

Caribbean Voice in Derek Walcott's Writings

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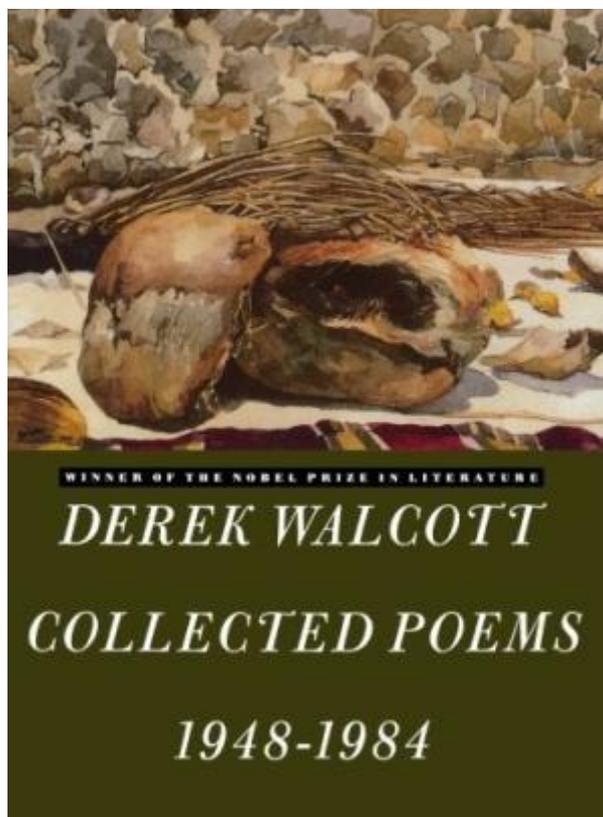
Sir Derek Alton Walcott

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Derek Alton Walcott

Derek Alton Walcott is one among the leading poets writing in English in the twentieth century. He is from Castries, Saint Lucia, an isolated volcanic island in Caribbean. The Caribbean territories were colonised by the British, the French and the Dutch forces several times mostly in the seventeenth century. Most of Walcott's poems are a representation of not only Caribbean experience, but also act as a mouthpiece for all geographical landscapes that have been subject to colonisation at any time in history. Walcott through his poems describes how it is essential not to part with any one of the varying identities, because that would kill the reality of the Caribbean experience-- forcing the

segment of the Caribbean community to be imprisoned within their mental recesses. The present paper attempts to explore the ultimate concern of Walcott for his native land and to evaluate his delineation of Caribbean experiences in his writings.



Walcott and Themes in Caribbean Literature

The themes in Caribbean literature extended from mere exile and migration to self-determination and domination. Since the ancestors of the people of current generation belonged to different race and culture, their responses to the realities of Caribbean historical experience, were also different. Hence, the Caribbean Literature celebrates the pleasurable mixture of all. At the end of 1940s, time seemed to be getting ripe enough for the advent of a major voice like Walcott in the world of art in West Indies. Those who were able to surmise the genius of Walcott's poetry even as an eighteen-year-old with his self-published collections, were soon to be proved right. By the late 1960s, it became abundantly clear that Walcott was sure to rise to fame. Caribbean writers are given encouragement and financial help under the B.B.C.'s programme **Caribbean Voices** edited by Una Marson and then Henry Swanzy.

Walcott is one of such authors who opened the window of Caribbean Literature towards English Literature. His poetry has also been well- received by literary critics and scholars. He has been widely lauded as an accomplished poet known for masterful explorations of racial, cultural and historical consciousness that incorporate both classical and Afro- Caribbean themes and experiences. Walcott's self- defined position as a cross- cultural artist has also invited criticism. He has been called too western by some Afrocentric critics and too Afro Caribbean by Eurocentric critics.

Walcott's Poems

Walcott's earlier poems confront the conflicts of European and African ancestry. In his poetic work *In a Green Night; poems 1948-1960* (1962) he explored the Caribbean land and its history in a colonial and post- colonial content. He was keen to use European poetic form to testify to the Caribbean experience. In his book, *White Egrets*, he ranges the world in an elegiac mood. In his writings, he pays indefatigable attention to the look of things, and writes with a spendthrift approach to the word-hoard. He does not put any limit to the use of metaphors.

The words used in poetic works such as *Selected Poem*, *The Castaway* and *The Gulf* were in lush in style and incantatory in mood. He expressed the feelings of personal isolation, where he was caught between European culture orientation and black folk cultures of his native Caribbean. But in *The Star Apple Kingdom* he uses a tenser more economical style to examine deep cultural divisions of language and race in Caribbean. In *The Fortunate Traveler* he explains his own situation as a black writer in America. The book *Omeros*, one of his most renowned works he retells *Iliad and Odyssey* in the Caribbean aspects. *Bounty* and *Tiepole's Hound* shows his feelings towards Caribbean home and poetic biography of Camille Pissarro respectively. His primary aim always was to create a literature truthful to the West Indian life. He wrote both in Standard English and in West Indian dialect and called himself as 'a mulatto of self'.

Deeply Rooted in Caribbean Society

Personally, Walcott himself was deeply rooted in Caribbean society, with its cultural fusion of African, Asian and European elements. He wrote a number of poems on New York City, Boston, Old New England and Southern US. But in midst of this, he was acutely conscious of his cultural and colonial heritage. He was himself centered on three loyalties, the Caribbean where he lives, the English language and his African origin.

Walcott used a series of themes to write poems which extends from his room to the vast outer world. He tries to touch every aspect of human life. His works were closely knitted with a variety of forms including the folktale, allegory, morality play, fable and ritual featuring emblematic and mythological characters. He dealt with themes of language, power and place. As an earlier painter, he brought the patient and accretive sensibility of a realistic painter. His plays explore Caribbean cultural experience. In "White Egrets" the central theme is ageing, whereas in "Castaway" and "Gulf" it is artistic isolation. In the play 'Pantomium' he uses the metaphor of shipwreck and brings Crusoe to describe the position of rebuilding after the colonialism and slavery, which highlighted the freedom to re-begin. *Omeros*, an epic book length poem, a loose reworking of Homeric story and tradition in the aspect of a journey within the Caribbean and beyond to Africa. He also exaggerates the beauty of islands, colonial burden and fragmentation of Caribbean identity and the role of poets in salving the rents.

Self-Conscious

Walcott is very self-conscious when compared to his contemporary writers. It is to be noted that, he is aware of the historic role which he had been undertaking to bring out the evolution of Caribbean literature and he himself states that:

I knew I lived in a region of bewitching beauty but I found no poet opened magic casements in the way Keats transformed and Wordsworth illuminated the English countryside.... This island is full of sweet sounds but why were there no voices? (qtd. in Narasimhaiah 234)

Religion, Culture and Art – Perishable?

According to Walcott, religion, culture and art are easily perishable. He also adds his views by expressing the fact that, "each living can be "doomed" and "gloried", through its own inherent hybridity. This has been exposed through a drastic scene in Walcott's "In a Green Night", which is being perceived from a Caribbean Vantage: "By noon harsh fires have begun / To quail splendours which they feed" (11-12).

Tension between Plainness and Complexity

In the writings of Walcott, he takes much care to bring about the tension between the plainness of surface and actual complexity at the core. For example, the sea crab is envied in "A

tropical Bestiary” as: “obliquely burrowing to surface / from hot plain sand” (3-4) and the “Tarpon” evokes the question: “Can such complexity of shape, / such bulk, terror, and fury fit / in a design so innocent ...?” (40-43). The movement in the poem tends towards “the style past metaphor” (10), “the passion of / plain day” (12-13), towards acceptance of the ordinary for itself: “Everything Is” (14), “All styles yearn to be plain / as life” (49-50).

Walcott often lays his emphasis on the transforming power of imagination of the mind which is extraordinarily receptive, approximating transcendence, as expressed in “Guyana”: “He was a flower, / weightless. He would float down” (58-59). Walcott feels that he does not require any sort of romantic cloud to deal his intimacy with that of the Caribbean:

The romanticized, pastoral vision of Africa that many black people hold can be an escape from the reality around, us. In the West Indies, where all the races live and work together, we have the beginnings of a great and unique society. The problem is to recognize our African origins but not to romanticize them. (qtd- in Taylor 85)

Use of Imagery

The use of imagery by Walcott is notable in his writings. He employs a photograph like realistic imagery. Louis James exposes his views commenting on the present West Indian literature as:

Here Caribbean flora and fauna are no longer emotive decorations as they tend to be in earlier Caribbean poetry, but they are integral to the poet's act of creation. They show poets true to their experience, making no compromise for the sake of European readers who have never broken a sappy twig of poinsettia, who have never seen, lying motionless in a coral cave, the huge obscene mass of a grouper fish. ("The islands" 34)

Allusions

Walcott uses various allusions in his poems. He uses this element in order to figure out the Hellenic myth like satyr and cythera, which serves to indicate the stark degradation that has come over the Caribbean. The protagonist refers to Cythera, the Greek Goddess of Love, in order to find

an expression in his rhetorical question for the frustration which he has deep in his mind: “So where is Cythera?” (9).

With his painter’s eye, Walcott seems to collaborate the outward scene with the inward experience. This has been noted by Norton as : “... he has taken a particular delight in transforming paintings into poems, a splendid instance of the cultivation of two talents” (qtd. in Kovalchik 1). In Chapter eight of “Another Life”, which has been entitled as “Homage to Gregorias”, Walcott pursues art and life as if they are in the company of his painter friend and the drinking companion Gregorias and are being guided by “Harry Simmons” - “that astigmatic saint”. They make a vow not to leave the island till they make it as a record in art: “For no one had yet written of this landscape / that it was possible” (124-25).The poet realizes the fact that his talent does not lie in the direction of painting and this has been highlighted in theninth chapter of the same poem as: “... I lived in a different gift, / its element metaphors” (109).

Rain is implied to be troublesome and it is compared with the troubled mind of his sister in “Dark August”:

“So much rain, so much life like the swollen sky of this black August.

.....

Everything goes to hell; the mountains fume like a kettle, rivers overrun; still,
she will not rise and turn off the rain” (1-2, 5-6)

The poet seems to be an excellent counsellor for his sister. He instructs his sister to learn to love, “the beads of the rain” (17) and he is waiting for his sister to part “the beads of the rain”.

Beauty of Caribbean Islands and Poetry of Walcott

Walcott, through his poetic art, brings forth the colour and sunshine of the Caribbean islands, there by echoing the beauty of the waves through the rhythm and beat of the waves that pulse and pound against the enchanting shores. Ned Thomas comments about the delights of Walcott’s poetry in one of his recent tribute to Walcott as: “its rendering of seascape and landscape, islands on long horizons, hands on oars and the keels of schooners cutting the water, sunlight and space and the open beach” (qtd. in Aiyejina 72). However to the editors of “Remapping Culture”, “The tangy see-breeze breathes new life into his poetry, and the slapping of waves resonates in the rhythmic clapping of

Calypsonian song and spectacle. Walcott epitomizes the verve and vigour of the New World”
(Vijayasree 111)

Walcott employs the ocean as a recurrent and fertile metaphor suggesting its diverse function such as, a ceaseless and a natural agent of change; an open inviting book of promise; a dark impenetrable mirror of mystery etc. The Caribbean Sea stands for an inexhaustible and complex metaphor on account of the West Indian artist. The clamour of the bell seems to beat and makes the ocean submissive in Walcott’s, “Crusoe’s Island”:

“The chapel’s cowbell
Like God’s anvil
Hammers ocean to a blinding shield;
Fired, the sea grapes slowly yield
Bronze plates to the metallic heat” (1-5)

It is being viewed that the sea is also a finished product of many little, nameless skills of workmanship. It is also considered as an essential part for the rigging of a sturdy native boat. Apart from all these, it serves like a book, conceived and described as a fulfillment of several literary skills. It has been implied in “The Schooner Flight” as:

“Well, when I write
this poem, each phrase go be soaked in salt;
I go draw and knot every line as tight
as ropes in this rigging; in simple speech
my common language go be the wind,
my pages the sails of the Schooner Flight” (71-76)

Jim Wieland declares: “If the sea is ‘a book left open’ (AL 3), it is to be read, and the story which evokes from Walcott’s vast ocean is a comprehensive and continuing fiction of the place of his people in some larger order” (*ACLALS Bulletin* 119)

Women in Walcott’s Poems

Walcott compares women to the moon, the sea and the landscape. These comparisons could be traced in Walcott’s work. “Another Life” A simile for the meeting of Anna with the dark

protagonist has been employed through the play of light and shade under the moon light : “The moon came to the window and stayed there. / He was her subject, changing when she changed.... His dun flesh peeled white by her lightning strokes!” (100-01, 108).

Maintains the Ties

Walcott strives hard to maintain the ties which he has with his island. Walcott is linked to his island with numerous bonds. In the purest sense of the term, he is considered as a loyal West Indian, having Creole and Pidgin as a part of his real-life existence.

Walcott’s attitude towards the use of native language when it gets complicated and mixed up with English is obvious. The dialect used by Walcott is genuine and it echos the voice of a native Caribbean. This genuine voice enriches the authenticity of feeling in the persona. To take a note on Walcott’s heteroglossia, it is employed to the life in West Indies in a lively manner and considerable ironic intent is being traced.

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