



DEREK WALCOTT: THE REAL POET OF WESTINDIES

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ABSTRACT

Studying West Indian literature is a great academic venture, because it is a synthesis of various cultures. The cultures of native tribes and of the imported slave communities from Africa, indentured labourers from India, China, Middle East and the cultures of colonial rulers promoted to a highly varied and complex culture in the West Indian soil. In this multi cultural context, it is very difficult to define one single notion of 'Caribbeanness' or 'West Indianness'. It is equally difficult to understand how and where and when exactly the 'West Indian Literature' had emerged.

INTRODUCTION

Though Columbus arrived into the Caribbean islands in 1492, the actual colonial settlement started with the Spanish conquistadors about 1600 AD. Gold mining was the main interest of the Spanish. The Tainos resisted the Spanish forces against their settlement in the Caribbean region. But a large number of the Tainos were killed in war. And some of them became slaves. Then the strong resistance to the Spanish forces came from the Caribs. The European settlement in the Caribbean region was resisted by the Caribs till seventeenth century. A number of Caribs were killed in war and those who were caught became slaves. Soon some of them died of epidemics. In this way the population of slaves in the indo Caribbean was reduced considerably.

By the end of seventeenth century the English, the Dutch and the French established their colonies in the Caribbean and they found that the soil was good for sugar plantation. The British took initiative for sugar plantation, due to scarcity of the labour force they introduced African tribes into slavery. Later they imported slaves mostly from Africa and indentured labourers from India, China and Middle East. There was a heavy competition among the European powers for sugar trade in this region. They earned huge profits from sugar trade. There were internal wars between the European settlers for power and economic dominance.

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Thus, the islands in the Caribbean region had come under the control of the four colonizing countries; Spain, England, France and Netherlands forming consequently four linguistic regions in the Caribbean as Spanish speaking region, English speaking region, French speaking region and Dutch speaking region.

Britain had the large number of islands in its possession, though the number of islands in possession under certain colony varied time to time, because of internal wars. St.Lucia was a fine example for this, because it was changed from hand to hand in wars nearly fourteen times. Ultimately the islands that came under the control of Britain were known as British West Indies or Anglophone Caribbean. This region includes Anguilla, Antigua, Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Bay islands, Belize, British virgin islands, Cayman islands, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Montserrat, Saint Croix, Saint Kitts, Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago (from 1797), the Turks and Caicos islands. The Literature that has been written in English by the writers of this region is known as 'British West Indian Literature' and popularly known as "West Indian Literature". Now, there are nationalist literatures in small places like Jamaica and Trinidad as a result of political fragmentation of the whole English speaking Caribbean region in to small nations. If one goes by political definitions of these places as units as Islands or nations the term "West Indian Literature" does not exist. But just as there is a West Indian cricket team, one can generally describe the literature in English written in this part of the world as 'West Indian Literature'. Even, in terms of culture, West Indies does not contain one single culture. As Shaheed Mohammed observes:

Migration has been one of the primary forces in the formation and transformation of Caribbean societies. Before the Arawaks discovered Columbus on their shores, and ever since, various peoples have migrated to the region – some by choice, others by force. The colonization of these territories gave way to the formation of independent Caribbean states with the population of each state comprising the descendants of one or more immigrant groups.¹

Mixed heritage of West Indian Culture has its own implications. Losing ground in one's culture means losing one's identity. It would certainly lead one to experience a sense of isolation, in spite of one's close connections with other cultures. Rootless culture results in spiritual isolation and alienation. The sense of loss of one's identity leads to the development of redefining, restoring and relocating one's own culture. A sense of Isolation was part of West Indians. Most of the early twentieth Century writers in the West Indies expressed this spirit. They tried to relocate and restore their lost cultures mainly from folk cultures and oral traditions. Though West Indies has various cultures and races, in terms of its 'experience' West Indies had provided a common ground for all, irrespective of their socio-racial-cultural backgrounds that is the adverse impact of colonial rule. Oppression, exploitation, enslavement displacement were some of the outcomes of colonial rule and these were the part

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of experience of every West Indian whether he was a native inhabitant or a slave from Africa, India, china or Middle East.

The historical experience of the Caribbean in the three hundred years of slavery and centuries of oppression between the first European occupation and the turn of twentieth Century was not conducive to the cultivation of any literary sensibility. There was full of unrest in society, the despair and dejection was the common experience of writers, artists or any others. The view of the world about West Indies painfully echoes in the words of V.S. Naipal thus:

*History is built around achievement and creation and nothing was created in West Indies.*²

From the words of Naipal, one may understand the despair and dejection that struck the hearts of West Indian writers and artists. When they look back, they do not have a history that they could take pride in but there was slavery and suffering and a nightmarish past, the present is bleak, and the future is hopeless. Perhaps, under such conditions one could think of nothing. The nationalists, revolutionaries, black intellectuals, writers and artists strove hard to promote national spirit against colonialism and to instill African consciousness among the African descent living in West Indies. The following lines can explain the African conscious of the black writers:

*They called me 'Nigger'
Those little white urchins
They laughed and shouted
As I passed along the street
Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!*³

Their effort was highly remarkable and appreciable but when it comes to the subject of reflecting West Indian reality in the works of these writers, it may be said they represented partial reality. Because they wrote exclusively about slavery, suffering, oppression and exploitation, one cannot however, deny the social responsibility of a writer or an artist and one cannot say these issues are unimportant and they can be ignored. Artists and writers have much obligation and more responsibility towards society where they live in. When the conditions in society lead to unrest for any reason their responsibility will be even more. Walcott himself believes in the social responsibility of writers and artists. In order to oppose colonial rule as well as to define African identity, most of the West Indian writers of the early twentieth century conformed themselves to revolutionary writings. Under those conditions the real worth and significance of West Indian soil and the innate abilities, sensibilities, the hidden beauties of people were left undiscovered by those writers who committed to revolutionary path and African sentiment. They do not even seem to have any attachment for West Indies. They seem to have only two objects, one is to drive away colonial rule from

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their respective islands the other is to define their actual identity against the established colonial interpretations of their identity. They felt Africa to be their home, not Westindies the following lines can you illustrate their dislike for westindies and their love towards Africa:

*I shall return, I shall return again
To ease my mind of long, long years of pain.⁴*

But it may be understood, discrimination, slavery and centuries of oppression might have made them react to conditions in such way, but it should also be considered that Walcott was also born where they were born, Walcott also experienced what they experienced, what they found inhuman and unruly on the part of colonials Walcott also found the same, but his approach to West Indian situation is altogether different from the other writers, it is his approach which has made him a unique poet in the West Indian literary scene. He says:

But to curse your birth place is the final evil⁵

Walcott's depth of love and attachment to his soil most powerfully echoes in the above line. The line, not only suggests Walcott's deep rooted sentiment for his mother land, but it also suggests a universal truth that one's obligation and responsibility to one's mother land. The statement seems to have come from Walcott as a natural reaction towards the attitude of the fellow writers and the West Indian public.

In the world of materialism the above line appears like a saying from the Bible. Its depth and its weight show the depth and weight of the personality of Walcott's as a man as well as a poet. The serene natural environment of West Indies contradicts with the highly disturbed socio, cultural, political and economic conditions in it. The colonial rule had brought Slavery, oppression, exploitation, poverty hunger death in to West Indies. The same conditions became persistent even after the establishment of self governance in West Indies. Though slavery was abolished even before West Indies could attain independence the other forms of exploitation continued, due to the corrupt policies and strategies of the politicians. The unfair governance resulted in a lot of unrest in West Indies. The second half of the twentieth century brought a sea change in West Indies. The archipelago of West Indies was divided into small nations. Almost every island itself had become a nation having its own flag. For Walcott, who longed for integrity and unity, this independence seemed to have brought only despair. The main reason for this disintegration and division is that the self governance itself had failed to bring any positive change in the living conditions of the poor and the common man. Walcott has been the witness for all the changes. Between what he saw in West Indies as a child, what he is witnessing now, there is a lot of difference. West Indies once had given him the impression of heaven. He was thrilled and elated by every sight in West Indies. He felt the entire archipelago of islands were like a litany to its creator. The serene Caribbean, the pull of the Atlantic, Mountain ranges, thick dark forests, waterfalls seasons and the people all

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had an indefinable impact on Walcott. However the serenity of his island home and the people were disturbed by the European colonizers. They had spoiled the sanctity and serenity of West Indies by introducing industries, the transportation for carrying cane to the mills. The introduction of mining had also brought a lot of disturbance into West Indies. They also put another poisonous seed of tourism which yielded them a lot of revenue. Later, when the colonials left West Indies, the local governance was established. The agrarian world of West Indies had become the world of industry. The peace and serenity in islands was disappeared with the rapid expansion of tourism industry and it has become the world of comfort and pleasure, making the people slaves again under the foreign tourists. Walcott has been witness of all the changes that took place in his immediate environment and in West Indies as a whole. Those who themselves declared to be the nationalists and patriots and who themselves established a mark in independent struggle against the British, and the champions of African campaign settled comfortably in foreign nations. In spite of poor living conditions, Walcott's Endeavour to have connectivity to St. Lucia shows his true love and affection for his mother land.

Walcott's reaction to colonial rule is not revolutionary but moderate and intellectual. As a matter of fact, his suffering is twofold. In addition to his virtual suffering of being a subject of colonial rule and being a Methodist in a catholic country, he suffered from discrimination and the distrust of native writers, nationalists, revolutionaries and the writers of African sentiment for his tolerant and moderate reaction towards the existing conditions in West Indies. He was mainly distrusted for his association with European literary tradition. He never seems to develop any dislike or hatred on anyone who distrusted him on personal lines and his poems reveal this fact. Throughout his poetic career, till today he stood for truth, tolerance, peace, love, unity and integrity, one may find these ideals in the poems of Walcott. The acceptance of reality, as a part of reality accepting his own faults and deficiencies and correcting them is the thing what makes Walcott a unique man as well as a poet. While having adequate sensibility and understanding towards the suffering of the fellow writers and their reaction towards colonial conditions, he seems to suggest through his poems indirectly to them, directly to the entire world that revolution and revenge should not be instruments to fight oppression, discrimination and exploitation of any kind by anyone, because they can also bring same destruction. Through his poems he seems to suggest to those who feel revengeful out of recalling the nightmarish history and experiencing the bleak present, not to scratch over their old scars to make the wounds afresh by looking into history. Because it brings back the pain and it will lead to revenge. In place of revenge he suggests tolerance, in place of recalling history, he suggests forgetting history. He strives for a free world where there is no discrimination and disparities and no violence. The poem "Blues" presents the racial tensions in America. The Poet's encounter of these tensions and his reconciliation towards it is the central theme of the poem. The ending lines of the poem are very crucial to understand Walcott's commitment and conformity to non violence as reflected in the following lines:

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*Still, it taught me something
about love. If it's so tough,
forget it.*⁶

He suggests that instead of looking into past one can build up one's present from realizing one's own strengths and weaknesses. He loves Africa as much as he loves England or America, for that reason, he loves any country in the same spirit. But he has a deep love and attachment, both emotional and spiritual towards his birth place. Throughout his personal life or poetic career he has an inseparable relation with his birth place and its people and many of his poems would reveal this fact. Walcott thinks that serving to one's birth place and one's people should be the primary obligation of anyone. His poems would reveal this fact. For him West Indies means the entire archipelago of islands with all its immense variety of cultures, West Indian means anyone who is born there and live there whether their ancestors came from Africa, England, Europe, India or China or from anywhere else. For Walcott birth place and its people is his primary obligation rather than definition of personal identity or racial identity. Many poems reflect highly rich, complex and varied experiences of Walcott in his island home St. Lucia in particular and West Indies in general. The poem "As John to Patmos" presents his island as "a heaven away from the dust blown blood of cities", the poem "Prelude" presents the stagnant living conditions of his island. The poems "The Castaway", "The Swamp" reflect the sense of alienation that Walcott passed through being an artist in adverse conditions of his island home. The poem "A Sea Chantey" reflects unity that exists among the diverse complex cultures in his islands. Apart from the experiences of his childhood as an artist, the poetic autobiography of Walcott *Another Life* reflects also the socio economic and political conditions in West Indies during the early days of his career. A number of poems in the poetic collections such as *Sea Grapes*, the first section of *The Arkansas Testament* celebrate his birth place St. Lucia. Another collection of Walcott *The Midsummer* exclusively reflects the experience of Walcott in Trinidad during one summer. The epic length poem *Omeros* seems to have been written as an expression of his gratitude to his birth place St. Lucia. Even one may find a number of poems in his later collections *The Bounty*, *The Prodigal* and *White Egrets* celebrating his birth place show his love and attachment to it. For him it is like mother. There are a number of poems which reflect the relation of Walcott with his people and also those poems which reflect his sensible observation, his humbleness to receive influences from the people around him, his openness to speak about their strengths and weaknesses. It is not an unknown fact that West Indies as well as the people of West Indies have been subjected to a number of divisions during colonial rule as well as after the self-governance established. It may be understood even among the writers the divisions existed as nationalist writers such as Trinidadians, Jamaicans and Barbadians on one hand and the writers of African sentiment on the other. Moreover, the native inhabitants Arwaks and Caribs were killed in wars and some became slaves and some were scattered over different places. By the passage of time people who came from various

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parts of the world into West Indies as slaves, as plantation workers, as indentured labourers, as traders, as rulers, settled and became integral part of the soil West Indies. It is very difficult to define the position of a West Indian or West Indian culture, It is an amalgamation of cultures hence hybridity exists at the very heart of westindian reality but no other writer would accept this reality. While they were living in West Indies they tried to have their specific identities such as Africans, Indians and the English on racial grounds and also such as Barbadians, Jamaicans, Trinidadians on regional grounds but they do not believe in collective identity or common identity as West Indians. Walcott being a man of integrity believes in collective identity of a West Indian irrespective of one's racial, cultural, regional and linguistic backgrounds. He believes that it is a moral obligation of any individual to serve his birth place as well as its people. His poems reflect this spirit. All the early writers who wrote about people of West Indies wrote about suffering and slavery, even Walcott was aware of those harsh realities and he too presented those realities in his poems, besides these issues the hidden potentialities, the hidden sensibilities and the hidden beauties of his people were discovered only by Walcott, his epic length poem *Omeros* is the finest example in this connection. Number of his poems reflects the living conditions of the people in his island. He never seemed to give any unrealistic picture about his people. He presented them as they are, with all their strengths and weaknesses. Innocence, hardworking nature, sincerity, undivided faith in god, humanity, endurance, courage and there are a number of other fine qualities that could be seen in the people of West Indies as represented in the poems of Walcott; in the same way, illiteracy, ignorance, superstitions, weak man and woman relations can also be found in them from his poems. For instance the poem "Tales of the Islands" reflects the panorama of West Indian life such as the savage rites practiced by certain tribes, superstitions of the people, the hypocrisy and exploitation of the catholic priests, poor living conditions of islanders, the existence of prostitution in islands, weak man and woman relationships and so on. Poems like "Return to D' Ennery: Rain", "Laventille", certain parts in *Another Life*, reflect Walcott's closer observation and association with his people and these poems also represent how he has been influenced by them. The poems like "The Schooner Flight", "Koenig River", "The spoiler's Return", reflect the exploitation of the poor by the corrupt political leaders. The first section in *The Arkansas Testament* is dedicated to his birth place St. Lucia as well as its people. The poem "The Light of the World" is an extraordinary one to present the real strength and beauty of his people. Walcott believes in human dignity, sometimes certain poems of Walcott may reflect his sympathy for the poor and the suffering, but he never thinks that he is a man, capable of sympathizing the poor, and they deserve it. He never plays a patronizing role rather he receives influences from them in return. The poems "Light of the World", "Return to D' Ennery: Rain", *Omeros* are finest examples in this connection. The greatness of his people is their tolerance and their endurance that they would accept all the suffering in silence and they never give up their faith in god. They never blame anyone or anything for their fate. Walcott was so impressed as to say about his islanders in the poem "Saint Lucie" thus:



*...on Sundays
between adorations, one were there,
if one were there, and not there,
looking in at the windows
the real faces of angels.⁷*

In the view of Walcott they are angels, because their true devotion can be seen in their eyes and in their innocent faces. There are number of poems which would illustrate Walcott's love and admiration for the people who live around him. There is not even single evidence from the entire collections of poems of Walcott that he has racial prejudice. Basically, he considers that the concept of race itself is false and ridiculous. His poems promote unity and integrity. There is not even a single poem of Walcott which represents division or discrimination but the world around him believes in divisions and revenge. But he can not change his conviction for the sake of anyone. Though the British rejected him, though his own people rejected him, his innate love for them has never been altered. He believes in unity, he believed in integrity because:

*To have loved one horizon is insularity;
it blindfolds vision, it narrows experience.⁸*

One can understand the impartial view of Walcott about the world. When the world believes in divisions he ascertains the purposelessness of divisions at all levels. And he further says to get away with those narrow racial or national feelings to establish integrity thereby achieving peace. He also believes that the actual frontiers of the world exist only in the minds of individuals. Where there are no psychological barriers, they can have liberty and peace. They can live happily anywhere in the world. They can move anywhere and they can become the part of the world without suffering from divisions. The thing what it separates people is not geographical boundaries but the psychological barriers. Walcott has most precisely conveyed this powerful thought in the following line:

*Wherever the heart hesitates
that is its true frontier⁹*

As Walcott has no divisions in his heart or thought, he has been able to become the poet of the world. As he has no barriers, he was able to love the British or the African cultures alike. The critics who tried to prove that his poetry is an embodiment of his inordinate struggle and conflict to define his position as an individual as well as a poet from his hybrid, racial and linguistic dimensions in the multicultural, multilingual context of West Indies may well understand that he does not have such conflict from the above lines. In spite of the highly complex socio cultural situation in West Indies he saw only unity in its diversity. He believes in the dignity of an individual and the integrity of the world. As a man as well as a poet

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Walcott has no serious concern for his racial connections, the above instances can provide sufficient ground to establish Walcott a true Westindian as well as the real poet of westindies.

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