

## Articulating Caribbean Conflicts in the Select Poems of Derek Walcott

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**Abstract:** This paper intends to reflect the racial conflicts that constitute the crux of Caribbean identity. It clarifies the sense of self-alienation and self-exile as experienced and expressed by Derek Walcott in his poems. Walcott, as a Caribbean poet, reinforces the themes of despair, disillusionment and defiance, cultural conflicts, linguistic hegemony, and loss of history and identity. Though he is a native of Caribbean island, he develops an attachment with English language. That is why Walcott suffers from a sort of dichotomy of identity. He can neither avoid the English language nor forget the brutality of the European colonization that befell upon the Caribbean people. This paper seeks to examine this fragmented Caribbean self in his poetry.

**Keywords:** *Caribbean, Post-colonial, Identity, African, History.*

**Introduction:** “[E]ither I’m nobody or I’m a nation” is a creed which envelops the entire oeuvre of Derek Walcott. Born in the island of Saint Lucia, a former British colony of West Indies, he has portrayed this ambiguous position of the Caribbean race through most of his poems. He enthusiastically engages with issues of postcolonial predicaments. He makes a quest for a meaningful Caribbean selfhood through his verses. On the way, he falters, suffers, gropes and emerges into a world of ambiguity and complexity. He cannot reach the Utopian self of his origin. He gets, in his search, entangled with so many dualities and dilemmas that he remains indecisive and inconclusive. According to Kamada, “Walcott simply cannot detach himself from the Caribbean landscape’s colonial history and as a result, must directly acknowledge the history of St. Lucia and the Caribbean, the history of diaspora, of slavery, of the capitalist commodification of the landscape, and the devastating consequences this history has on the individual.” [1] His constant search for identity also showcases his fear of inability to express the truth of his real self. However, he considers his poetic power as a burden and feels responsible for representing the true image of the Caribbean community which is quite a utopian ideology. This paper attempts to figure out the effects of colonial rule upon the Caribbean culture and identity. However, this research is made on the basis of a selection of his poems from his Collected Poems 1948-1984.

**Materials and Method:** This study adopts the method of “close textual exegeses”, one of the fundamental methods of criticism. The term exegesis means “to explain” or “to interpret”. This paper provides a profound understanding of the key features of Caribbean identity complexities. On the basis of textual analysis, this research investigates into multifarious issues of the poet’s dilemma.

**A Critical Review of the Racial Dichotomy of Derek Walcott:** In his notable poem, “A Far Cry from Africa,” Derek Walcott unfolds the irreconcilable dilemma of his origin. The poem depicts a bloody battle between the native Kikuyu tribe and the British colonizers. Being split between two sides, the poet feels compassionate neither for the white settlers nor for the black natives. The poem, however, begins with a scene of bloodshed and violence as

A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt Of Africa.

Kikuyu, quick as flies

Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt.

Corpses are scattered through a paradise. (Walcott 17) [2]

The land of Africa is compared to an animal which is being skinned alive by a rough wind, that is, the brutal treatment of the British. On the other side, the Kikuyu tribe specifically the Mau Mau revolutionary group is compared to flies who are wading through blood of Africa. The heavenly image of Africa is turned upside down and it is rather a charnel house full of corpses. In this bloody war, the worm is the only entity that claims to have the taste of victory and it declares, ‘Waste no compassion on these separate dead!’. It suggests that the victims deserve punishment.

The poem is mainly written on the context of the Mau Mau uprising against the British colonial rule in Kenya during the 1950s. The poet cannot feel sympathetic for any of the groups. On the one hand, he cannot accept the brutality of the native and on the other hand, he also hates the colonial policy of the white settlers.

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Being torn from within, the poet does not know how to respond to this conflict. Even he is not satisfied with the indifferent response of the observers who do not want to get involved in it as they want to wipe their hands “[u]pon the napkin of a dirty cause”. The Mau Mau revolutionists are furthermore compared to “gorilla” and the white colonizers to “superman”. This indicates Walcott’s pessimistic view of the Mau Mau victory over the Whites. He is suspicious of their triumph. Being in an incessant whirlwind of ambiguous identity, Walcott calls both the groups in derogatory terms.

The last part of the poem reveals the climax of the poet’s unresolved dilemma as he holds:

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,  
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein? I who have cursed  
The drunken officer of British rule, how 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? (Walcott 18) [2]

As he belongs to both African and European origins, he is like a “single circling homeless satellite”. This hybrid position tears him between “Africa” his root and the English tongue he uses. He cannot take side of any culture due to his mixed heritage. Helen Vendler also captures this ambiguity in her article, “Poet of Two Worlds”:

He was in all things “a divided child”, loyal to both “the stuffed dark nightingale of Keats” and the “virginal unpainted world” of the islands; he was divided again between writing poetry and writing plays, divided yet again between writing plays and directing them. From St. Lucia he went to Trinidad, from Trinidad to the United States, becoming not only the colonial but also the exile and, in his returns to the West-Indies, the prodigal son. [3]

This dual position of his being resembles Homi K. Bhabha’s idea of in-between space. According to Bhabha, a postcolonial writing is like a junction where two or more cultures meet. In Bhabha’s language, this junction is ‘in-between space’ which means “neither the one nor the other but something else besides, in between.” [4]

He can neither reject his African ancestry nor the English identity. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon calls this psychological trauma Negrophobia. In his opinion, the black man “lives an ambiguity that is extraordinarily neurotic.” [5] In the “collective unconscious” of a Black man, being black means being “wicked, sloppy, malicious, instinctual,” that is just the opposite of the white. Walcott also suffers from this trauma but it remains unresolved. Though he remains indecisive regarding his identity, his poem suggests that he will abandon neither Africa nor Britain.

Walcott expresses a deep desire to dig out a memory of the past of his true self and of his race. This longing is very prominent in the poem “Names”. Here he longs for discovering the true history of his Caribbean culture but in vain. In this poem, he narrates the birth of his race, the Caribbean community. In the beginning, they were like the sea as he says, “My race began as the sea began/ with no nouns, and with no horizon.” This implies that the whole race existed only in the sea which was mysterious, unnamed, vast and free from the touch of the world. Later, at one moment they come to the world but the poet cannot identify that moment. He yearns to get hope at that moment which ends only in despair. He claims:

I began with no memory,  
I began with no future,  
But I looked for that moment  
When the mind was halved by a horizon.

I have never found that moment  
When the mind was halved by a horizon-  
For the goldsmith from Benares,  
The stonecutter from Canton,  
as a fishline sinks, the horizon  
sinks in the memory. (Walcott 305) [2]

He gets utterly frustrated as he says, “I have never found that moment/ when the mind was halved by a horizon-”. Neither he can trace that origin nor the other professionals of his race like the goldsmith, stonecutter, bronzesmith and so on. The idea of mind “being halved by a horizon” implies a binary opposition that formulates the political structure of the world. This binary divides the world between the self and the other or between the rulers and the ruled. This division disseminates injustice, inequality,

superiority-inferiority complex and so on. The Europeans, through the binary opposition, has led to the concept of Eurocentrism that is the world revolving round Europe. The west is defined as the 'self'- familiar, civilized, enlightened, white, the supreme and the East is defined as the 'other'- uncivilized, emotional, ignorant, violent, exotic, dark, dirty, inferior and so on. Walcott assumes that "the moment when the mind was halved by the horizon" is the same as the moment when these binaries begin to exist for the Caribbean People with the beginning of his race. He also hints that the concept of Caribbean identity itself is built upon colonial ideas.

The last two lines of the poem of the above quoted extract, however, suggest a note of ending of getting any hope or positive outcome of that search for historical origin. The only feature he can remember of his past is that the beginning was like a harsh cry of a "sea-eagle". With this cry, his community tried to define their original, pure 'self' as they came from the sea to the politically constructed world. Yet they fail to establish "that terrible vowel/ that I!" It is terrible because what they achieve is a socially constructed self, not a true self. Their entire past is folded in the sky and the ocean. No definite tool remains that can report their past-

But this stick  
To trace our names on the sand  
Which the sea erased again, to our indifference. (Walcott 306) [2]

The stick here connotes the act of writing which the race of Walcott requires in order to preserve their past. Yet the sea comes and wipes away all the story again and again. It is quite challenging to rewrite the history from a subaltern perspective. They do not know in which language they will document that history. This question of language is also a crucial one. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o writes, "Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture." [6] So they fail not only to communicate but also to retain culture.

Moreover, instead of being alert, people are also 'indifferent' regarding documenting their history. This brings again utter sorrow and disappointment. This poem does not only make a search for history but also reinforces the role of colonizers in the island. They imposed different names on the Caribbean nature and culture. They used to imagine that the European landscape is the ideal one and the rest of the world is nothing but an inferior copy of that superior realm. They named the palm trees as "Versailles' colonnades". They also name a pigsty as "little Versailles". In this process of naming, they repeat their own language to ridicule the colonized landscape and its other features.

The theme of repetition is also very frequently found in the poem "Names". In the beginning the repetition of "I began with", is observed. The next stanza also displays repetition and alliteration as he pens: "Their memory turned acid/ but the names held;/ Valencia glows/ with the lanterns of oranges,/ Mayaro's/ Charred candelabra of cocoa." (Walcott 307) [2]. This stanza begins with hopelessness but the alliteration provides a sense of solace on the burning heart of the poet. Yet the colonized people began to reclaim their language through repetition. Though the colonizers wanted to impose different names on their land, "The African acquiesced/ repeated, and changed them." First Africans began to experience the world in terms of nouns. Then they used them, repeated them and transfused them. It becomes clear through the last few lines of the poem. The Caribbean children look at the stars "over Valencia's forest" which is the name of a place in Spain. Nonetheless their vision is not confined to the naming process set by the Europeans. The children do not see the so called constellations "Orion" or "Betelgeuse" in the sky, but only "fireflies in the molasses" in their own terms. This shows the power of resistance and the sense of freedom in the Caribbean people in perceiving the world in their own ways. The role of repetition thus demonstrates Walcott's deeper association with history and his constant search for the past. He laments for what has been erased but uses memory to reconstruct the lost self. Manjinder Kaur, in his article, "Retrieval of Caribbean Identity in Derek Walcott's Poetry" hints at this phenomenon:

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. [7]

**Ambiguity of Caribbean History:** His obsession with history predominates in the poem "Ruins of a Great House". This poem denotes the historical legacy of colonialism in the Caribbean islands. This is another poem focusing on the ambivalence of Walcott between the cruelty of the British colonizers and the loyalty to the English language he writes in. The poem begins with an epigraph from 17<sup>th</sup> century writer Sir Thomas Browne. This is an extract from a poem named "Urn Burial" which highlights the nature of death and decay of Roman colonization in Britain. The ending of British Empire reminds him of the Roman Empire in Britain. He suggests that no brutal, dominating policy survives long. The poem, however, begins with the metaphor of a "Great House" which is compared to both British Empire and English canon. But the British Empire is now on decay and degeneration. Nothing glorious remains of that time except "stones". The empire is further compared to the "disjecta membra", the dismembered body that lies on the ground helplessly just like Ozymandias of Shelley. The cherubs that beautified the entrance

are now screaming and lamenting over the collapse of the colonial rule. The air of this poem is polluted by the rotten empire as he holds:

Three crows flap for the trees  
And settle, creaking the eucalyptus boughs.  
A smell of dead limes quickens in the nose  
The leprosy of empire. (Walcott 19) [2]

Though the empire expires, “the leprosy of empire” still prevails. The odour of rotten, corrupted empire still fills the air of the former colonies. It seems that they are infected by a fatal disease and there is no remedy for it. They have left the pollution of their evil deeds. The poet says, “The rot remains with us, the men are gone”. He also remarks that “Deciduous beauty prospers and is gone”.

Next he moves to the river and there he finds lime trees that remind him of the empire again. The manor’s rich, immoral, young men and women- all are gone but the river flows being forgetful of all the torments and torture of the empire which the river witnessed on its bank. While climbing an iron-wrought wall, Walcott feels that the craftsmen of the Great House are no more. They successfully protected the Great House from “guilt” but not from “the worm’s rent” and the attack of “the mouse”. This implies the natural justice winning upon the human injustice.

However, the clash between Walcott’s contempt for colonial rule and his compassionate feeling for the English language and its literature continues in the poem. This complexity is upheld by Peter Balakian in “The Poetry of Derek Walcott” as he says:

For his ability to embrace his Black West Indian identity and to accept, with the ingenuity of an artist, the language of his inherited culture accounts for much of the genius and richness of his idiom. Using the English tongue he loves does not preclude his moral outrage at the crimes that the Empire has committed against his people. He hears in the mansion of English culture a death-rattle in each room. [8]

His passion for the English can never make him oblivious of the oppression of the Empire.

In the second stanza, however, he refers to American novelist, William Faulkner as he appears to be an embodiment of both aesthetic work and history of violence. He further conjectures-

Of men like Hawkins, Walter Raleigh, Drake,  
Ancestral murderers and poets, more perplexed  
In memory now by every ulcerous crime. (Walcott 20) [2]

Instead of having hatred for the European colonial policy, Walcott sympathizes with the English canon. He thinks of the great poets who wrote artistically and murdered to perpetuate the British rule. People now get “perplexed” regarding the role of those poets whether they should be remembered for their art or “ulcerous crime”. The glorious “green age” has faded away and been turned into “a rotting lime”.

The final stanza begins with “rage” as Walcott recalls the brutality of the empire whose literary canon is so rich. Immediately his anger gets pacified with the idea that “Albion (Britain) too was once/ A colony like ours”, which was full of faction and rivalry. Besides, his quotation from Donne’s poem, “No Man is Island” unearths the central conflict of the poem as Walcott affirms:

All in compassion ends  
So differently from what the heart arranged:  
“as well as if a manor of thy friend’s...” (Walcott 21) [2]

Again his heart is torn between his hatred for the empire and his passion for the English writing with which he is existentially connected.

The strife between European history and English poetry also prevails in the poem “Map of the New World”. It is written on the context of independence of St. Lucia in 1979 following a long war of ten years after centuries of British colonization. His mention of “the New World” suggests the discovery of America by the Europeans. This discovery led to the elimination of the natives of America. When the British colonizers came to St. Lucia, they followed the same method and killed most of the indigenous people. In this context, St. Lucia was also a “new” world, colonized by the British Empire and different from the former, original one. In that “new world” of St. Lucia, Walcott becomes a stranger, a refugee. That’s why he endeavours to make a voyage in search of an original identity. With this intention at heart, he divides the poem or the voyage into three sections: “Archipelagoes”, “The Cove” and “Sea Cranes”. In the first section, he compares the poem to a ship with which he starts his attempt to find his own lost self and to describe it through his poetry.

Nonetheless, on the way, he experiences a rainfall. It makes his search vague and leads him to confusion. He loses hope to find out a safe land or a solid ground for his identity. This implies the difficulty of finding a harbour after the long subjugation of British rule. Losing his self and original history of his island, he refers to classical literature and compares the ten-year long war of St. Lucia to that of Troy. Unlike the traditional way of describing the Trojan war with the victory of the Greeks, he angles camera on the darker sides like Helen's "grey hair", "a white ashpit/ by the drizzling sea". It appears that the raindrops are the strings, the sea is the harp and the ship or the poem is the song. In this tone, Walcott hears the song sung by Homer to create the lines of "the Odyssey". It reminds us of the music of sea heard by Matthew Arnold in "Dover Beach" which was also heard by Sophocles long ago on the Aegean coast. Walcott hears the same song full of yearning for the truth and beauty of his origin. At one point, Walcott becomes able to create seditious writing being assured that he is "[f]ar from the curse of government by race". This ability exhibits his desire to write freely against the oppressive rulers. But he no longer is lost at sea, he also longs for returning home, and he asks the ocean to "turn the wanderer/from his salt sheets" to bring him back home from the poetic voyage at sea.

His arrival at home, however, is implied in the last line- "Wrench his heart's wheel and set his forehead here". This indicates a sort of discovery of the "new world" but it is not like that of the emperors. Patricia Ismond, in this regard, asserts:

What makes the difference is the expansiveness and depth of this route to self-definition – namely, the philosophical and epistemological intention contained in the dialectic of setting a newer world against the old. It directs him to what are core factors in the shaping of his consciousness ... the metaphoric naming of the elementals of his virgin landscape; and, continuous with this naming, a sense (a surviving presence) of prehistory as it interfaces and intersects with a burdened empirical history in that landscape. [9]

Thus the world Walcott expects to regain is not the old one but something new and hybrid. The colonizers discovered lands, subjugated and eliminated their inhabitants. Unlike their discovery, the ship of Walcott's poem is able to find its way back to its origin in a special way.

The sea, in this allegory, refers to the history of English literature. The allusions are made to the Trojan War. Tristan and Isolde refer to the roaring of the sea and this roar makes it possible for the poet's ship to navigate home secretly. Then he writes again subverting the colonial government policy of his island.

Being constantly haunted by the sea, Walcott uses the allegory of the sea in the poem "The Sea is History". This poem dives deep into the past and makes a quest of a true, documented history of the tribal community which ends in vain. It begins with the question of some people, "where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?...." These questions imply the absence of monuments, glorious battle, sacrificing martyrs, tribal memory in the Caribbean culture. They are not only absent but also there is no possibility of finding them out as they are "locked" in that grey vault of the sea. Walcott intends to unlock stories, events from the pre-colonial and colonial periods. He hopefully answers, "The Sea is History" but gradually the poem leads him to despair and disappointment.

In order to investigate the past, Walcott here refers to the Bible, history and natural phenomena. Firstly he refers to some Biblical events as a historical document. Secondly, he makes reference to "Emancipation", a historical event comparing this to the role of Christianity in bringing freedom of the natives. Then he sheds light on some natural objects like sea, flies, herons, frogs, fireflies, bats, prayer-mantis to represent history. Yet, he rejects all these Biblical and natural incidents to be true history as it exists only through the act of documentation.

His Biblical reference makes the poem historically significant. His account of the caraval is reminiscent of the Portuguese ships of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. By using these ships, the Europeans arrived in Africa. Then he makes a series of references to the Bible in order to display the nature of African history. The Book of Genesis is the first book of Christian Old Testament which tells the story of the Origin of the world. In the poem, this marks the beginning of the African natives with the arrival of the European colonizers. His reference to Exodus is the second book Old Testament which includes the story of the displacement of Israelites from Egypt by the influence of Moses. In the poem, the Exodus suggests the shifting of the native Africans from their homeland to the European colonies. But there lies a difference between the two movements. Unlike the Israelites, the Africans got slavery instead of freedom. Here the poet attempts to connect the history of African land to that of the Jews and the Christians.

The poet claims repeatedly that the history lies in the sea. It indicates the unlawful acts of the colonizers in the sea. It also reminds the poet how they departed and they took the slaves with them who were suffering intolerably. These slaves met death in the sea and their bone "soldered by coral to bone". These sea corals bear testimony of the oppression and torture of the colonizers upon the natives. The corals of the sea also form mosaics that are covered by "the benediction of the shark's shadow". This is nevertheless ironical as the shark is not something blessed but representative of the colonizers who were hungry for riches. This reveals the hegemonic operation of the colonizers who claimed to bring salvation for the natives which was, in fact, nothing less than a shark-like threat. This is the Exodus, in Walcott's opinion, or the second chapter of the history of Africa.

Next he continues to turn pages of that history book of sea and refers to “plangent”, “Babylonian bondage”, “white cowries”, “drowned women”, “Song of Solomon”, “brigands”, “the tidal wave swallowing Port Royal”, “Jonah”, “Gomorrah” and “Emancipation”. All these narratives allegorize the negative aspects of the colonial policies in ruling the natives. Among them, the reference to Jonah or Yunus, the prophet of Israel who was swallowed by a giant fish or whale is remarkable. This Biblical event is merged with the historical event of Port Royal, the most important city in Jamaica. Here the poet indicates that the way the sea waves swallowed Port Royal in 1692, is similar to the way Jonah was swallowed by the giant fish or whale according to the Bible.

Yet the ocean continues its search for history. It implies that all these descriptions fail to offer the complete history. It requires to dive deeper into the sea for further information of the past. The poet holds: “but the ocean kept turning blank pages /looking for history.” (Walcott 365) [2]. In this search, he very frequently combines the poetic adventure with that of the geographical. In “The Schooner Flight” the sailor Shabine refers to “my pages the sails of the schooner *Flight*” (Walcott 347) [2]. The poet also delineates islands “like words...Erased with the surf’s pages” (Walcott 52) [2], “...the pages of the sea/ are a book left open by an absent master” (Walcott 145) [2], “boulevards [that] open like novels / waiting to be written. Clouds like the beginnings of stories” (Walcott 496) [2]. These expressions make us oblivious of whether we are journeying through landscape or language. It reinforces the rupture between reality and representation. Similarly there is always a gap between real history and its representation. It also affirms Walcott’s futile search for true history which is not found anywhere in a documented way.

He further asserts saying “but that was not history, /that was only faith, /and then each rock broke into its own nation.” (Walcott 367) [2]. “Each rock breaking into its own nation” may imply the division of Africa into smaller nations by the French and English colonizers.

Then he compares the church councils to buzzing flies, the official clerks to herons, the politicians to frogs and the ambassadors to bats. The poet hints that here begins the history of Africa because after this, the Africans began to think about their own political policy in order to challenge that of the colonizers. Finally the poet refers to Ten Plagues mentioned in the Bible and compares them to the Bureaucratic system. The end of the poem, however, is ironical and frustrating because the poet fails to provide a specific answer to the question of historical documents. All his accounts to the Bible and historical events prove to be incomplete to describe the real African history as it is beginning at the end.

Thus it is clear that the hidden history of Africa is full of injustice, inequality, suppression, oppression, massacre, loss, despair, conquests, destruction and devastation. The injustice and inequality prevent Walcott to recapture his true original self and at the end of his adventure he remains nobody. This is clarified by Ms Bushra Waqar who quotes from “The Schooner Flight”:

By confronting the most degrading aspects of his life, the failures as an individual and as a nation, a native sailor named Shabine strives to exorcize the ghosts of his soul as well as his national history. The poem revolves around the plight of the speaker agonized by the conflict about his roots, “I have Dutch, nigger and English in me, / and either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation” (346). Despite having ‘a sound colonial education’, he is considered inferior both by the whites and his own countrymen because he “... wasn’t black enough for their pride” (350). [10]

This native sailor called Shabine represents the dichotomy of Walcott himself who fails to possess any pure identity. He can neither recollect his past nor can define his present.

**Results and Discussion:** Due to postcolonial predicament, the Caribbeans suffer terribly. They are relentlessly haunted by the loss of history, culture and identity. These disjointed feelings of the Caribbean are projected here through the poet’s poetic voyage. He undergoes the same situation and suffers bitterly. Moreover, he is split between his hatred of colonial rule and sympathy for the English language and its literature. This dichotomy intensifies his dilemma and he seems to be an outcast in his own land. This paper, however, concludes by highlighting this dichotomy of identity crisis which remains unresolved.

**Conclusion:** In his search of identity, Walcott gets enmeshed with so many associations and affiliations that he cannot define anything appropriately. He is broken between his ancestral roots in Africa and the English language he learned to love. As he fails to define his proper self, he concludes in “The Schooner Flight” saying- “I have Dutch, nigger and English in me, / and either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation” (Walcott 346) [2].

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