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POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY CRISIS IN DEREK WALCOTT'S
"DREAM ON MONKEY MOUNTAIN"

DWAIPAYAN MITRA

M.Phil., Research Scholar
The Department of Comparative Literature
Jadavpur University



DWAIPAYAN MITRA

ABSTRACT

Constructing identity for the black Caribbeans has been an anathema as they have been subjected to various forms of colonisation. This long history of domination has jeopardised the mental equilibrium of the black Caribbeans. Derek Walcott in his *Dream on Monkey Mountain* attempts a psychopathology of colonialism. Makak, the chief character, suffers from, in Fanon's words, arsenal of complexes. However, Walcott also articulates the remedy from this kind of inferiority complex through the decolonisation of the mind. The dream vision is suggestive of the fact that the black Caribbeans can overcome this self-delusion if they take recourse to emancipatory violence.

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The question of identity has plagued the characters in the postcolonial world. The colonial context inevitably gives birth to the notion of identity. The confrontation between the coloniser and the colonised ends up damaging the cultural and material heritage of the colonised. It also destroys the mental equilibrium of the colonized. The assertion of power is not always coercive and violent but at times interpellative too. As a result of different techniques of domination, the native finds himself enmeshed in an existential crisis and suffers from an identity complex. It has been the task of postcolonial writers to reveal the effect of various forms of domination. However, writers like Derek Walcott, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka not only explore the various facets of this crisis but also Endeavour to infuse the dominated people with courage so that they can overcome this colonial hangover.

Constructing identity is an uphill task in the Caribbean world. Bill Ashcroft and others have written in *The Empire Writes Back*

In the Caribbean, the European imperial enterprise ensured that the worst features of colonialism throughout the globe would all be combined in the region. (1989:144)

Within a span of 25-30 years after Columbus's arrival the aboriginal population comprising Caribs and Arawaks was all but exterminated. Their legacy was zeroed in by the Spanish colonizers. With the introduction of sugar trade, a demand was created for a large number of labourers. As a corollary, black people from Africa were imported to be used as labourers. Even the situation did not improve after the abolition of slavery in the

1800s. New forms of domination sprouted in the name of indentured labourers who were imported from India and China. This variegated forms of domination annihilated the true culture of the Caribbean and made it a place virtually sans history.

Dream on Monkey Mountain is a representative play by Walcott that projects the emasculated psyche of the black Caribbeans living in a world where identity, in Lacanian term, is an ever-elusive signified. This play unfurls before our eyes various ramifications that arise from long history of colonial domination. In his "Note on Production," Walcott says that 'The play is a dream, one that exists as much in the given minds of its principal characters as in that of its writer, and as such, it is illogical, derivative, contradictory. Its source is metaphor and it is best treated as a physical poem with all the subconscious and deliberate borrowings of poetry' (1970:208). This intermingling of dream and reality helps Walcott delineate the colonial psychosis and the way to get over this psychosis. In his epic poem *Omeros* Walcott has given the Homeric epic a postcolonial twist to establish an identity for the oppressed people. This journey motif is also dominant in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*.

A cursory glance at the storyline of the play reveals that the plot is simple enough to comprehend. Makak, a charcoal burner, is arrested on a charge of vandalism and put to prison. In his dream he sees the apparition of a white woman who tells him that he is the king of Africa. Towards the end of the play he realizes that he cannot form an identity of his own until he kills the white apparition. As soon as he kills the apparition of a white woman Makak wakes up and realizes that he has called up his real name.

Under the apparent simple plot line are entwined a number of complex key themes related to the issue of identity in a postcolonial world. The opening scene of the play shows the crisis of identity as a result of colonial subjugation. When Corporal Lestrade enquired Makak of his race, he replies, 'I am tired'. This reply is suggestive enough of his fractured identity which is a corollary of long subjugation. Makak wants to bypass the question of race as he wants to take shelter in the realm of oblivion that can only offer him some solace amidst the ossified existence. Colonialism not only plunders wealth but also robs the colonized of his true self. It is therefore an emasculating enterprise too. Colonialism has uprooted Makak from any sense of belonging and creates in him an inferiority complex. He is assigned the name of an animal ('Makak' stands for monkey) and is downgraded in the rank of the Great Chain of Being. Fanon in his opening chapter ('Concerning Violence') of *The Wretched of the Earth* speaks about this dehumanising aspect of colonialism:

In fact, the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. He speaks of the yellow man's reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of spawn, of gesticulations. (1967: 32-33)

What is most noteworthy is that Makak has internalised his subordinate position and as a result, tries to hide his identity. Lakoff and Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By* have shown us that life is not what we construct but it is shaped by manifold societal constructive norms. And in this construction metaphors play a pivotal part. In *Dream on Monkey Mountain* the metaphor of blackness has constructed a world for Makak where to be a black signifies to be devoid of identity.

Walcott shows in detail how colonialism has fractured the identity of Makak. He loathes his own image. He tells Lestrade that he has not seen self-image in the mirror for thirty years. Moreover, he also refuses to see his reflected image in water:

Not a pool of cold water, when I must drunk,
I stir my hands first, to break up my image. (1970:226)

Makak sees his own image from the perspective of a white coloniser. Patrick Colm Hogan rightly observes:

He is, in effect, a metaphor for those legacies of colonized subjects who, in Walcott's words, 'looked at life with black skins and blue eyes' ("What the Twilight Says" 9), suffering the 'contradiction of being white in mind and black in body. (12)' (1994:108)

The Manichean compartmentalization of the world into the black and the white reduces the colonized to an extent that he becomes enamoured of whiteness. A classic example of this aspect is the case of Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Under the prevalent hegemonic ethos, Pecola pines for blue eyes like those of white children because she has internalised the rhetoric of colonial master that makes her adulate

whiteness. In Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Condition* Nhamo refuses to come back at home during his vacation from the mission as he has taken up the white value as an apotheosis of culture and now loathes his native existence. In *Dream on Monkey Mountain* Makak also longs for whiteness. This aspect of psychosis is clearly hinted by the epigraph of the play which is culled from Sartre's Preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*:

Thus in certain psychoses the hallucinated person, tired of always being insulted by his demon, one fine day starts hearing the voice of an angel who pays him compliments; but jeers don't stop for all that; only, from then on, they alternate with congratulations. This is a defense, but it is also the end of the story. The self is dissociated, and the patient heads for madness. (1970:211)

When Makak is arrested in prison, he is said to have carried a white mask; a literal symbol of his desire for the west. His quest for identity is supported by the apparition of a white woman who acts as a kind of muse figure to Makak. Makak feels elated by her message, 'She say that I come from the family of lions and kings' (236). Corporal rightly diagnoses the malady as 'rage for whiteness that does drive niggers mad' (228). However, it must be noted that Lestrade also suffers from this kind of complex. He is a mimic man for whom salvation lies in imitating the white world. It is proved by his remark to Souris:

I am an instrument of the law, Souris. I got the white man work to do. (1970:279)

His desire is representative of the departure syndrome that bedevils the Caribbean society. In this way both Makak and Lestrade are the two sides of the same coin. Both try to escape from an overwhelming feeling of non-entity in different ways.

Walcott not only describes the psychological emasculation of the colonized but also affirms the dignity and identity of the colonized through decolonisation of the mind. By dint of various dream sequences the playwright shows the way for the redemption of the black Caribbeans. The vision Makak sees helps him shake off his Eurocentric vision that invaded his inner space. The visionary experiences help him regain his true identity unencumbered by the dictation of the West. Makak undergoes a complete journey in his dream. He finds his true abode in Africa where he becomes the king of his tribe and passes judgement on others. In his dream he embraces an alternative world where he finds a ground beneath his feet. The make-believe world of dream proves more substantial than the real world. In scene one of the first part Walcott shows Makak healing the sick people with his magical power in a dream. This is the first tentative step he takes towards achieving the emancipation from colonial bondage. He is accurate in diagnosing the psychological disease of the first peasant when he says, "Remember, is you all self that is your enemy" (1970:249).

In the opening scene of part two we find Makak, in the course of his dream, stabbing Corporal Lestrade and then running into the forest along with Tigre and Souris. Tigre and Souris join Makak only for personal profit. They want to steal the money from Makak and are not concerned with his vision. Here Walcott pokes fun at the dishonest national leaders who only think of hoarding wealth under the façade of mass regeneration. In the forest episode we find an alternative kingdom by the blacks where conventional Eurocentric norms hardly get validity. Corporal Lestrade also undergoes a parallel journey to reclaim his identity. His encounter with Basil, a black apparition the concept of which is culled from Haitian mythology helps him regain lost identity. This confrontation scene reminds us of Simon's hallucinated encounter with Beelzebub in Golding's *Lord of the flies* that brought epiphany to him. In *Dream on Monkey Mountain* Lestrade imbibed the mimetism of the white denying his own identity. The following conversation between Lestrade and Basil is instrumental in bringing out the hollowness of this slavish imitation:

Corporal: My mind, my mind. What's happened to my mind?

Basil: It was never yours, Lestrade. (1970:297)

This encounter helps Lestrade get back his lost self and like Milton's Samson, he begins to feel rousing motion within himself. Elated by his new found identity he makes an address to Africa of the mind that becomes indicative of his recovery of self:

I kiss your foot, O Monkey Mountain...I return to this earth, my mother. Naked, trying very hard not to weep in the dust. I was what I am, but now I am myself...Now I feel better. (1970:299)

In scene three of the second part (Apotheosis scene) we see an application of anti-colonial views. Walcott presents in detail various cultural practices of the tribal community. Protesting against the racist vilification thrust upon the black people, Walcott celebrates precolonial ethos. However, it must be remembered that the precolonial ethos is not described in idealistic terms but along with its pros and cons. Walcott describes the setting thus:

Bronze trophies are lowered. Masks of barbarous gods appear to a clamour of drums, sticks, the chant of a tribal triumph. A procession of warriors, chiefs and the wives of Makak in splendid tribal costumes gather, chanting to drums. (1970:308)

We find Shakespeare, a representative figure of European cultural sobriety deployed by the political masters for political reasons, tried and hanged for having committed injustice to humanity. This scene culminates in the beheading of the white goddess whose image obsessed Makak in such a way that he forgot his real name and lineage. That is why Corporal remarks accurately:

She is the wife of the devil, the white witch. She is the mirror of the moon that this ape look into and find himself unbearable. She is all that is pure, all that he cannot reach. (1970:319)

It is only after beheading the apparition of the white woman that Makak is finally restored to the status of man. Makak calls up his original name which is Felix Hobain. We are reminded of the case of Bertha in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* when she realizes that her real name is not Bertha but Antoinette Cosway:

Names matter, like when he wouldn't call me Antoinette, and I was Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking glass. (1977:147)

It is true that Walcott is advocating, like Fanon, violence to uproot the colonial regime and unify the oppressed people. Fanon in his *The Wretched of the Earth* tells unequivocally:

At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his superiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect. (1967:74)

To conclude, we can say that Walcott in his *Dream on Monkey Mountain* tries to hold up an alternative world for the black Caribbeans; a world free from the influence of the colonisers. It is true that at the end of the play Makak is harked back to the real world where nothing is found to have changed. But it does not suggest the futility or fatuousness of his vision. Like Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* this play gives us a glimpse of the fact that the other world is possible. Edward Baugh aptly remarks that, 'The dream is purgatorial, bringing him to self-acceptance and psychic wholeness. (2006:85)' It is only as a result of that visionary dream that Makak is able to regain his lost identity that elevates him from the derogatory status of an animal to a man.

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