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Identity, History and Caribbean Experience in Select Poems of Derek Walcott

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Abstract

This study examines how history has shaped social identity and the impacts of both on Caribbean experience in Derek Walcott's poetry. Using New Historicism as theoretical framework, it critiques some Caribbean historical realities highlighted in the selected poems and their impacts on society at individual and societal levels with particular emphasis on identity. Four poems from different collections of Walcott are analyzed in this paper, which are "Codicil", "The River", "Love after Love" and "The Sea is History". The conclusions of this critical engagement show clearly that identity in Caribbean reality is inescapably tied to the traumatic history of displacement, enslavement, migration and alienation of the Caribbean peoples.
Keywords: Derek Walcott, identity, history, social experience, Caribbean experience

Introduction

The confluence of history, literature and society is patently manifest in literary texts depicting disturbing conditions or experiences of societies whose past have engendered deep socio-cultural alienation that has eroded the individual's sense of belonging or fulfilment. So it is in the Caribbean universe where histories have impacted so much on individual, social and cultural identities that the people continually struggle to rediscover their individualities as well as their cultural heritage and relevance (Onwuka & Eyisi, "Exploring History" 30). Thus, literature often interrogates the human condition, especially in societies where long periods of struggle for self-determination and self-rediscovery have affected their development like in Africa and the Caribbean. Consequently, literary products from such climes would likely be influenced by social conditions. It is of such situations that Ngugi observes that "Literature does not exist in a vacuum; [rather], it is given impetus, shape and direction by social, political and economic forces in a particular society" (4). The quest for self-rediscovery is a central concern in Caribbean literatures;

and not many works from that clime rival the poetry of Derek Walcott, the St. Lucian writer and Nobel Laureate, who explores a fundamental motif in Caribbean society, the crisis of identity. This study probes identity and social experience in select poems of Walcott to highlight the trajectories between Caribbean histories and the struggles of Caribbean peoples to redefine themselves at both cultural and psychological planes.

Caribbean History, Literature and the Problematic of Identity

The crisis of identity lies at the core of Caribbean literatures with the myriad of historical problems that have bedevilled the peoples of the islands, particularly the West Indian peoples. Their state of limbo is reflected in Caribbean art, music (especially Reggae and Calypso) and imaginative literatures. Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe offer a perspective to this dilemma that is both historical and sociological:

> The common experience of c olonisation, displacement, sla very, indenture, emancipation and nationalism has shaped most West Indian environments, creating a unity of experience that can be identified as particularly West Indian. West Indian literature is in the main a product of this experience. Its beginnings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its explosions in the 1930s and 50s and its growth into new dimensions in the late twentieth century reflect the progress of a West Indian engagement with history, with political and social adjustments and with problems of definition, identity and aesthetics of West Indian literary activity in poetry, prose, fiction and drama. (13)

This view perceives West Indian literature as a cultural manifesto nurtured by the people's history and their prospects of a future *sans* the challenges that had plagued them since their period of enslavement. From the fictions of Wilson Harris, Samuel Selvon and V.S. Naipaul to the poetry of Louise Bennett, Eric Roach, Derek Walcott and Edward Brathwaite, themes of a divided Afro-Caribbean consciousness and identity are highlighted. Major efforts include Bennett's survey of "various dimensions of the tradition of folk poetry," Brathwaite's creolising experiments to elicit creative possibilities and contexts to explore history in his quest for an authentic poetic tradition, and Walcott's art which most symbolizes the amalgamation of two cultures grappling with themes of displacement and spiritual impoverishment (Akuso 35). The implication of all these is that constructing a unique Caribbean identity remains fundamentally topical to the Caribbean artist. Walcott especially, it appears, is far more self-conscious of the dilemma of hybrid personalities plaguing his people when he declares in his poem, "The Schooner *Flight*",

> I'm just a red nigger 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.
> (Lines 40-43)

In these lines above, Walcott bemoans the complex colonial legacy of the Caribbean persona and the tripartite character of his/her identity crises which are at the levels of the individual (personal identity), the society and culture (socio-cultural identity) and the

nation (national identity). Owing to his modernist outlook, Walcott seeks spatial footings and meanings in interstices of Caribbean realities in the post-colonial universe of subjugated cultures. This is why his poetry, arguably more than any of his contemporaries, shows the skewed identity of the Caribbean persona in a vortex of historical oppression and subjugation that have obliterated his/her character and personality.

Considering these conditions, Halls proposes an interesting solution that the quagmire of Caribbean identity can be resolved by the elevation of communally shared values over individual ones. His view is an effort to situate the tensions at work in the Caribbean universe made up of peoples of disparate ancestral backgrounds with common legacies of enslavement, migration, frustration and rejection capriciously lumped together resulting in individual and communal limbo. He argues that:

> Cultural identity [refers to] one shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self' hiding inside the many other more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves' which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. This 'oneness', underlying all the other more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence of 'Caribbeanness' of the black experience. It is this identity which a Caribbean or black Diaspora must discover, excavate, bring to light and express. (qtd. in Jonathan Rutherford)

However, as appealing as this 'pan-Caribbeanness' above may sound, the premise of Halls' position which calls for suppression of individual or group sensitivities for communally shared ones is existentially faulty for missing a vital point. This point is that the journey of self-discovery starts from the self because as long as the Caribbean individual harbours a sense of loss or emptiness at the core of his/her being personally or as a distinct group within a larger multicultural community, so long would they feel they are drifting in limbo no matter what communally shared values are thrust at them. In other words, without an understanding of their individual or group histories, strengths, weaknesses and choices available to them, communal bonding would be difficult as the cracks on the walls of individual or group psyches could transform into gulfs on the communal one. Yet, Halls' call for synergy in the authentication and entrenchment of definitive histories that celebrate heroic exploits of Caribbean peoples as a whole is vital as long as it thrives alongside the individual's or group's yearning for self rediscovery and their identity in society. Walcott appears quite aware of this; which is why he strives for concrete identities on both individual and communal planes in his poetry.

From another perspective, Allahar argues that the Caribbean's loss of identity is a

consequence of its history and politics of colonization and decolonization, and unequal distribution of power resulting in sections of society becoming "thoroughly subverted" (125). This subversion, he appears to claim, is responsible for the peoples disjointed sense of indeterminacy of identity. This could be why the cultural and psychological complexities associated with fractured identities that often reverberate in Caribbean literatures are hardly unexpected. To us therefore, Walcott is among Caribbean writers who assiduously search through diverse historical, psychological and social conditions in Caribbean societies for an authentic Caribbean consciousness. **Mahmudul affirms this view observing that "**Walcott [has] conducted a life-long struggle to integrate the divided self, engendered by the duality of his legacy. . . .[which is why] many of his poems explore theme of his inner cry for identity" **(par.3). Similarly,** Douillet opines that "Walcott's work gives us a glimpse of the making of contemporary Caribbean identities, and examining his work can help us understand the contemporary Caribbean dilemmas and struggles in identity-making in a context of a colonial legacy of global socio-economic and political inequalities" (par.2). Thus, our position that the identity crisis persistently probed in Caribbean literatures is inextricably linked to the historical past of Caribbean peoples is evident from the foregoing.

Interest in Walcott and his poetry stepped up several notches after he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992; however, a few of the most recent ones will be mentioned here. His *Omerus* (1990) seems to attract more critical attention in recent times. From Baral & Shrestha (2020), which explores the politics behind the use of myth and history in the epic poem, to Nanton (2018), which focuses on migration motif in it and Homer's *Iliad*; and Orhero (2017), which studies theme, style and vision in it; all deeply interrogate important motifs in the poet laureate's iconic poem. Other recent studies include: Acho (2020), which looks at the efficacy of language in Walcott's poetry in a multicultural Caribbean society; Abd-Aun (2019) which explores the sea as symbolic of history and identity in Walcott's poetry; Baral (2019) that argues that Walcott's poetry consciously uses in-between images to explore the hybrid nature of Caribbean personality; Mohan (2017) that also explores what he calls 'hybridity' in Walcott's poetry; Dubey (2017) advances the view that Walcott uses a landscape of sounds, wild echoes and the 'calypso' cultural form in his craft. Gill (2016) focuses on recurrent communication images that appear to shape the thrust of Walcott's poetry; and Hambuch (2015) which conducts an eco-critical and geo-critical study of Walcott's sea imagery; and lastly, Butchard (2014) which attempts to move Walcott from a periphery to a position of centrality. In all these studies is a common consensus: that Walcott's poetry is not only evocative of West Indian consciousness, it reflects a brotherhood ethos of a common humanity far beyond the historical and experiential trajectory of Caribbean dialectics.

Theoretical Framework: New Historicism

New Historicism proposes that literary texts transcend mere cultural artefacts; they are sites where discourses of culture and power with their inherent social implications contend for dominance (Greenblatt 1980). In the purview of this theory, texts which are objects of critical analyses are cultural discourses involved in interplays with other discourses for dominance as no discourse is absolutely objective; rather, each embodies a specific worldview or ideology. Consequently, New Historicism re-

privileges history in literature though not along the trajectory of traditional historicism which regards history as objective and authentic, and therefore subject to no interpretation. Contrarily, New Historicism talks of histories rather than history as each history is a version that can be interrogated as a narrative or discourse influenced by circumstances of the author, the period, the dominant power relations and other considerations the critic considers relevant to his inquiry. This is why New Historicism advocates that text and context construct each other to enable a criticism unencumbered by historical preconception or authorial subjectivity.

New Historicism blends the historical and the textual in literary analysis which makes it ideal for the study of Walcott's poetry as the poet explores motifs from Caribbean history. The specific subject of identity which this study explores is a problematic in Caribbean universe because of the historical past of the peoples of the islands. Though discourses on Walcott's poetry often relate to motifs of the Middle Passage, migration, exile, identity and racialism among others, identity occupies a prime concern in practically all his poems especially those that explore 'hybridity' (espoused by Homi Bhabha) at personal, group and communal levels.

Famed New Historicists include Romanticist scholars like Jerome McGann and Marilyn Butler alongside researchers of the Renaissance like Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose. However, we adopt McGann's approach in this study, which stipulates that "New historical criticism tries to define what is most peculiar and distinctive in specific works, [and] in specifying these unique features and sets of relationships, transcends the concept of the-[text] –as-verbal-object to reveal the [text] as a special sort of communication event" (131). Walcott's poems are explored in this study as products of an artist's impressions of his society from purely subjective prisms of individual and cultural limbo resulting in hybrid identities. His poetry contextualizes the conditions of Caribbean peoples by depicting their turbulent histories of dislocation, brutality and dehumanization. We therefore interrogate Walcott's poetry as historical discourses that plot trajectories between Caribbean histories (the past) and the peoples' quest for identity (the present).

Hybrid of Identity, History and Social Reality in Walcott's Poetry

I

"Codicil" in *The Castaway and Other Poems* (1965) is a significant poem in Walcott's oeuvre. It has been variously read and interpreted by most critics as an autobiographical text depicting Walcott's crisis-ridden attitude to his Caribbean cum European roots, race, culture and ultimately, identity. However, on closer reading, the poem leaves an unnerving feeling in the reader's mind. "Codicil" is not only a disturbing poem; it is haunting and scary too. It bares the troubled psyche of the West Indian man by unmasking the "Schizophrenic" behind the facade of the modern tenants of the Caribbean islands (line 1). The poem reverberates with a palpable feeling of ambivalence laden with the pessimism and hopelessness often associated with lost or damned souls. The absolute absence of optimism in the persona's tone is indicative of acceptance of a fatality that is completely blind to possibilities of choice or change in conditions of existence. That is what makes it a disturbing and scary poem.

In substance "Codicil" explores history, social experience and identity; and also foregrounds alienation, fear and despair as

impetus driving the Caribbean man's search for identity. The persona is not only "wrenched" by two styles of writing, "a hack's hired prose" (lines 1-2), his adopted European style, and his own indigenous forms that operate on the outer fringes of Caribbean literary canon which he yearns for; he is in a state of limbo emasculated by doubts birthed by his past, nurtured by his present conditions and driven by the fear that it could likely continue in future if nothing changes. Here, Walcott bemoans the reality of being caught between two cultures none of which he is comfortable in.

"Codicil" is an introspective poem that sieves Caribbean histories through the consciousness of the persona who assesses their direct impacts on his person, his peers and generation and Caribbean societies in general. The second and third stanzas of the poem depict the scars of the persona's journey of self-rediscovery, the "tan [and] burn" of his skin by the sun which is clearly self-inflicted so he could exorcise his penchant "love of ocean" that he considers as "self love" (lines 4-6). It is a confession of unresistingly accepting his condition of cultural hybridity and his choice of an escapist route of a wanderer who "trudge this sickle, moonlit beach for miles" (line 3) rather than confront the power of the borrowed culture over himself. "The old wrongs" he cannot "right" (line 8) are clearly the historical heritages of enslavement, dislocation, oppression and exploitation visited on the peoples of the Caribbean by the colonising powers of European nations, which is at the root of the human and cultural degradation of Caribbean societies. The dire impact of these historical inhuman atrocities on the present is the futile efforts of Caribbean societies to attain political and financial advancement like developed nations of the West. Inevitably, the persona helplessly "watch the best minds [of his peoples] root like dogs/ for scrapes of favour" in order to survive (lines 15-16). His realisation that patriotic zealousness is not a potent weapon to break off the stranglehold of foreign culture on his peoples adds to his depression so much that death becomes a fearless prospect to him. Language, to him, is the ultimate symbol of this stifling cultural imposition by the colonial powers; a reality he cannot break away from without completely changing his life (lines 7); that is, his hybrid identity. His berthing on colonialism as prime cause of the Caribbean peoples' dilemma is fruitless without actions to bring about a change. His habit of migrating from the islands to other shores, a behaviour that the peoples of the Caribbean have a penchant for, and returning more disgruntled each time is compared to "Waves [that] tire of horizon and return" (line 9). The Caribbean peoples' verbal protestations against these age-long wrongs, which sound like "gulls screech[ing] with rusty tongues" (line 10), are efforts that are as futile as pouring water on rocks to soften them.

From another angle, the persona in "Codicil" on a note reminiscent of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" about the condition of America's intelligentsia, decries the neglect and mistreatment of his kind, the enlightened and educated, who have become indifferent subconsciously to suffering, lack and even death after years and generations of waiting for social change. They subsequently lost not only their self-worth, but also their identity as they could neither identify with the extant leadership of their society nor hope that an era of liberation would ever manifest for their kind. So "nearing middle age," the persona deteriorates in body as he has in mind and spirit especially with his awareness of how he would likely end on earth like his

kind. This corrosion of the body is as symbolic as it is symptomatic of a famished and malnourished people yearning for their lost roots even as they struggle to come to terms with foreign and invasive ways of life. In a despondent tone the persona gives up all prospects of a positive reversal in the dire co nditions of Caribbean peoples:

> At heart there's nothing, not the dread
> of death. I know too many dead.
> They're all familiar, all in character,
>
> even how they died. Of fire,
> the flesh no longer fears that furnace mouth
> of earth . . . (lines 18-26).

This symbolism also extends to the Caribbean peoples' manifestation of tendencies that juxtaposes hopelessness and defiance in the face of great historical odds, aimed at a rediscovery and by extension a redefinition of the self.

II

Walcott's "The River", in *The Gulf* (1963), is another important poem that sources motifs from the ponds of Caribbean histories to explain the peoples' conditions in the present. Referencing their pre-colonial era, it canvasses that they bond as a society to overcome the challenges of their post-colonial identity-related quagmire. It re-asserts the virtue of unity and bewails the dangers of disunity and its attendant disruptive consequences. The poem recounts the common spirit of the Caribbean peoples in the past and the gradual erosion of that oneness and identity that made them a powerful river which "was one, once;" (line 1). Historically, the peoples of the islands shared so much in common which gave them a sense of unity: a free society basking in freedom and prompting strong desires among exploring nations of Europe to access its natural landscape and peoples living in a 'state of nature.' Later they transited to a heritage of invasions, enslavement, suffering, pain and denial; however, their capacity to thrive like a freshly-burst river full of anger and energy which "could roar through town, foul-mouthed" (lines 4-5) was not in doubt. Back then they discountenanced the multicultural character of their populations which were bursting with raw energy – "brown-muscled, brazenly drunk, a raucous country-bookie . . ." (lines 5-6). It was a past where fault lines of colour, race, creed and ideology were invisible in the face of shared destinies and agonies of uprooting from ancestral homes and conversions to human commodities. This sense of belief in Caribbean unity has since been lost to forces of neo-colonialism, capitalism, individualism and other western influences that have blinded the present generation to the things they shared while their differences have been amplified. The poem therefore recalls that there were no divisions in the struggles against oppression and dehumanization during the fight to dismantle the slave trade.

"The River", therefore, is a dirge on loss of commonality and shared identity eroded by schisms along racial, ethnic colour lines and other differences unbeneficial to the common goals of Caribbean peoples. Inevitably, with no sense of commitment or ownership, people began to dissociate and disconnect with the islands and dreamt of leaving for greener climes. Thus, many became "too footloose for this settlement of shacks, rechristened a city" (lines 8-9). The result: massive migrations away from their delineated home to the north, the home countries of the colonizers. Little wonder today that Caribbean peoples are some of the major migrants, numerically, from the less developed world to the more advanced

countries like the United Kingdom, the US and Canada. No one is wary anymore of "gutturals" of Caribbean nations whom while the struggle lasted were as mysterious and unpredictable as masquerades; rather, many now regard them as failed states with sad tales of unfulfilled promise. They have calamitously disintegrated from being a strong river to become mere gutters in strength and prestige; powerless, without influence, and *sans* potentials.

The ultimate message in "The River" is that the unity of Caribbean peoples is inseparable from their identity. To be of any relevance therefore, Caribbean peoples must put aside all tendencies that disunite and embrace those that celebrate their commonly shared values. This is a necessity for liberation from the daunting challenges that have kept them suppressed over several decades. Tone-wise, "The River" is a sober lamentation of loss, especially of social identity which is crucial to unity. Symbolically, this loss extends to the self leaving in its wake a palpable sense of insecurity individually and socially.

III

"Love after Love" fundamentally explores history, identity and social experience in the Caribbean enclave. Casting a critical glance backwards at Caribbean history and the peoples' disappointment at how the islands turned out after independence, the poem prophesizes a Caribbean revival. It envisages that the Caribbean peoples would one day experience a reversal from their shame in identifying with their Caribbean homelands and pride in claiming citizenship in their foreign lands of sojourn, to evolve a national ethos that would celebrate 'Caribbeanness'. It advocates that the Caribbean peoples should imbibe the prodigal's mindset against their lukewarm stance or rejection mentality for all things Caribbean. This refusal to identify with their native soil, the poem posits, have made them exiles in their own lands with little desire to remain at home or stay long when occasions made it inevitable for them to visit. It is this wilful estrangement by his kit and kin from the Caribbean that Walcott seeks an end to in this poem.

Conspicuous in this poem is the issue of Caribbean identity that has been a problematic throughout history. The poem foregrounds the prospect of Caribbean peoples coming to terms with their condition of struggle and hardship to re-assert their identity. It warns that their denial of their homelands emasculates their self-worth, and their lust for foreign climes could degenerate into self-immolation. This self-defeatist fixation that nothing can work in the Caribbean enclave has become a second cycle of enslavement for them; a complex from which there is little hope of redemption by the very fact that it is self-imposed. Walcott's vision in the poem is to advance a new consciousness of self-rediscovery that would transform the Caribbean mind to re-appraise the ideals that define its peoples and their place in the world so they can reclaim their lost values as nation-states. That consciousness would break the circle of self-rejection and alienation the people feel towards their homelands by triggering a jettisoning of histories that indoctrinate the ideology that the Caribbean is ontologically inferior to the West in body, mind and spirit.

The ultimate objective of this poem therefore is to dismantle the false belief among the peoples of the islands that liberation from poverty, insignificance and the complex of non-existence can only be achieved by a physical and spiritual migration to the West where they must lose their identity to foreign lifestyles and mindsets. The poet therefore strives for a

reversal of this residue of negative colonial inferiority complex in the colonised and their irrational fixation on the superiority of the coloniser's culture. Walcott subsequentl y decrees a future where the *Spiritus Mundi* of the Caribbean islands would reconcile with the individual spirits of her children in exile who would return to their own and become one inseparable entity. So he prays that:

> The time will come
> when, with elation
> you will greet yourself arriving
> at your own door, in your own mirror
> and each will smile at the other's welcome.
> ("Love after Love" lines 1-5)

In summary, "Love after Love" is a vivid reflection of Walcott's optimistic vision for the Caribbean society. It symbolizes a strong desire for the people to re-ignite a movement towards reversing their existential condition of self-denial to a re-assertion or rebranding of the Caribbean spirit. This spirit is one of communal love for one another through kinship and nationalism. By so doing, they can re-possess their land and redirect their destiny positively in spite of the colonial belief that the colonized lacks the mental capacity to recognize their condition.

IV

"The Sea is History" in *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979) highlights the interface between history and identity. Walcott here showcases that literature feeds on history and the historical evolves into poetic imagination. The poem posits that an understanding of one's history is a great step to understanding one's identity. The use of rhetorical questions, metaphor, imagery and other figurative expressions are profuse in the poem. It is a dialogic poem laden with biblical allusions. The poem begins with the questions 'Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs? / Where is your tribal memory?' (lines 1-2). 'Monuments' in the first question are relics of the past. The second question indicts Caribbean peoples of forgetting their culture and by extension their identity because they cannot recall the tenets of their heritage let alone their significance. The response of the second voice while pointing to the sea, which bears the history of the Caribbean, shows that Caribbean history is buried in the sea, the prime witness to the Middle passage.

Alluding to Bible, the poet draws an analogy between the Jews and the Caribbean peoples in their sufferings. Just as many Jews died in the wilderness on their journey from Egypt to their promised land, ancestors of the Caribbean peoples perished in great numbers during the Middle Passage from their ancestral home in Africa to the new world in the Americas, and their remains forming part of the coral fissures of the seas resulting in colourful mosaics that are testimonies of their past encounter with the sea, metaphorically. Consequently, the peoples of the Caribbean cannot risk neglecting the significance of the sea to their history in terms of who they are, where they came from, how they got to where they presently call home and ultimately, their identity. This is why the affinity between their history and identity is so obvious in "The Sea is History" to warrant a re-appraisal of the whole debacle of the status of the Caribbean or West Indian peoples so they can chart a course of self- realisation and fulfilment in the post-colonial as well as post-modernist world.

Conclusion

This study has explored Derek Walcott's poetry and highlighted a number of historical and social conditions directly connected to the problematic of identity in Caribbean society. These include forced

migration, displacement, enslavement, oppression, exploited indenture, cultural dislocation and racial discrimination which are all historical; and cultural and social alienation, economic dependency, voluntary migration and psychological complexes of inferiority and inadequacy which are all contemporary social challenges. Using New Historicism as theoretical framework, the study applied Jerome McGann's variant by foregrounding peculiar and distinctive elements in the four poems analysed in the study. It has succeeded substantially in establishing a correlation between Caribbean peoples' history, their social experience and their identity crisis.

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