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The Poetic Dilemma of Derek Walcott

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Creative writing originating from the erstwhile colonies of Britain, France, Portugal and Spain carries in its folds, at both conscious and subconscious level, the residues of colonial experience. Postcolonial writers, therefore, are united in the manner they foreground the tension with the imperial power and in the process make serious attempts at breaking the social and economic hierarchies on which imperialism thrives. Postcolonial writers writing from the margins as far and scattered as the Caribbean islands too impress upon the need for writing back to the centre to reclaim the heritage lost in the imperial process. The complexity of the postcolonial experience of the Caribbean islands lies in the varied and diverse forms it has assumed in its different constituent islands. Therefore, it becomes really difficult to formulate a general poetics that lies at the back of Caribbean literature. The paper is an exploration of the problems that defines the working of Caribbean literature. Moreover, the focus is on the poetic insight of one of the most distinguished poets of English language, Derek Walcott who writes from the peripheries of West Indies. He explores the Caribbean past, present and future and also goes on to examine the ways in which Caribbean self embraces and is split between different places and loyalties. All his life Walcott has experienced the dilemma of defining his final allegiance vis-à-vis his motherland and the corresponding patriotism. In other words, unlike most of the postcolonial writers, he doesn't seem to have a clear position for or against the imperial centre. The paper, further examines the issues and complexities of Walcott's poetry in order to reach at a poetic doctrine delineating the disposition of his literary endeavours.

Derek Walcott was born in 1930 in the town of Castries in Saint Lucia, one of the Windward Islands in the Lesser Antilles. The experience of growing up on an isolated volcanic island, an ex-British colony, has had a strong influence on Walcott's life and work. He studied as a writer, becoming an elated, exuberant poet and playwright. Walcott had an early sense of vocation as a writer. In the poem, "Midsummer", he writes:

*"Forty years gone, in my island childhood, I felt that
the gift of poetry had made me one of the chosen,
that all experience was kindling to the fire of the Muse."*

After studying at St. Mary's college in his native island and at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, Walcott moved in 1953 to Trinidad, where he worked as theatre and art critic. Walcott is known for his passion for travelling to different countries around the world. He splits his time between New York, Boston and St. Lucia, where he incorporates the influences of different areas into his pieces of work. A literary laureate of high acclaim, Walcott received the coveted Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992 generating much pride among his fellow Caribbean citizens.

Walcott comes from that part of the world that calls attention to its problems of identity and nationhood. The diversity of Caribbean islands is so vast that each island can be considered as a

separate nation, given the differences they strike from each other on cultural, linguistic, religious, economic and social grounds. The most important question that comes to one's mind is that do these diverse and scattered pieces of land make one nation? The only thing that ironically unites these states is the economic and political problems they are facing individually. Moreover, Caribbean population actually is the settler population; people from all parts of the world have come and settled there. This only aggravates the complexity and tension that lies at the heart of Caribbean culture and identity. What renders matters even more complex is the pattern of racial thinking imposed by European colonizers through all sorts of residential and labour segregations and legislation that would control and delimit who was deemed to be indigenous.

West Indies' colonial experience like most of the erstwhile colonies of Britain, France, Portugal and Spain, is deeply rooted in the colonial centre's economical motives. Christopher Columbus made his way to Trinidad in 1498 and around this time, imperial masters from different imperial centres started settlements in different parts of West Indies. However, what makes its colonial history completely different from the colonial experience of the rest of the erstwhile colonies of the globe is the diversity in cultural exchange that took place in the West Indies as a result of different imperial powers settling in the land. Some islands changed hands more than twenty times during the Caribbean wars. European imperialists waged war among themselves and with the Carib Indians. Luigi Sampietro in *The Specificity of Caribbean Literature* writes: "The literature of the Caribbean is an ideal melting point, the place where the assorted cultures of two boundless continents and the ghosts of four colonial empires come together."

This had a positive as well as an adverse effect on the Caribbean life, language, literature and other socio-political aspects. It played a great role in enriching Caribbean history but at the same time it never allowed Caribbean polity a sense of security and stability.

The colonial experience and the subsequent postcolonial saga have gone a long way in shaping thoughts of the people of erstwhile colonies. As a result, the theme of struggle and tension between the imperial power and the aboriginal culture appears naturally in any postcolonial writer's work. The postcolonial writers, therefore, are united in the way they foreground their tussle with the imperial power and in the process make serious attempts at breaking the socio-political hierarchies on which imperialism thrives. To quote from *The Empire Writes Back*,

"Literature offers one of the most important ways in which these new perceptions are expressed and it is in their writing, and through other arts such as painting, sculpture, music, and dance that the day-to-day realities expressed by colonized peoples have been most powerfully encoded and so profoundly influential."

The Caribbean post-colonial studies, unlike general postcolonial theory, are engaged with varied problems and challenges. Here the crucial issues are least obscured. The Caribbean has witnessed the worst form of colonization viz, conflict, repression, immigration and forced migration. Naturally, the West Indian writers share a special concern with questions of identity, ethnicity and language that rise out of the Caribbean historical experience.

Derek Walcott usually described as "the Caribbean community's greatest poet, playwright and theatre director" is a conscious as well as a subconscious heir to this colonial and cultural legacy. He is known for exploring the Caribbean cultural experience in his poems and plays. His work confronts his own mixed ethnic legacy—Walcott is of African, Dutch and English descent—as

well as the multi-ethnic character of the West Indies in general. Robert D. Hammer, in 1981, in his biography of Walcott, has aptly described the poet's approach to creative process.

"Nurtured on oral tales of gods, devils, and cunning tricksters passed down by generations of slaves, and is educated in Western classics, he should retell the traditional themes of European experience; and he does. As inheritor of vitally rich cultures, he utilizes one, then the other, and finally creates out of the two his own personal style."

In his work, Walcott attempts at a serious union between two social and racial pulls that has given rise to the unique Caribbean culture. He has worked on his self and his poetry and has raised himself from an islander to respect and appreciate the culture of an enslaving colonial force. He is, in Hammer's words, a "living example of the divided loyalties and hatreds that keep his society suspended between two worlds." Derek Walcott often uses the image of a fruit, cut in half, and seamed by its own juices to describe the experience of identity undergone by a Caribbean islander. At no point in his life, has Walcott been able to define his true allegiance. Moreover, he has no desire to evaluate one component above the other. Defining himself, in the poem "The Schooner Flight", Walcott writes,

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

And again, "A Far Cry from Africa," he writes,

*... how to choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool? How
Can I turn from Africa and live?*

Derek Walcott is madly in love with English language and strongly influenced by modernist poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. He clearly follows the European models of poetry and doesn't make serious attempts at forming a Caribbean model to align himself with his country of origin in the context of postcolonial writings. Walcott's opinion about the use of colonizer's language is highly radical. For him, it is not a weapon to counter the Western canon; instead, English language provides a convenience to consolidate his polyglot material. Trinidad's fabulous carnival provides the raw material and the inspiration he needs while T.S Eliot, Bertolt Brecht, JM Synge and the Greek classics easily help him in casting the inspiration into perfect literary models.

Derek Walcott has almost categorized himself as a "schizophrenic" in "A Far Cry from Africa." He writes,

"Poisoned with blood of both,

Where shall I turn, divided to the vein”

The dilemma of allegiance and loyalty is a permanent feature of Walcott’s plays, poems and critical essays. He finds himself torn between identities pulling in divergent directions. The choice between home and self-exile, self-realization and betrayal of one’s own identity leads to the schizophrenia that Walcott keeps on referring to in his works. However, ironically, this dilemma works in favour of the poet because as he finds difficulty in resolving this crisis, it faithfully lends more power to his thought. The gift of his poetry flows from this unresolved crisis and tension.

Walcott sees art as a mission and artists, in his opinion, have a social responsibility. In such poems as the “Castaway” and in the play *Pantomime*, he evokes the metaphor of shipwreck to describe the culture and what is required of artists after colonialism and slavery: both the freedom and the challenges to begin again, salvage the best of other cultures and make something new. In this context, he writes, “If we continue to sulk and say, look at what the slave-owner did, and so forth, we will never mature. While we sit mopping or writing morose poems and novels that glorify a non-existent past, then time passes us by.”

While Derek Walcott criticizes V.S. Naipaul for turning his back on the West Indies, and praises the efforts of anti-imperialists like AimeCesaire, he is no hard-liner. He is indignant towards those who reject any aspect of West Indian heritage, whether it is African, Asian, indigenous American or European. He strongly believes in the fact that poetry should not become a casualty to the scars and bruises of history, but should instead embrace the beauty and the possibilities of the present.

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