Creative Salvage of Self: Derek Walcott's Symbiosis of the Self and the Other

Shahzeb Khan / Dr.Amr Ra

ABSTRACT:

This paper explores how Derek Walcott, the 1992 Nobel laureate, imaginatively reframes his Caribbean identity. Redressing the identity crisis Walcott's poetic expression reflects his struggle to re-explore his roots. The research, through an analysis of Walcott's representative poems, highlights how interrelating of 'soul' and 'soil' shapes his rootedness. Breaking the borders of race and culture, Walcott constructs identity on the basis of the archetype of Adam thus entitling his vison of identity as Adamic. Through the route of 'creative' sensibility he not only confronts but also cures his 'schizophrenia' fusing inventiveness of thought with cultural and historical constructs. More specifically the triangular relationship of history, family and earth; three markers of identity construction creatively broadens the view of how Walcott evinces identity.

Keywords:

Caribbean literature, identity, Derek Walcott, Adamic identity,

The soul is indivisible as air.
Supposedly, all things become a dream,
But we, as moving trees, must root somewhere,
And there our separation show its seam

Walcott *Tiepolo's Hound*

Derek Walcott in an interview mentioned that as a writer he: retain[ed] powerful attachments…to family, earth and history" (Conversation 3). These three associations, he recounts, are vital to a person's subjectivity because they are the pivotal factors which give a

sense of meaning to one's existence and help answer the most essential question faced by human beings: Who am I?

For Walcott, however, carrying an identity for himself out of "family earth and history" was a complex task. His family had intermarriages between Europeans and Caribbean natives. His paternal grandfather was a white Anglican from Barbados (King 7). His ancestry did not give him a clear sense of identity. The question troubling him in the beginning was: should he identify himself with the natives or with the whites. Each side had its implications for him as a writer; therefore he had to carve a new identity for himself. In his poem "The Schooner Flight", he comments about his dilemma: "I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation" (346). The horror of being *nobody* haunted him early in his literary career and he resorted to the alternative of finding an identity for himself out of the varied lineages he had.

The second element, which Walcott mentions, is the 'earth'. He was born in "socially and racially complex" Saint Lucia (King 7) which is an island country in the eastern Caribbean Sea on the boundary with the Atlantic Ocean where people from different cultures were brought and settled by the colonizers. This mingling of cultures lends difficulty in ascertaining cultural influences to which he was exposed from his childhood. He was thus unable to find his roots in Saint Lucia. Early in his literary career he became conscious of this deficiency. He writes in *What the Twilight Says* (1998): "The migratory West Indian feels rootless on his own earth chafing at its beaches" (19). His ancestors were strangers there. They did not enjoy the privilege of naming things, something which Walcott associates with origins. He writes in the same essay, "But we were all strangers… because the soil was stranger under our feet than under those of our captors. Before us they knew the names of the forests and the changes in the sea, and theirs were the names we used." (11) The historical estrangement that Walcott felt with his land was another factor which made it difficult for him to determine his identity.

The third element which Walcott mentions is 'history' which undoubtedly has the most profound effect on human identity. Walcott had inherited African and European traditions. If he adhered to any one of these traditions he had to dispense with the cultural and literary asset of the other. Tracing his own history back to Africa would not satisfy him as he considered himself a *taint* and not *pure* black because he had European blood in him. In his poem "A Far Cry from Africa" he states his dilemma:

…The gorilla wrestles with the superman.
I who am poisoned by the bold 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? (25-29 18)

The grand narrative of the history of enslavement did not impress him. He grew skeptic of the way history was presented and rejected from the perspective of the slave or that of the master, because each perspective deprived him of something valuable. History, he believed, could never be written objectively or dispassionately and was against the idea of being chained to one's past. He rejects "servitude to the muse of history", which he believes "has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by descendants of slaves" (*What the Twilight Says* 37). In other words Walcott dispels the possibility of making a coherent sense of identity from the history taught to him.

Walcott's challenge was to find his true identity, therefore much of his work deals with this issue. Family, earth and history, which otherwise offer a coherent identity, failed to give any solace to Walcott's anguished soul. Bruce King describes his condition as:

Someone who as a child was raised to think of himself as much more like the 'whites' than those darker and lower on social scale, until in teens he discovers the history of slavery, becomes conscious that his grandmothers were descended from slaves that there is illegitimacy in his family, and who himself experiences the discriminations of racial prejudice. (4)

Walcott himself sheds light on his position bordering on cultural schizophrenia and the confusions he grappled with in his youth. He writes in *What the Twilight Says*:

At nineteen, an elate, exuberant poet madly in love with English, but in the dialect loud dusk of water buckets and fish sellers, conscious of the naked, voluble poverty around me, I felt a fear of that darkness which had swallowed up all fathers, full of precocious rage, I was drawn, like a child's mind to fire, to the Manichean conflicts of Haiti's history. (10)

Finding an adequate identity as a writer has wide ranging implications. As David Smith writes, "Self-concept plays a significant role in the way a person views things; it provides the person with an inner direction, a map or a compass as to which route one's life should travel" (356). All the people who have come in contact with cultures and ethnicities other than their own share the same problem with Walcott. Thus as a writer he had to grapple with the issues of subjectivity, identity or the 'Self'.In this paper Walcott's works, especially his creative prose will be scanned to ascertain the vision of identity he productively imagines.

As mentioned earlier, Walcott realized early in his life that he faced the problem of his real origin. He felt this because the society in which he lived was influenced by colonialism and was divided on binary lines: colonizer and colonized; black and white; descendants of masters and descendants of slaves. He had only two options: either to adhere to the concept of Manichean dichotomy or to present an alternative to this system of binaries. He opted for the latter, which inevitably led to a hybridized version of identity while incorporating something from both the extremes of this Manichean system.

In his endeavor to pin down the most elusive entity in literature, identity, Walcott had first turned to the available identity constructs. Due to socio-political circumstances prevalent in Walcott's times, the most convenient and emotionally appealing self-concept for a person with black skin was the 'afro-centric' concept. According to this concept, a black person essentially belonged to the black race and because of unfair treatment meted out to him by his captor and later by the colonial, he was prone to looking at his past for solace. The past led the black people to primitive Africa: the Africa from where they have been displaced and brought to an alien land. A speech extract from Malcom X, an influential pan-African nationalist clarifies the afro-centric vision of identity:

The black man has no self–confidence; he has no confidence in his own race because the white man (European) destroyed you and my past; he destroyed our knowledge of our culture and by having destroyed it, now we don't know of any achievement, any accomplishment and as long as you can be convinced that you never did anything, you can never do anything. (qtd. Hoskins 248)

Such an identity construct was based on the Manichean division of slave and master because descendants of the slaves considered Europeans to be the cause of the anguish of their race, therefore they were averse to the idea of acknowledging any influence from them in their identity construction. This tendency became stronger gradually and the black Diasporas around the world developed the concept of the black self. They looked at Africa as the place of their origin and tried to revive and preserve whatever remained of the continent. There was even a movement in America which suggested the citizens of African origin should move back to the continent of their origin. Marcus Garvey, himself from the Caribbean, and part of Jamaica's "National Club" preached them to return to their ancestral homeland (Young 28).

Frantz Fanon, an influential figure of decolonization, in his magnum opus *The Wretched of the Earth* (1969) also endorses the essential black identity and accepts the Manichean dichotomy. He writes about the colonial world, "This world divided into compartments, this world cut in

two is inhabited by two different species" (30). He refers to the natives and the colonizers: two completely different consciousness in themselves with totally different visions of identities. His writings preached and emphasized segregation. It thus propagated a concept of identity, which disapproved of the colonizer. "Obedient to the rules of Aristotelian logic, they both follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity. No conciliation is possible" (30). Even Fanon's solution, has no place for 'the other'. He writes,

To break up the colonial world does not mean that after the frontiers have been abolished lines of communication will be set up between the two zones. The destruction of the colonial world is no more and no less than abolition of one zone, its burial in the depths of the earth or its expulsion from the country. (31)

The identity constructs available for a black individual stressed the racial self and hence negated the other. Walcott did not find such an identity suitable for himself because early in his life he had come in contact with the 'other' and had found so much to be loved, represented by his line "…the English tongue I love" ("A Far Cry from Africa" 18). Identifying himself as the descendant of slaves, especially when his grandfathers were European, would immediately deprive him of things he considered valuable. But if he refused to accept the Manichean division, he had to think of one which satisfied him, he had to dig one out of history and give it a fresh impetus. In his autobiographical essay *What the Twilight Says,* he writes,

We knew the literature of empires, Greek, Roman, British, through their essential classics; both the patois of the street and the language of the classroom hid the elation of discovery. If there was nothing, there was everything to be made. With this prodigious ambition one began. (4)

Derek Walcott observed the overwhelming effect of history and the resulting misconceived and retrogressive notion of identity prevalent among the West Indians. He realized the importance of rejecting the grand narrative of the history of enslavement and this is precisely what he does in his essay *The Muse of History*. Walcott writes "history is fiction, subject to a fitful muse, memory" (37). He rejects the authenticity of history and breaks the shackles of the past, which had clamped down the West Indian imagination: "In time every event becomes an exertion of memory and is thus subject to invention" (37). According to Walcott when history becomes 'subject to invention', it limits history to the suffering of the victim. This then leads to creation of an extremist vision of identity, which makes its adherents disdain 'the other'. He writes about the individuals who are overpowered by the metanarrative of history and its resulting effect on their work:

Their admirable wish to honour their degraded ancestor limits their language to phonetic pain, the curse of revenge. The tone of the past becomes an unbearable burden, for they must abuse the master or hero in his own language, and this implies self-deceit. Their view of Caliban is of the enraged pupil. They cannot separate the rage of Caliban from the beauty of his speech when the speeches of Caliban are equal in their elemental power to those of his tutor. The language of the torturer mastered by the victim. This is viewed as servitude, no as victory. (38)

The quoted passage reveals Walcott's desire of accepting something of 'the other' especially when it helps the native equip himself with the decolonizing implements. It preaches assimilation and hybridity. Only this view can ensure a sound and mature vision of identity that is progressive in nature.

The stress on the 'black self' directs the seeker to Afrocentrism. However, Derek Walcott is unwilling to accept this afro-centric vision of identity. His creative work continually rejects this misconceived notion. The vision of identity he constructs in his essay "The Muse of History" (1998) shatters the myth of the black self or afro-centrism. All attempts at emphasizing the black self are built upon the belief that their skin colour unites them. This belief enables them further to shun the influence of the other. Walcott dismisses the paradigm and writes, "For purity, then, for pure black Afro-Aryanism, only the unsoiled black is valid, and West Indianism is a taint and other strains adulterate him"(56). He questions: "Can an African culture exist, except on the level of polemical art or politics, without an African religion, and if so, which African religion"? (43). He dismantles the personification of diverse race by saying, "that all black are beautiful is an enervating statement that all blacks are brothers more a reprimand than a charter…" (56).

Walcott's ultimate aim is to visualize an identity for the West Indians, which will also be his own identity. He desires for an identity, which makes his nation move forward and not regress. Thus by liberating the West Indian or himself from the regressive concepts of identity, Walcott conceives of one which transcends the otherwise tacit acceptance of dividing lines among cultures, histories and races.

In *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1970), Walcott dramatizes the West Indian quest for identity, Makak who represents all the descendants of African slaves, goes back to Africa to heal his anguished soul. But the ending of the play reveals the uselessness of such an endeavor. Makak remains disillusioned even after his arrival in Africa because he no longer remembers the names. Africa is as alien to him as the place to where his ancestors were brought. Makak's questions are the same as Walcott faced in his life. Through this play Walcott theatrically salvages the West Indian

from the potential shipwreck of voyaging on an apparently buoyant concept of afro-centrism.

In an interview Walcott said:

When he [Makak] dreams that he is the king of a united Africa, I'm saying that some sort of spiritual return to African can be made, but it may not be necessary. The romanticized, pastoral vision of Africa that many black people hold can be an escape from the reality of the world around us" (Conversations 18).

Walcott, thus tries to resolve this afro-centric complex through his prose and the above-mentioned play. His endeavor must not be read as an effort to downplay Africa through the process of negotiation of conflicting cultures. His concept is an all-embracing one. He glorifies his African ancestor, not because he rejected 'the other', but because he adapted himself according to the Caribbean condition. Walcott writes, "The slave converted himself, he changed weapons, spiritual weapons, and as he adapted his master's religion, he also adapted his language, and it is here that what we can look at as our poetic tradition begins. Now began the new naming of things." (*Conversations* 48)

Here 'our poetic tradition' is quite significant. Walcott attributes his origin to 'the slave' who accepted the influence of 'the other.' He adapted his 'master's religion' and also 'his language'. But in the process, the slave had also contributed to both religion and language. According to Walcott, the slave "deliberately began to invest a decaying faith with a political belief" (45). It is exactly here that his symbiosis takes place. Decaying faith, possessed by the European was reinvigorated when the African embraced it.

Walcott realizes that his creative salvage lies in forging an identity which embraces the self and the other: the European and the African. The most conspicuous manifestation of such a symbiosis is the language he contrives to employ. He loves the 'English tongue' but at the same time is unwilling to forego the rhythm and vigour of the African dialect. He strives for this fusion but such a scheme is unacceptable to those whose firm conviction is to absolve themselves of anything which comes from the occident. For them it is servitude, for Walcott it is objectification of something which runs in his blood. He writes:

What would deliver him from servitude was the forging of a language that went beyond mimicry, a dialect which had the force of revelation as it invented names for things, one which finally settled on its own mode of inflection, and which began to create an oral culture of chants, jokes, folksongs, and fables…(15)

Symbiosis is an essential trait of his vision of identity. He sums this up by saying that this is the 'creative use' of his 'schizophrenia, an electric fusion of the old and the new' (16).

Identity, as mentioned earlier, serves as an inner compass; it determines the future course a person would adopt. Walcott redresses his identity crisis and comes out with a vision of identity which he refers to as Adamic. He resolved to 'shuck' (5) 'centuries of servitude' (5), determined to break the chains of history, 'earned' (5) language, moved forward without 'self-contempt' (5) sans any 'vision of revenge' (5) and thus 'there was no other motivation for him but knowledge' (*What the Twilight Says* 7). With such a perspectival view about identity Walcott transcends boundaries of race or culture and allows himself to freely and creatively make use of his own creative talent and simultaneously benefit from traditions he has inherited. He deliberately calls this vision of identity Adamic because Adam is the ultimate archetype. He named things around him as Walcott resolves to do the same in the Caribbean.

Christopher Balme highlights this 'mediating' role of Walcott:

A radical counter-position to Naipaul and the Eurocentric ideology he represents emerged in the 1960s in the wake of the black-consciousness movement in the United States, which quickly found followers in the Caribbean. A new Afro-centric cultural ideology grew up which concentrated on and revalorized the retentions of African culture in the Caribbean. In these competing and highly polarized positions Walcott assumes the role of a mediator. (Balme 49)

Derek Walcott, thus, presents a vision of Caribbean identity that is syncretic. Due to his shared lineage he was in the identity imbroglio that goaded him as a writer to find the solution creatively. Thus he imbibed the two cultural streams to replenish his creative Self.

Works Cited

Aschcroft, Bill, et al. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice of Postcolonial Literature.* London: Routledge, 1989. Print.

---. *Key concepts in Postcolonial Studies.* London: Roultedge, 1998. Print.

Blame, Cristopher. *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial*
Drama. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999.

Conversations with Derek Walcott. Ed .William Bear. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996. Online.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth.* Trans. Constance Farrington. Suffolk: Penguin, 1969. Print.

Hoskins, Linus A. "Eurocentrism vs. Afrocentrism: A Geopolitical Linkage." *Journal of Black Studies*. 23.2, (1992)247-257. *Jstor*. Web. 28 March 2016.

King, Bruce. *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. Print.

Smith, William David. "The Black Self- Image: Some Theoretical and Historical Reflections." *Journal of Black Studies*. 10.3, (1980)355-366. *Jstor*. Web. 28 March 2016.

Walcott, Derek. "A Far Cry from Africa". *Collected Poems: 1948-1984.* New York: Farrar, Straus, 1986. Print.

---. *Remembrance & Pantomime.* New York: Farrar, 1980. Print.

---. "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory" *What the Twilight Says: Essays*. NewYork: Faarar, 1998. Print.

---. "The Last Carnival." *Three Plays.* New York: Farrar, 1980. Print.

---. "The Muse of History." *What the Twilight Says: Essays.* New York: Farrar, 1998. Print.

---. "The Schooner Flight." *Collected Poems.* New York: Farrar, 1986. Print.

---. *Tiepolo's Hound.* London: Faber, 2000. Print.