A Study of Derek Walcott and His Poetic Cosmos

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ABSTRACT: It was in the 1960s that the Caribbean writers felt the need to show the world their individual identity and the problems of their community. And so many poets emerged from West Indies and among them Derek Walcott was perhaps one of the best poets the world have ever seen. As a poet of mixed ancestry, he tried to show the problems, conflicts, contradictions in religion, race and colonial heritage of that period. He got his inspiration and as well as was influenced by some mentors like T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, W.H. Auden and Ezra Pound. Actually he wanted to show the world the economic, socio-cultural, socio-political and racial problems of his people and in doing so he adopted many concepts, changes, themes and symbols in his poetry. In this paper, I have attempted to show the various poetic visions or his poetic cosmos that lie in his poetry through some of his everlasting poetry.

Keywords: Black, Colonialism, Crisis, Identity, Imagery, Metaphor

INTRODUCTION:

“Forty years gone, in my island childhood, I felt that
The gift of poetry had made me one of the chosen,
That all experience was kindling to the fire of the Muse.” (Midsummer)

For a long time West Indies had experienced a history of slavery, colonialism, alienation and deprivation. In this identity crisis condition, many Caribbean writers have been educated abroad and continued to live there. As a result, a historical void, a sense of dislocation and lack of a common culture were found in that period. In such condition, Caribbean literature needed a poet to write for them, to be with them, to raise voice for them and got Derek Walcott who worked from within towards a creation of the Caribbean culture. He wanted to recognize his origin and never wanted to romanticize it. Actually the Caribbean islands, the sea, the surrounding atmosphere inspired the poet very much to write poetry about Caribbean culture, nature and colonial condition. A close reading to his poems shows that he wrote poetry with different themes and sometime with the same thing in a different way. And these are found in some of his poetry from his works such as ‘In a Green Night: Poems’, ‘Omeros’, ‘Another life’, ‘The Castaway and Other Poems’, Sea Grapes’, ‘Midsummer’, ‘The Star-Apple Kingdom’.

Walcott’s most ambitious work is ‘Omeros’. It is an epic poem and is divided into seven books with sixty four chapters. In this poem he retold the story of Odyssey and all Greek characters here registered their hybrid identity. He showed his mastery of poetic technique in recasting Achille, Hector, Maud, Plunkett, Helen and many more. The success of Omeros validated the substance of Walcott’s entire oeuvre for here his poetic cosmos preoccupied and changed a lot. Here his chief concerns were the fragmentation of Caribbean identity, the beauty of his island home, the burden of colonial legacy, memory and history and he tried to explore these issues from personal and global perspective. His own life experience as a writer’s block and midlife crisis in living in an empty house were also shown. Experience of black slaves with no name and identity were very much present here. As he said in Omeros:

“I sang our wide country, the Caribbean sea
Who hated shoes, whose soles were as cracked as a stone?
Who was gentle with ropes, who had one suit alone,
Whom no man deared insult and who insulted no one,
Whose grin was a white breaker cresting, but whose frown?
Was a growing thunderhead…” (Omeros)

Walcott’s poetic cosmos was not at all static. Even the concept of love was different in his poems. In his ‘Love after Love’, using his mixed heritage as an analogy and platform, he asked God about his purpose on earth. He also wants to confess his flaws, weakness and wants to look forward leaving past sorrows and obstacles. Here the poet talks about learning to love yourself. But a deep insight into the poem shows that it is a poem about self discovery and identity as one day everyone will recover and reconnect with his identity and
self. He is very optimistic here about the near future of his people. Here we find an expression of post colonial experience as he also wants the postcolonial ‘white’ side to reconcile with ‘black’ side. As he says here:

“You will love again the stranger who was yourself
Give wine, Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you
all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.” (Love After Love)

In every aspect, Walcott is different and unique in his own way. It is because he was too anxious for his people and he wants to convey his message his hope, his anxiety in his poetry in a new way. In his ‘Dark August’, he says that in life bad times will obviously come but we should not lose hope and we should look at the positive aspects in life. We can’t control our fate and nature. So we must have to accept both good and bad experience in our life. As he says:

“Everything goes to hell; the mountains fume
like a kettle, rivers overrun; still,
She will not rise and turn off the rain
I would have learnt to love black days like bright ones,
The black rain, the white hills, when once
I loved only my happiness and you.” (Dark August)

Walcott’s poetic world is somewhat illustrates that as a postcolonial poet, he tries to show the colonizer as well as colonized condition. In many of his poems we find that as a man of mixed heritage, he tries to discover his roots and identity as well as the crisis of the colonized along with his ideas about colonizer’s language and culture. Actually his poetic thoughts are sometime full of confusion, crisis and ambivalent nature. In his ‘Extract A’, from ‘Another Life’, he shows the contrast between white and black with vivid imagery. He shows his disgust against racism, imperial attitude and rational thought on colonial discourse. He says here with his views against colonial wisdoms, enlightenment and rational thinking which bring nothing for the colonized:

“The dream
of reason had produced its monster:
A prodigy of the wrong age and color.” (Extract A)

Walcott tries to create a balance between colonized culture and colonizer’s culture and it is shown in his ‘Ruins of a Great House’. He shows here that evil will surely destroy oneday. Here he reexamines the destruction of the practices made by the colonizer and also the destruction of the empire. A deconstructive reading shows the house as colonizer’s house and now it is ruined and it is also shown with the sunset image. The power of the colonizer to dominate the world has gone. Here he shows two ideologies of religion and power which is needed to rule natives and at the same time he feels compassion for colonized culture also. As he says here:

“What Kipling heard; the death of a great empire,
the abuse of ignorance by Bible and by sword
All my compassions ends
So differently from the heart arranged:
As well as if a manor of thy friends…” (Ruins of a Great House)

Such was Walcott’s poetic vision and thought that even using simple, common and clear images with language, he presented pictures and elements of love in a new way. In his ‘The Fist’, the poet shows how love clenches around human heart and how it strangles and holds the heart in thrall and pain. Love is very hard to understand and suffering from pangs of love is so painful and strong that we have to harden our hearts so that they may not feel the pain. As he says here:

“Hold hard, then, heart. This way at least you live.
When have I ever not loved the pain of love?” (The Fist)

Walcott’s use of imagery and rhetorical expressions are no less praiseworthy. In his ‘A City’s Death by Fire’, he describes the destruction of the city, sadness, disillusionment and previous existence of the town with vivid images and metaphors like ‘hot gospeller’ and ‘Churched sky’. The contrast between the wooden world and natural world is also shown with much feeling. However in the last stanza, there is also a note of pessimistic optimism as ‘baptism by fire’ indicates a new beginning and it is not based on man made things. Actually Walcott wants a new way of looking at life and it is shown in these lines:

“In town, leaves were paper, but the hills were a flock of faiths;
To a boy who walked all day, each leaf was a green breath
Rebuilding a love I thought was dead as nails,
Blessing the death and the baptism by fire.” (A City’s Death by Fire)

Walcott in his poems also throws light on racism and the violence that it brings. He also holds opinion for American and all these are shown in ‘Blues’. Here he again speaks of colonialism as this poem raises issues on culture and their conflicts. The narrator in this poem may be a black man. He is also beaten but he feels pity for those who attack him. The narrator stays above the conflict but other boys perpetuate it. A close reading shows that in this poem Walcott tries to say that colonized people and their colonized culture and identity are not so important for those who fought to claim control over them. As he says in last stanza:

“You know they wouldn’t kill
you. Just playing rough,
like young Americans will.
Still it taught me something
about love. If it’s so tough,
Forget it.” (Blues)

Walcott’s search for identity goes on in his poem ‘Names’ from his collection of poems ‘Sea Grapes’. He composes, integrates and sums up his thoughts with greater maturity. He is in search of an identity that comes from a flow of history. He negates the fact that identity can be named for he has no nouns with which he can introduce himself. His search for the past previous to colonial history is futile. Walcott shows here how his countrymen face difficulties to adopt colonizer’s language. And the poem reaches its climax when he tries to proclaim his identity in a vivid way:

“A sea-eagle screams from the rock
and my race began like osprey
with that cry,
that terrible vowel,
that I!” (Names, I)

The poem closes with a question and an answer that shows the anger and frustration of the colonial master as well as the native’s pathetic reply of the native subject:

“Answer, you damned little Arabs!
Sir, fireflies caught in molasses.” (Names, II)

Walcott in his different collection of poems tries to maintain a balance of his ideas and themes from different viewpoint. In his ‘The Sea is History’ from ‘The Star-Apple Kingdom’, we find the poet’s sense of disillusionment beyond his immediate origin. Here Walcott tries to describe the actual condition of his people by taking help from the history of other suffering nations. With his use of language and metaphor, meditation upon suffering and death, Biblical imagery, ironical perception of life, delicate touch of humour he makes the poem a unique one where explanations become endless. He also shows here mixed psyche of the races in West Indies. The last few lines show his sadness as well as his challenges towards the concept of history. As he says:

“…and then in the dark ears of ferns
and in the salt chuckle of rocks
with their sea pools, there was the sound
like a rumour without any echo
of History, really beginning.” (The Sea is History)

Walcott’s poetic cosmos also consists of dilemma and intertextuality. In his ‘Goats and Monkeys’, we find master-slave relationship like that of Robinson Crusoe and also obvious references to Shakespeare’s ‘Othello’. His lyricism, historicity, nemesis, allusion and pastiche go hand in hand in this poem. A deconstructive reading also finds a colonial problem in this poem. Here Walcott turns Othello into an allegorical figure with whom he can identify with himself and his people. Othello is a black and struggles for recognition in a white society. With his poetic technique he relates famous fragile evidences with racial odds and ideals. One such is also shown here:

“His grief
farically knotted in a handkerchief,
a sibyl’s
prophetically stiched remembrancer
webbed and embroidered with the zodiac
this mythical, horned beast who’s no more
monstrous for being black.” (Goats and Monkeys)
The discussion regarding Walcott and his poetic vision and cosmos will be incomplete with the discussion of his most representative poem of his period ‘A Far Cry from Africa’. The poem is written against the backdrop of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, a Kikuya anti-colonial organization. Actually Walcott notices with horror that colonization has reduced the African people to the level of savages and they are likened to helpless animals that ought to be haunted and killed. Here Walcott also uses animal and bird imagery to show us the physical environment of an ancient civilization with its own natural laws where survival of the fittest rule is followed. Actually the African native like the poet continues to wrestle with his white masters in search of his individuality and identity, only two find himself torn between the two:

“The gorilla wrestles with the superman
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 the Africa and the England 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?  (A Far Cry from Africa)

CONCLUSION:

In a nutshell, it can be said that Walcott throughout in his poetic career works on not so many themes but on some particular issues with great efficiency. His poetic style varies from dualism to ambiguity, from colonial to postcolonial issue, from doubt to identity, from root to rediscover someone’s own image and space. His poetry shows a preoccupation with the national identity of the West Indies and their literature, and with the conflict between the heritage of European and West Indies culture. His poetic cosmos also shows a condition of home and exile, self realization and sometime spiritual betrayal with one’s country and culture. As a poet he can be summed up in these lines:

“I’m just a rednigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger and English in me,
And either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation.”  (The Schooner Flight)

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