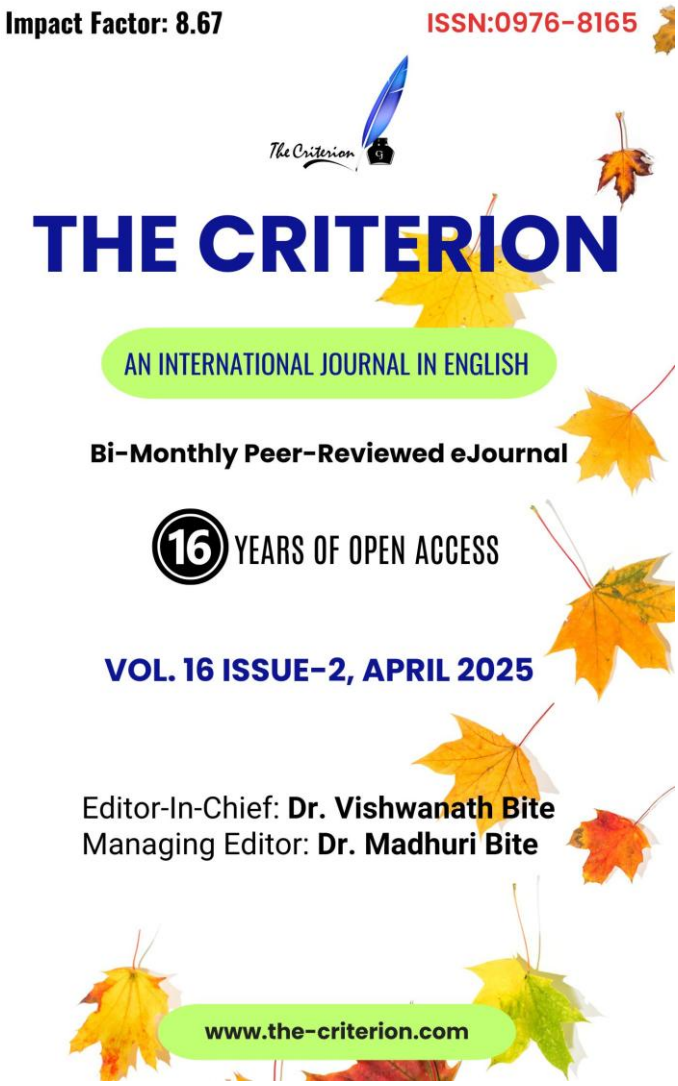

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Afrocentricity, Pan-Africanism, and Creole Identity in the Poetry of Edward Kamau Brathwaite

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Abstract:

Edward Kamau Brathwaite's poetry is a powerful site for rejuvenating African cultural identity within the Caribbean literary landscape. His engagement with ideas such as Afrocentricity, Pan-Africanism, and Creole language challenges Eurocentric historical narratives. In this context, this paper explores Brathwaite's poetic expression using Asante's Afrocentric theory, Fanon's postcolonial discourse, and Irigaray's feminist critique and examines how his works negotiate themes of displacement, linguistic reclamation, and cultural memory. The paper also attempts to map the gendered dimensions of this reclamation on the axes of the roles of Black women, Creole hybridity, and Ananse folklore in shaping diasporic resistance. By way of situating Brathwaite's work within the broader conversations of decolonization and identity formation, this paper highlights his contribution to the ongoing discourse on postcolonial subjectivity, linguistic autonomy, and Afro-diasporic consciousness.

Keywords: Afrocentricity, Pan-Africanism, Creole Identity, Postcolonialism, Cultural Resistance, Linguistic Reclamation.

Caribbean literature represents the turbulent cultural codes shaped by its colonial past and postcolonial present. Accordingly, the colonial experience refuses to wipe away the scars of its marauding experience in the present narratives. As a consequence, the critiques of Caribbean literature attempt to map the impact of colonialism on the cultural and social articulations vis-à-vis the corollaries of the economic and political superstructure—the factors influencing the Black community. The writers of the Caribbean, ranging from V. S. Naipaul to Mikey Smith, Edward Baugh, Claude McKay, and Derek Walcott, have voiced the perils of Otherization, which is contemporaneous with the dialectical erosion of the West Indian cultural identity. Like all other postcolonial literature of the post-slavery era, Caribbean literature has been constantly trying to formulate an indigenous voice that must correspond to its Africa-centered experiences and history under strain. Thus, Caribbean writers with their inherited dialects, like Creole and its dialectical precedent, the socio-political movement Negritude, have tried to further the African experience, which is expected to appeal to Black African posterity to pride itself. Such a literary movement steering towards the renaissance of the African glory in the form of re-Africanization marred by Eurocentric theorisation is termed Afrocentricity, and the poetry of Edward Kamau Brathwaite is one such instance of concerted efforts to make *Afrocentricity* an African cultural and social acceptance.

Brathwaite's poetry is the embodiment of Afrocentricity. The Afrocentric perspective is based on the idea that globalisation doesn't include the unique ways of talking about things in Africa, like literature, in its efforts to make everything the same. The politics of universality fails

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to uphold African literature's unique status and its capacity to provide a unifying code for the Black African experience, including both pre- and post-autonomy periods, as well as slavery in certain situations. Molife Asante's *The Afrocentric Idea* interrogates the claims of multiculturalism that fail to recognise the justifiable contribution of Africans to the world's historical, artistic, and intellectual development while simultaneously challenging cultural hegemony. Asante "…seeks to rescue the continent from the clutches of anthropologists through establishing a genuine narrative of Africa through explaining how Diopian Histography, Kawaida, and Black Nationalism movements all influence Afrocentricity but remain distinctively different in their ideological orientation" (Smith 2).

Assante and his intellectual peers have provided a broader framework for the term Afrocentricity, which has postcolonial overtones that inform and interrogate every African cultural manifestation, including literature. Asante gives a very basic understanding of the concept of Afrocentricity: a) an intense interest in the psychological realm that is determined by symbols, motifs, rituals, and signs; b) a commitment to finding the subject-place of Africans with implications for questions of sex, gender, and class; c) a defense of African art, music, literature, and a pan-African cultural connection; d) a celebration of centeredness and agency; and e) a powerful imperative from historical sources to revise the collective text of African people as one in constant and consistent search for liberation (Asante 4). In this sense, Afrocentricity signifies that the European hegemony tried to smother the ideas, contributions, and cultural realities that existed in the intellectual heritage and historical narratives of people of African descent. This attitude is so typical of the colonial ideology and is reflected in the thoughts of legendary African theorist Fanon, who comments upon the truth behind the colonial politics of denting the African nativity: "The colonialist bourgeoisie had hammered into the native's mind the idea of a society

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of individuals where each person shuts himself up in his own subjectivity, and whose only wealth is individual thought. Now, the native, who has the opportunity to return to the people during the struggle for freedom, will discover the falseness of this theory" (6). The same loss and emasculation have to be replaced with a new vigour, which must be symptomatic of the revolution that lies ahead in terms of African cultural identity dimensions. Literature could be that revitalising vehicle since the representations through literature can subvert the ideologies that thwart the African narrative and stymie it from taking new but self-destructive epistemological routes. Brathwaite's poetry aims to steer it towards Africa-centred narratives, grounded in African legends and folk beliefs modified by contemporary new wave thought, where language and culture are of primary importance.

Brathwaite's poetry is dictated by the trope of journey, whereby he psychologically chronicles the voyage of the Africans to the New World, either by force or by preference. Caribbean diversity and the African continuum are also the outcome of the same journey whereby numerous sociological changes occurred due to this new encounter. Brathwaite's epic work*, The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy,* narrates the African experience in the Caribbean islands, shaped by the scattering of seeds. His "Rites of Passage" from the *Arrivants* also underlines his project of Re-Africanization, whereby he interrogates the historical movement of the African into the Caribbean and the various stages through which the Africans forged the symbol of home in the geographically distant and culturally variant Caribbean. Brathwaite, in an interview, spoke about the imaginative origin of the book, which fictionalises African inroads into the Caribbean hinterlands: "How did we get into the Caribbean? And the antithesis to that was—well, the answer to that, which emerged, was that they came out of migration out of Africa…. We came out of Africa. Hence, *Islands"* (Mackey, "An Interview" 13). So, the

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historical and contemporary African dialectics are written down to create a new, open-ended African epistemology that is different from the one that was written from a Eurocentric point of view.

As we talked about above in Asante's defense of Afrocentrism, which is marked by a strong focus on the psychological African locations shaped by myths, folklore, traditional beliefs, etc., Brathwaite's poetry is full of signs that refer to distant African stories. His poem, "Wings of Dove," is a personalized fictional account of a Rasta, the spokesman of Rastafarianism, a significant Jamaican cultural belief that terms Ethiopia as the ultimate home of all Black people. The appearance and practices of the representatives of this cult reveal their marginalized status in Jamaican society. Their constant references to Babylon in the biblical sense (sometimes to Jamaica), denoting any geographical place in the world immersed in sinful pursuits, are a recurring trope employed by Brathwaite to forward the contemporary Jamaican scenario run down by exploitation and corruption. This appropriation of Rasta in the poem is oriented toward a demand for social justice in resistance to the hegemonic practices exerted by the state and its apparatuses. Brathwaite gives a graphic description of a Rasta who lives in an impoverished place outside the "boomtown" of Jamaica to further his Afrocentric motive of reliving African discourse. Consider the following description:

Brother Man the Rasta
man, beard full of lichens
brain full of lice
watched the mice
come through the floor-

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boards of his down-
town, shanty-town kitchen,
and smiled. Blessed are the poor
in health, he mumbled,
that they should inherit this
wealth. Blessed are the meek
hearted, he grumbled,
for theirs is this stealth. (Brathwaite, “Wings of Dove” 22)

Here the dilapidated condition of the Rasta throws light on the austere lives of such people in Jamaica who believe in the cult and are up against the artificiality, squalor, and the new lows to which the Jamaican society has sunk under the weighty Eurocentric remains of the colonial legacy of exploitation and inhumanity.

In the poem, he fully integrates his Afrocentric perspective by comparing the Rasta to Solomon, using the neologisms "Solo" and "man" to represent a single individual capable of rescuing the Black people from their plight. He forecasts a rebellion if the status quo persists, and Rasta, as a wise man, could be the agent of social amelioration and counterattack on the privileged White men, the Brown men with mixed racial antecedents, and the White-Black men who ape them. Brathwaite urges Africans to return to their golden era of purity and sanctity, with the Rasta serving as the conduit. The poet’s obvious attempt is to invoke folklore and other native mechanisms to give the present African generation a thematic strand of African glory. The appeal to Rasta to *rise* is, in fact, a plea to the Africans to come alive to the original Africa as distinct from Babylon:

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Rise rise

locks-

man, Solo-

man-wise

man, rise

rise rise

leh we laugh

dem….

go back back to

the black man lan'

Back back to Africa. (Brathwaite, "Wings of Dove" 24)

Clearly, "back to black lan" is an Afrocentricity-modeled ideal that Brathwaite tries to further. Here the raising of Black consciousness is a prelude to an actual African return.

Similarly, in the poem "Ananse," Brathwaite invokes the figure of Ananse from the popular folk imagination of the Caribbean, who is a sly and slippery customer hero. Ananse is visible in many folk tales and mythical Caribbean narrations that catch the fancy of a country marred with the atrocities of slavery and hegemonic structures. His ability to break all codes and escape from bonds is highly captivating to Brathwaite since the Caribbean itself is eager to unshackle its unresponsiveness towards the beckoning of the new world. In the poem, he lies inertly and passively in his place, yet he remains in a state of *thinking*, symbolizing the Caribbean's potential to recover from disruptions such as rebellions and bloodshed.

With a black snake's

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winking eye
thinking, thinking through glass
through quartz
quarries of stony water
with a doll's liquid gaze, crystal,
hiS brain green, a green chrysalis
storing leaves,
memories trunked up in a dark attic. (Brathwaite, "Ananse" 41)

Thus, Ananse becomes the cultural symbol of autonomy and a trope of alive African consciousness in the heart of the Caribbean, robbed of essence by the colonial experience. Furthermore, the reference to Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leader of the slave rebellion in Jamaica in 1760-61, in the poem speaks about Brathwaite's keen historical consciousness, which he feels is necessary to be disseminated in the socio-cultural annals of the Caribbean and the present generation. The exploits of the rebel have occupied the popular imagination as much as Ananse lore and are something to be cherished by the contemporary African narratives. Brathwaite doesn't render the history with glamour, as it involved lots of merciless killings of men like Toussaint and other chieftains.

Tacky heard him
and L'Ouverture
all the hungry
dumb-bellied chieftains
who spat

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their death into the ground. (Brathwaite, "Ananse" 41)

Brathwaite writes about the reincarnation of these historical figures since history is an important strand in the Afrocentric perspective in terms of weaving a new social, cultural, and political yarn of a nation-state. In Marxist Africa, slavery and colonial decadence inform all state superstructures.

Similarly, Afrocentricity calls for a defense of African-influenced aesthetic ideals in the form of literature, art, music, etc. The use of native language in literature and its promotion as a medium of communication in everyday affairs is one such component that Afrocentricity entails, which it considers important for the survival of African ethos in the face of colonial antagonism and postcolonial apathy. Creole is the language/dialect of the Caribbean, which signifies the cultural union of the Caribbean and a strong bond with the history, which is characterised by numerous struggles for autonomy, cultural and political. The Caribbean was polyglossic or polydialectical, and creolised English retained some of the standard internationally spoken English. Brathwaite's use of this as a poetic medium is an effort to acquaint the postcolonial Caribbean world with its ancestral heritage, which is witness to the bloody struggle of which today's Jamaica and other islands are the outcomes. It is looked down upon in the Caribbean, and Brathwaite's crucial consent to its use points at the revolutionary potential he attributes to language as an effective means of cultural resistance and is related to the "…African aspect of experience in the Caribbean" (Brathwaite, *Roots* 266). He grants the status of "…national language" to the English "…influenced by the underground language, the submerged language that the slaves had brought" (Brathwaite, *Roots* 262*),* which is Creole in this case. Furthermore, it has a very sophisticated syntax and lexicon, which qualifies it as being a language system and

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not merely an approximation. Brathwaite's employment of Creole in his works is a decisive step towards the rehumanization of the Africans in terms of linguistic assertion, as it offers the veritable confrontation to the imported mediums of cultural exchange, which are feared of getting translated into colonial mimicry. He discusses the relationship between Creole and the Caribbean social model in the following manner:

> …historically affected socio-cultural continuum within which… There are four interrelated and sometimes overlapping orientations. From their several cultural bases, people in the West Indies tend towards certain directions, positions, assumptions, and ideals. But nothing is really fixed and monolithic. Although there are white/brown/black, there are infinite possibilities within these distinctions and many ways of asserting identity. A common colonial and creole experience is shared among the various divisions, even if that experience is variously interpreted. (Brathwaite, *Roots* 310)

Hence, Creole becomes the definitive unifying factor of sociocultural encounters in the Caribbean and a seminal constituent of the Afrocentric epistemology.

Another Afrocentric ideal that informs Brathwaite's poetic rosarium is his gender perception, whereby he articulates candidly the women's situation in the Caribbean milieu. His accounts of the Black Caribbean women doubly targeted by poverty and gender bias reflect his confrontation of the sexist agenda that keeps the Black women at the periphery. His views echo Irigaray, who argues that the subject of knowledge and reason is always defined in the Western tradition as masculine through "…the subordination of the feminine, which is associated with the

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inchoate, undifferentiated, formless, in(de)finite materiality of the world that must be transcended, objectified, and categorized into proper identities if rational speculation, the power of reason to form concepts and rational representations of the world, is to engage in ideation and describe truth" (Irigaray 112). In the Caribbean, Black women represent the in(de)finite materiality that underpins the rational speculation of the masculine. Being a woman and representing the Black continuum transcends the amorphousness of the Black woman identity. Brathwaite uses this theoretical image of Black women in "Angel/Engine" and conceptualises the unique Black women's experience as sexually and economically exploited in the Caribbean.

> The yard around which the smoke circles
> Is bounded by kitchen, latrine, and the wall
> Of the house where her aunt died, where
> Her godma brought her up, where she was jumped
> Upon by her copperskin cousin
> Driving canemen to work during crop
> Time, smelling of rum and saltfish; (Brathwaite, "Angel/ Engine" 28).

Male dominance exacerbates the unequal economic conditions of Jamaican women. The woman in the poem lives in a shanty place with a retarded daughter and a copperskin cousin who satisfies his perverse sexual needs over her. Clearly, Brathwaite expresses the African women's situation as double victimhood and extends a plea for gender equality, which again is an Afrocentric agenda, as commitment towards helping the Africans find the subject place in the questions in the matter of sex and gender is a discursive dimension of the same.

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Brathwaite's poetry situates itself within the Africa-centered experience, making a political statement about its rightful place in the world culture, which is defined and dictated by Eurocentric practices. His awareness about the requirements of the contemporary socio-cultural narratives of the contemporary African generation, scaled with the African traditions and folk culture, attests to his postmodern and postcolonial relevance. Cultural phenomena like Rastafarianism and Ananse are his vehicles to supply ready tropes for generating critiques of materialism and inspiring role models for contemporary African narratives, and his employment of groundbreaking poetic techniques like video style and broken narrative is a powerful statement of identity assertion. Finally, his exhibition of the entire African cultural spectrum, complete with the African woman's experience, amply rationalizes his attempts at envisaging and fashioning a pan-African cultural connection and Afrocentric ideology.

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