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RETRIEVAL OF CARIBBEAN IDENTITY IN DEREK WALCOTT'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The themes and issues discussed in Post-colonial poetry are much the same as in fiction. After the withdrawal of colonialism the Caribbean islands were fragmented as they had no unified history or identity. Walcott, as a Caribbean poet, created a great poetry that highlighted the themes of memory, displacement, loss of history, exile, brutality and tried to celebrate the rejected or little known aspects. Walcott as a poet represented through his poetic forms the unfortunate encounters of people and islands with alien, hostile forces. He had used iconography in his poetry and sensitively mark each aspect of his natural world from stones, rocks, trees, flowers, birds, animals, climatic changes and even the blowing of the wind and tried to correlate it with life and shifts in its passage through time.

Keywords: Caribbean island, Iconography, Post-colonial poetry.

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Born on the Island of Saint Lucia, a former British colony in the West Indies, Poet and playwright, Derek Walcott was trained as a painter but turned to writing as a young man. He won the 1992 Nobel Prize in literature and was the first Caribbean writer to receive it for his epic poem *Omeros*, which many critics take as the poet's major achievement. In addition to it, Walcott has won many other literary awards over the course of his long career, including an Obie Award in 1971 for his play *Dream on the Monkey Mountain*, a Mac Arthur Foundation "genius" award, Royal society of Literature Award, the Queen's Medal for poetry, the inaugural OCM Bocas prize for Caribbean Literature and the 2011 T.S. Eliot prize for his book of poetry *White Egrets*.

Poetry as a genre occupies an important place in Commonwealth, or later known as 'Post-Colonial' literature. The themes and issues are much the same as in fiction and these are exploitation, colonial history and memory, evocation of myth, tradition, folklore and cultural milieu and the socio-political concern of the writer-poet in the post-colonial Third World setting. It may not be inappropriate to state that the literary imagination that has impelled the poet in the above context essentially stems from his deep rooted concerns and anxieties as an exile, and one who has shared the collective destiny of people under the impact of imperialism and colonialism and the writer or poet from colonial space carries an ineluctable burden of memory, a burden that in turn has to be both carried and articulated to form a vision and a world-view. It is very important in any context (Commonwealth, Third World and Post-Colonial) to understand that a major constituent of colonial experience has been the loss of cultural roots and psychic or emotional pride in one's tradition, along with the loss of indigenous linguistic expression.

The society that emerged in the Caribbean islands after the withdrawal of colonialism was totally fragmented and splintered in that it had no unified national or historical identity. The empire in its anxiety to maintain its hold on the colonies had developed means which taught disrespect to their own age old ways of life and thinking and in their place proclaimed its civilizing mission acting on God's behalf. It became the colonial poet's task and urgent need to wipe out these myths and white lies as he set out to make poetry. And in different colonial settings and landscapes, the poets created great poetry out of memory, displacement, loss of history, exile, brutality, neglect and through the celebration of rejected or little known aspects of environment, nature, seasons and daily cycle of life.

Several features of the West Indian past and its present reflections are mandatory for the understanding of its poetic content. Of all the post-colonial people, only the West Indian can be said to be largely dispossessed of his past and Oral literature as the European adventure had annihilated it along with its makers; the Caribs and Arawaks, the original dwellers of the islands. The Arawaks are a group of people who occupied the North Western part of Amazon basin, where they shared the means of livelihood and social organization of other tribes of the tropical forest. They were merely farmers who hunted and fished and were driven out of lesser Antilles by the Caribs shortly before the appearance of the Spanish. On the other hand, the Caribs occupied the north-western part of Trinidad. Columbus found the Caribs extremely savage and they were cannibals who ate those they killed in fighting and those they kept as prisoners. They still remain a ghostly trace on the consciousness of the modern creolized inheritors.

Walcott is deeply involved as a poet in the several contradictions that mark the residues of European/Imperial intervention in the complex geography and environment of the small islands in the Caribbean, among them St. Lucia where he was born. Walcott as a poet represents through his poetic forms the unfortunate encounters of people and islands with alien, hostile forces. Everything in Walcott's poetry minutely evokes the ingredients of the West Indian past- the chequered histories, towns trying to imitate suburban American communities, the waves of conquests (beginning 16th century) by Spain, Netherlands, France, Britain, the African slave trade, the influx of cheap labour from India and China, the confusion of languages, the friction arising from different, often colliding cultural and religious practices, customs, eating habits and ways of living, etc. Walcott is renowned to sensitively mark each aspect of his natural world-from stones, rocks, trees, flowers, birds, animals, to the climatic changes, even the blowing of breeze across the landscape- and correlate it with the life and shifts in its passage through time. Walcott's poetry creates new and powerful symbols, one among them being the sea, as a repository and source of the land's passage through monumental mutations.

Helen Vendler opines: "Walcott being a poet of divided worlds is divided ethnically, historically, culturally and psychologically" (Vendler 23). His poetry often throws up complex issues of conflict and portrays the impact of the cyclical waves of colonial incursions on the West Indian past and its geographical location, and that changed their destiny and identity forever. This aspect of Walcott's poetry is revealed in the middle phase of his work comprising *Another Life* (1972), *Sea Grapes* (1976) and *The Star Apple Kingdom* (1977) that highlights his concern with the history of the New World, its physical features and environment and defines the course of its making and unmaking.

Walcott in his writing gives insight into local themes and specific stress on corrupt West Indian politics and societies, deals with loss of roots and an acute awareness of exploitation and inclusion following the dark phase of foreign economic, political and psychic invasions. His works reflect his attitude to history and colonialism. This is so among others, in *The Arkansas Testament*, particularly 'St. Lucia's First communion', 'White Magic', 'Oceano Nox', 'Steam', etc. One cannot of course forget to refer to *Omeros*, his great epic poem in which he has merged a profound reverie upon his remote birth place (St. Lucia) – its people, landscape and its history. Walcott doesn't disown the past and the torture of the colonizers is still fresh in his mind. Walcott as a poet can be called 'Hybrid' because of his mixed parentage, his religious upbringing and his choice of the English language as his medium. His both grandmothers were African and grandfathers were European. Although he hated the British culture yet he thought there is something good in it and it should be accepted. He considered English language as superior, has written both in Standard English and in West Indian dialect. He

belonged to Methodist community which was later overshadowed by the Christian community and his father christened him. He uses his genetic and cultural hybridity with great subtlety. These things reveal the uniqueness of Walcott's art, the way he deliberately 'exploits' and uses his mixed ancestry in the personal, cultural and literary sense. Walcott uses the idea of 'colonial mimicry' and he fertilizes his poetic ground to mingle literary traditions and models to declare all composition experience as his own. Walcott in his poetic form opens up several inter-related thematic, literary, cultural and technical strands which in turn shape the poetic space in which he generally organizes his material. His long poems like *In a Green Night*, *Another life*, *Sea Grapes and Omeros* create an enormous poetic space where he uses multiple associations, conceits, metaphors, images, allusions, parallels, paradoxes to work on a general framework dealing with a variety of related issues. Likewise, history oppression, endurance, colonial influence, literary tradition, English language and education are the other key areas around which progression and growth of the poet's consciousness is placed. Walcott's shorter poems center around certain recurring images of Caribbean island environment, nature, landscape, sea life, birds, vegetation, etc.

An important feature of Walcott's poetry is the way it draws up a map of the New World, a map that encircles and contains conflicting patterns of civilizations and cultural/geographical boundaries. The poet engages meticulously and brilliantly in iconography and gives a new turn to the established myths in order to define and create an alternate historiography of the voiceless and powerless. He uses images of space and wide expanses of sea in his poetry that makes the reading of Walcott's poem an extra ordinary experience and it becomes difficult for an average reader to understand the complex, compounded structure that underlies his poetic innovation. In fact, Walcott's greatest achievement is to have created an authentic, self-reflexive world of sights, sounds, experience and the palpable Caribbean consciousness out of a broken fragmented one. As his poetry deals with the loss of history buried under the weight of imperial onslaughts, at the same time it also questions and condemns it, but also call for a renewal of the past with the present.

Walcott's poetry brims with two themes- Methodism and spirituality- which highlights the role of religion and Church in exploring the Caribbean history in a Colonial and Post-Colonial context and Methodism was mainly concerned with the reformation of Church. His very first publication at the age of 14, reveals his former theme. He commented, "I have never separated the writing of poetry from prayer. I have grown up believing it is a vocation, a religious vocation" ("Derek Walcott, 'The Art of Poetry' No. 37"). Walcott published his first poem, a Miltonic, religious imitation in the newspaper, *The Voice of St. Lucia* titled '1944', and its forty-four lines of Miltonic-Wordsworthian blanks verse foreshadow the reach of his poetic ambition. Despite its derivativeness and stylistic rough edges, the poem harbors a maturity beyond the poet's years and prefigures Walcott's fiercely independent thinking, while it also signals a poet who would attract controversy. In this poem, the young Walcott advanced the idea that one learns better about God from the teachings of nature than from the teachings of mankind and the Church.

Walcott's major breakthrough came with the collection *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960* (1962), a volume which celebrates the Caribbean and its history as well as investigates the scars of colonialism and Post-colonialism. Throughout a long and distinguished career, Walcott has returned to those same themes of language, power and place. His recent collections include *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000), *The Prodigal* (2004), *Selected Poems* (2007) and *White Egrets* (2010). Between 1964 and 1973, he published four volumes, which continued his exploration and expansion of traditional forms, and which increasingly concerned themselves with the position of the poet in the Post-colonial world. *The Castaway and other Poems* (1964) reveal the isolation of the artist. "As a West Indian", Katie Jones suggests, "the poet can be seen as a castaway from both his ancestral cultures, African and European, stemming from both, belonging to neither" (Jones 30). Coping with internal division remains a concern in *The Gulf*, which calls on the body of water separating St. Lucia from the United States as a metaphor for the breach between the poet and all he loves, between his adult consciousness and childhood memories, between his international interests and the feeling of community in his homeland. Walcott explored these themes again in *Another Life*, a book length autobiographical poem that examines the important roles of poetry, memory and historical consciousness in bridging the distances within the Post-colonial psyche.

Walcott's works, from the 1980s, during his stay at the United States reveal the tension between his role as an educator at a mainland institution (United States) and as a poet from a small island and explore the "bitter sweet pleasures of exile" experienced when one has become estranged from his beloved homeland, when one has become divided between "North" and "South" (the subdivisions of "*The Fortunate Traveller*") and between "Here and Elsewhere" ("*The Arkansas Testament*"). While these works deal with general themes such as injustice, racism, hatred, oppression, and isolation, they continually return to inner divisions of an exile. "*Midsummer*" is important in this regard, for its lyrics record a year in the life of the poet, as he returns to the Caribbean from the United States in search of childhood memories and travels throughout the region, recording its sense of community from the perspective of an outsider.

Walcott opines that art is a healing medium. Though it sometimes takes its inspiration from disturbances in society or the individual, its final effect is to weld the fissures of consciousness through its affirmation of continuity. From its earliest beginnings art has served mankind as a means of giving order to chaos. In the words of Robert Elliot Fox, "Walcott opines that History is the factual record of mankind's struggle with reality and art gives abundant evidence of man's dis-ease, his conflict with the world as well as with himself" (Fox 241).

According to Gordon Lewis in his book, *The Growth of the Modern West Indies* (1969), the West Indian, "has been deprived of a meaningful kinship with his origins and has sought relief in sheer movement – dance, cricket, carnival, activists, religion, migration itself (Lewis 30). He later says that Caribbean peoples are "all together, in the same boat, sailing on the same uncertain sea" (46).

Walcott in his poems looks back to the disappearance of the native cultures of Carib and Arawak as an image for the region still struggling with its own identity in the shadow of the Colonial rule, still unconverted by poetry into a space habitable, either in the mind of Europe or in the minds of West Indians themselves. Walcott's play *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and *Ti Jean and His Brothers* dwelt on the historical situation of the West Indies. Walcott's lyrical elegies, the ones for example in *The Arkansas Testament*, dwell on the endpoints of various histories: island histories, as in "The Lighthouse", domestic histories, in "The Young Wife," Literary histories at the point where they intersect with the personal, as in the "Eulogy to W.H. Auden." They celebrate the richness of the language the poet is empowered to apply to such moments.

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