the uncouth features of this,
my prone Island (*Prelude by Walcott*).

Here we can locate colonial impact in 'variegated firsts of cloud'; author enjoys panoramic view of Island and also conscious of a threatening entity i.e. British rule which has beaten the Island into submission. Walcott draws the "Sketch of blacks" who has returned to the native Island after having been in us, he sees :

||The bowed heads of Leans, compliant men ||
Poet of Two Words by Helen Vendler, p. 27.

This statement of aesthetics in his poems is practised to avoid colonizers' wrath so that poet, hailing from marginal culture should not be dismissed as a non-intellectual and his poems as a confession of a west Indian - impulsive, lecherous and blowing his trumpet out of proportion. Let us discuss another lines from him :

..... note the living images
of flesh that saunter through
the eye.
..... my reluctant leopard
of the slow eyes. (*Prelude*)

Beneath the creamy surface of politeness, author is a detached observer in whose poems human beings are served not as objects or characters but 'living images of flesh'. These images 'saunter' more vividly 'in the middle of the journey triumph life' are lulling and captivating. 'Leopard' reluctant and 'of slow eyes' confirm the poet's vow to admit paradox and conflict into his intellectual makeup. If we consider the following lines:

..... Nameless I came among olives
of algae,
..... I remember nothing. (*Origins*)

(‘Origins’ the fifth poem in the book, originally published in ‘selected poems’ (1964) is like a quilt of west Indian history the roll of surrealistic images imitates the roll of the surf and is reminiscent of Césaire’s Return to My Native Land) (*Either I’m Nobody, or I’m a Nation* by Rita Dove, p. 55-56)

Acoustical flamboyance of Walcott here is in full effect. ‘I’ stands for neither identity of Walcott nor history of his nation. Here, he wipes off tradition, culture identity and history, without implying negation he starts fresh as ‘nothing’ he remembers, not even wounds of past. In his entire work willingly or unwillingly, knowingly or unknowingly he tangles himself up with a struggle to unite western civilization with culture and tradition of West Indies.

This struggle for assimilation of two cultures, poles apart in their constitution and execution of cultural doctrines is utterly painful and fraught with festering wounds of colonial rule. Fascination for western culture and at same time, negation, hatred and repulsion for its brutal face of colonizer creates biggest paradox in Walcott’s work. What is special, remarkable and note worthy in Walcott’s poetry? – His style to evoke strong emotions of fury, love, rage but in a writing controlled, composed, penetrating nonetheless trenchant. Who exactly, does he represents? And why does he emphasize? - ‘while’ evil as in

“The heart of darkness is not Africa/The heart of darkness is the cure of fire/in the white centre of the holocaust.” (Derek Walcott, Contemporary by Calvin Bedient, p. 19).

Endlessly striving for self-scrutiny, he possesses a photographic eye to present panoramic, bird’s eye view of his beloved Island, what scenery he clicks for us in his camera is – *flailed beach head, yellowing coconut* and *‘padded cavalry of the mouse’*. In his poems like ‘The liberator’, ‘Parang’, the ‘Schooner Flight’, the very cadence of poem exceeds the aroma of dialect and patois words are unabatedly sprinkled without annihilating the very sense.

His intense craving, passion and above all love for his country and island and also to his native dialect is very much clear here, he fondly cries :

“Come back to me/my language”. (*Sainte Lucie*)

In the same poem he gives spaces to the lyrics of a native Creole song. A close scrutiny reveals that Walcott represents in his poems three things – incessant love for his island, its sprawling and rich natural beauty; its disfiguration at the hands of colonizers; fascination for western manners especially British language. Irony of the situation lies in the fact that the language of colonizer makes him realize rather enables him to realize

what shameful treatment his genealogy not his but of his entire island underwent at the hands of colonizers. English language unravels before him the bare, naked truth of his grandfather, being a European.

A schizophrenic self image anticipates Walcott's sense of isolation "*part white and Methodist*" (*The Apprentice : 25 Poems, Epitaph for the Young, Poems, and In a Green Night by Stewart Brown.*, p. 86).

Through western knowledge and language he comes to know the chequered beauty of his home town with '*the brick factories 'sooty clap board houses' – a condition' deplorable. The gorge in city remains, Choked with dog wood, oak, hickory; in summer its wafts sickeningly with the floral bouquet of rotting garbage.* Walcott portrays an altogether different picture of West Indies. Tourist generally love Caribbean, West Indies islands for its white beaches, opal seas, its glossy vegetation, trailing across restaurant lattice but behind the British imprint of Christianity, the white manor house and sprawling bungalows sprawls the squalor of poor black labours; Caribbean island registers African slave trade, the influx of cheap labour for plantation from India and China, inscribed on its soil, the intermixing of regional dialect and European language creating a babble of language; Intolerance, incompatibility and disharmony, discontent arising from subscription and propagation of various religious, various eating habits resulting from belief and religions & also body gesture erupting from various regions and pockets of world.

This diversity is no doubt, a rare and unique feature of Caribbean island but the very root of this feature is not the climatic difference or geographical reason as in India but the exploitation that runs in the veins of people, the blood of Europeans forcefully induced in them by means of exploitation and by medium of colonization. Above all, the weight of north western world leaning on the rest of the world, especially third world Caribbean and African repeatedly, crudely and sarcastically also, tells the world that the ways of this third world are primitive shameful, wrong and this change which they infused in their blood was very much required and desired. This very feel of shame, disgrace of indignity imposed on poet and his compatriot is very deep, recondite and runs in blood; irreversible and painfully form the very core of their being. Colonialism disgraced its colonized subject beyond measures but the most insidious and disgraceful one is a spiritual, biological and cultural Schizophrenia. Walcott's personal pain and wound lies in the fact that his grandfather was British and he along with his father were product of a forced and incestuous relationship, a disgraceful subjugation – a necessary evil to propagate the colonial rule.

In the oft quoted "*A Far Cry from Africa*" he desperately shrieks :

I who am poisoned with
the blood of both/where shall I turn,

divided to the vein?

(*Either I'm Nobody, or I'm a Nation* by Rita Dove, p. 58.)

The idea of assimilation of cultures dawns upon him quite late but the very seed of colonized cruelty gives him constant, unmitigated pain. In crane's manner, Walcott prefers lyrics, but in an elevated manner, faithfully recording the landscape and people with

“honest exploration of contradiction”

(*Epitaph ...* by Stewart Brown, p. 88).

In *Selected Poems* (1964), especially in his poem ‘Parang’ he recreates the language of the people in humorous but ironical vein,

‘laughing just to keep from crying’. (*Parang*).

This ‘laugh’ is ridiculed as a survival practice of suppressed group – a colonized group not allowed anything other than a grin, an embarrassed laugh.

Walcott in his ‘*Tales of the Islands*’ - a sequence of ten sonnets composes and compiles the folkloric rituals, gossip of people, saloon talk and scenery of Island but the presentation appears to be a batch of mock satirical postcards. Walcott limitation lies in ‘postcard’ image of West Indies, his favourites are the flavours of sea, beach, sweating humanity blinding heat, sweltering summer, stunned water; ironically, sometimes, he acts as a tourist guide and also an inflicted soul to show his wound with a background of dirty colonized past of the third world. His ‘chosen’ point of discussion is always about galvanized roofs, stars like nails in sky, rain-torrential like knives; he rams the scenery down our throats until we stop, being thrilled and start to listen.

The main concern of Walcott in every of his line is to find roots, history and base of survival. To his shock and surprise, this tourist ridden island has a new race by the lustful grace of tourists and colonizers so the history of nation is lost never to be gained. Walcott is pained by official record of events eulogizing European invaders and rulers, instead of groping for the roots of his island, he jibes at his countrymen for not making any specific contribution to shape up the history of nation. Walcott here adopts duplicitous way to demand foundation of island's civilization. Through sarcasm, remorse he invites the attention of his community to decide whether the nation seriously has any history or not.

Michael Harper finds history to be matrix of memory and responsibility, so official version of Caribbean history is discarded as it contains no memory, vision or sincere projection of island's history and severely rejects humane and truthful description of the natives of islands. Walcott's sharp reply to

Harper is : without history, there is no memory or conversely : without memory, there is no history. (*Either ... by Rita Dove*, p. 59).

The uniformity and commonality erupted from colonial rule which obliterated family ties; choked tribal spirit; disintegrated tribal connections with each other and also religious and communal sites that gave sense and naturalness to West Indies. This uniformity, Walcott deeply regrets as it has spoiled the diversity, zeal and genial current of soul of Caribbean Island. Walcott feels that brutal destruction of Caribbean culture in British regime has rendered the people forgetful of their earlier rich culture and heritage.

In Walcott's perception this amnesia of Caribbean people reflects itself in the island's vegetation, its overgrowth, its proliferation invading everything that comes its way; objects of nature have effect on human activities but uncontrolled growth is emblematic of processes of forgetting and also of colonial expansion engulfing and over powering every thing, making people forget their past and native culture. Walcott finds sea as a witness to every development and destruction in his island. It has also suffered no growth and bears testimony to changing face of island, beaten into submission by colonizers.

Sea is the primary metaphor for Walcott. The sea is history or like a book of history where a steady turning of her pages of wave unravel the destruction, distortion of exploitation registered in every drop and vegetation of it. The sea is quintessential nothingness. 'When he writes 'The Sea is history'. (*The Star Apple Kingdom, Either ... by Rita Dove*, p. 60). He also feels that sea is reduced to nothingness as it failed to register the record of imported peasant labours conquerors or exploiters as the true essence and existence of sea does not exit.

"Walcott is all things 'a divided child' loyal to both '*the stuffed dark nightingale of Keats*' and '*virginal unpainted world*' of the islands." (*Poet ... by Helen Vendler*, p. 27).

To the question,

"Where are your monuments
your battles, martyrs?"

The West Indies replies :

Sirs/ in that
grey vault, The Sea.

The sea has locked them up. (*Either by Rita Dove*, p. 60).

Sea contains all inhuman experiences and experiments, a document of unending humiliation but like a monument of silence and suffering, sea issues forth no evidence for rich history of island and its desecration by colonial power. Walcott wryly claims that history begins with self determination, no matter how corrupt the struggle is to prevail

upon. He grieves over uselessness of resources and the natural aura of island. In his poem “*Return to D’Ennery; Rain*”, he writes :

..... so murmurous of oblivion on the sea.
 That any human action
 seemed a waste
 The place seemed born
 for being buried there

Walcott presents the literature with a growing compulsion to articulate the dreams of his people who were “dazed, ignorant/ waiting to be named.” (*Either by Rita Dove*, p. 62).

He criticizes the history found in ‘lonely Englishman who loved parades/sailing and reading Conrad’s prose’ to pupils or telling them red – jacketed ‘History of the British Empire’ or tapestry of Waterloo hanging in the house of one of his mother’s British sewing clients. (Page 63. Rita Dove).

He regrets Caribbean history washed away with torrential shower of British invasion, its glory and grand British history; again he takes up the issue of testimony and hold on sea. In his poem, ‘*The Estranging Sea*’, Walcott feel that it is the sea which allows glimmer of hope. If sea is a book, the most natural book serves no record but trace of evidence in its existence. For Instance :

... the pages of sea,
 to write of the wind and the memory
 of wind-whipped (*The Estranging Sea*)

He is so possessed and gripped by loss of history and identity of island in general and his, in particular that in everyway he fails to forgive colonizers for desertion of island. In his fury, he starts accusing and blaming objects of nature i.e. sea, Sun, beach of being mute witness to suffering and genocide of natives West Indies, for serving no historical record of atrocities, consequently the new hybrid race is forgetful of history of nation and has accepted the history of British and her empire as its own, erasing whatever identity is left there, Walcott’s contrariness intensifies in a typical way as he chooses to ‘row but back ward’. Walcott stands apart from the crowd of writers as unlike others, he presents psychological version of atrocities, cites an introspective exploration of his personal past and also the chequered past in veins, features and colour of skin in people of West Indies. Walcott uses himself as a symbol and insists that his particular fate can help a universal fate to be posited. His poem *Sea Grapes* (1926) is a kind of resignation borne of equal parts serenity and loss. These poem are triste – elegant, spare construction, almost classical :

Desolate lemons
 in your bowl of earth
 the light to your better flesh.

Sea is greenish blue is the signature color of 'Another Life' Sea Grapes's hue is gold; Gold is the colour of fervor and denouement of the fire and its embers.

This mention of opalescent prevalence in his narrative does not hint at changed taste of poet but his mollified sweetness and dignity. The world of Walcott's poem has proliferation of sour bitter fruits – lemons, olives, limes and sour apple or green grapes. The bitterness of heart finds solace in sour bitter fruits.

Gradually, Walcott attains practical wisdom and his experience 'as unlikely prodigy' avid in theatre have broadened his cognizance of the bogus glories of 'fame' and 'world citizenship'. His experience has prepared him for a new lesson : reconciliation with the irrevocable. He gradually accepts an amalgamation of white and black and also the contrast of colonized and colonizers as he writes in 'Dark August'

... I am learning slowly
 to love the dark days,

 learnt to love black days
 like brought ones,
 the black rain, the white hills ...

In his "The Schooner Flight" the persona Shabine, whose name is "the patois for / any red nigger" suffers the ordeal which is the allegory of everyman and his flight becomes a quest. Walcott bears similarities with this character as he suffers no agonizing sense of estrangement from the spirit of his community. Shabine is in Walcott as he embodies the universal in the particular.

Shabine like Walcott has a vague nostalgia about exotic beauty of Island that has escaped a web of corruption and betrayal now, standing on high sea, he has vision that includes the ghosts of great admirals as well as slave ships.

"Our father below deck too deep to hear us shouting."

(Either ... by Rita Dove, p. 67)

Walcott here presents a contrary, opposite self what Walcott cannot do, Shabine is made to do. Unlike Walcott, Shabine is not painfully self conscious, is able to travel backward, over the troubled waters, to become whole. Through Shabine Walcott completes his incomplete self.

In the same way, In ‘*The Star Apple Kingdom*’ Walcott brings in the theme of bitter introspection with harsher judgement, brutal visions and naked revelation. The protagonist here falls asleep but plunges into a nightmare procession of images from Caribbean history and hears the silent screams from the oppressed from the ‘slave pardoned his whip’.

La Revolucion is presented in the form of a woman, “a black umbrella blown inside out” who is simultaneously ‘raped wife, empty mother, Aztec Virgin/ transfixed by arrows from a thousand guitars. (*Either ... by Rita Dove*, p. 68).

Walcott here cries out :

..... history without any
memory
streets without statues,
and a geography without myth

He wails over the loss of history, dignity of women who are rendered now of ‘*no where land*’. The island, he feels, is moulded into design set by colonizers. Through persona of poem he plunges into deep sleep one ‘that wipes out history’. When he awakens his jaw is still aching from the silent scream but this scream is heard “*as a dog hears, as all the under dogs/of the world hear.*”

This roll of fierce images in Walcott’s poetry, dense with consonance, imitates the roar of the sea but he finds no resolution of conflicting energies. Even if, his anguished consciousness find a kindred spirit, it is mute and inaccessible and is an eyesore to Walcott and he weaves an intricate layering of remorse and avails himself of a ‘sadness born of introspection’.

With the prominent theme of alienation and rejection, A recurrent figure in Walcott’s work is that of ‘Robinson Crusoe’ – cast away – a man forced to survive as a survivor of a race.

A repository of western education, Crusoe returns to his island to find himself deserted that too, in familiar surrounding, intellect helps him but only at expense of emotion, so is the case with Walcott who finds.

“The African acquiesced repeated, and changed them (*Names*)”.

Walcott from his marginal perspective spots irony as he reserves with him the dubious privilege of finding language that can ‘startle itself’ as he is stifled by colonizers’ blood in his vein. Walcott constantly reminds him of sexual atrocities perpetrated on women of his family line.

Walcott notices that prodigious nature bestowed on him guilt within and envy from outside, whether this extra ordinary intellect of him, in alien soil, brings glory or shame to him but time away from 'home' will be suspected, interpreted or connotated as rejection and alienation from home; frustration with the double bind can erupt into hate. Here, main problem of Walcott is to find acceptance in wide world on his own terms, a world where a reaction can fluctuate from patronizing praise to outright disdain. Walcott's struggle, internalized by his own mixed racial heritage delineate his pain as he cries out:

I who have cursed / the drunken officer
of British rule, now choose/Between
Africa and The English tongue I Love? (*Either ... by Rita Dove, p. 71*)

His perception is tantamount to oblivion as colonial impression is everywhere from body to beach, it is so profound that no relic of West Indies history is left, only natural objects are left which don't possess history or sense of time. This colonial impression is so serious and so much imbibed in Caribbean world that its separation is impossible and loss of identity with this assimilation is very much sure.

In poems like '*Gulf*' the rootlessness of the islander is augmented by homelessness of the traveller. Walcott's indignant righteousness and impatience over the spontaneity with which West Indies adopted, embraced and imbibed the culture of colonizers, visible in their taste, code of dress and conduct is picturized in every of his poems especially the initial ones. Walcott carries his island in him, emblematic of midsummer is scorching heat that dries up vegetation and issues a glare that flattens perspective.

"Midsummer's furnace cast everything in bronze."

His poem paints itself and stiffens into elegy as Walcott's extreme love for nation translate itself ultimately into his frustration as, to his estimation, island has lost its erstwhile culture and rich heritage but he has no option but just to keep moving and to accept that everything will be alright.

The gravitational pull of fondness for island is so great and overpowering that he breathes through lush linguistic scenery where we find 'cloud waits in emptiness for the apostles' and islands noon 'jerks toward its rigid, inert, echoless, empty, inert landscapes' – beauty of island reminds him European imposition and imprint on it.

To shed off his complex and guilt he takes refuse in cities like Boston and Chicago but his return to England, land of his '*bastard ancestry*' continues to hammer his peace.

As my father

His name was Warwick Walcott

....

his father, in love or bitter benediction
named him for Warwick Shire

Walcott's chosen devices of story telling in his poems are - repetition and embellishment. His rhetorical insistence puts the desired effect and we feel him talking, we hear the words being strung on a breath.

The thread of emotion, experience and thought running through the fabric of tangled mass or labyrinth is held together by authentic narration of the story teller. He intends to frustrate all efforts at portraiture so that a general impression should not spoil his unique flavour. 'Walcott's wise artistry in his collection also resist the presentation of a slick surface, shelf upon shelf of well wrought urns polished to blinding perfection.' (*Either ... by Rita Dove, p. 78*).

Walcott weaves a spell and we can appreciate him as in his own words :

You have a grace upon your words
& there is sound sense within them.

In short we can say Walcott throws surprises to us as his *Midsummer* augurs a fresh outburst, *Collected poem* favours a fresh start with nothing. Walcott, a traveller shares his experience as wandering from one place to other, tries to shed off his guilt and regret for his contamination of blood with European blood.

He in the end, sublimates his pain through unique artistry of his poems. His pain, to his credit, purifies him of guilt and remorse and imbues his mind with 'loyalty, love and faithfulness' to his Island announcing him as a poet towering over others in stature of story teller in verse, spinning a yarn of best quality for his Island but with a fabric of European language. Ironically, he settles his score with his tyrant as he cast slur on his accused in his own language and style.

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