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Post-Colonial Theme in Derek Walcott's Poem "A Far Cry from Africa" – A Study

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Abstract

Colonialism began with the frequency of sailing. Portuguese were the first sea sailing community, which had the temerity to begin trade with the distant countries. Slowly they started exploiting the natives for their financial well-being and there originated the concept of colonies. The colonizers of the west dominated the natives in Asia and Africa with their power and occupied land, expanded their country. The native people were pushed to lead a slavish life. In Africa, the Europeans exploited the mines and rubber plantations, and above all their need for labourers was fulfilled by the slave trade initiated during those times. These black Africans were forcibly drafted from their native lands to the distant parts of American continent, and to the islands surrounding the American continent. Enslaved Africans lost their family, language, culture, respect and dignity. Derek Walcott is a poet, who laments continuously for the

loss of their culture. The present study will try to collect the assimilated left over fragments of colonial masters after they left Africa due to the Second World War in Walcott's "A Far Cry from Africa".

Keywords

Caribbean Literature; Post-Colonialism; Derek Walcott; "A Far Cry from Africa".

Post colonialism in literature deals with the cultural legacy of colonial rule. It deals with cultural alienation in colonized, the dilemmas of developing a "National Identity" after colonial rule. The postcolonial theory is concerned with the ways in which colonial masters used their knowledge against the colonized people and making them believe that they are powerless and subordinate to the colonizers. In post-colonial literature the writers use the colonizers language. The purpose of using the language of the colonizer is to give a fitting reply to the colonial legacy. In this way the postcolonial literature developed and the colonized people proved their scholarship to the world. Many writers from the files and ranks of the colonizers had written against colonization but they did not portray the real feelings of the colonized people. They misrepresented many ideas. They presented Colonialism from their own point of view, and not from the point of view of the natives. Edward Said in his essay "Culture and Imperialism", has analyzed the novel *Heart of Darkness* by Conrad. The colonial period is reported by Marlowe. In the essay Edward Said says that both Conrad and Marlowe are Non-Africans, hence they could not understand the sufferings of the natives. Chinua Achebe in his essay "Home and Exile" analyzed Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* in which Achebe points out that the Africans are misrepresented by Joyce Cary. After reading *Mister Johnson* the African students raised their voice against the misrepresentation of their country.

In postcolonial era, poets have exercised admirable craft in their works from a technical stand point. They do not write in a vacuum but show a keen

awareness of the current trends in poetry because many of the postcolonial poets were educated abroad. The postcolonial poets found themselves in young nations set free from the imperial fetters of the past. Most of the postcolonial poets satirized western legacy, and some glorified imperialism. The postcolonial poets replied their colonial masters through poetry. They compared their countries beauty with western countries beauty.

West Indies is a group of large islands that separate the Caribbean Sea from the Atlantic Ocean. Caribbean poetry came into existence in its own right during the twentieth century. The poets who best represent Caribbean poetry are Jamaica's Claude McKay and Lausie Benneff; Guyana's A.J. Seymour; St. Lucia's Derek Walcott; and Barbados' Edward Kamau Braithwaite. The Caribbean postcolonial poets became the strongest voice for the Caribbean freedom. Many of their poems exposed British colonialism and American imperialism by using their poems as major mode of expressions.

Derek Walcott was born in Castles, St. Lucia, British West Indies on January 23, 1930 to Warwick and Alix Walcott who was of mixed African Dutch and English descent. His father, a civil servant died in 1931 leaving Pamela his older sister and Derek and his twin brother Roderick Alton in the sole care of his mother. His interest in art blossomed and was significantly influenced by Harold Simmons. Some of his famous collections are *A Far Cry from Africa* (1962), *Codrill* (1965), *The Castaway and other Poems* (1965), *Another Life* (1973), *Sea Grapes* (1976), *Saint Lucia* (1976), *Schooner Flight* (1979), *The Star Apple Kingdom* (1979), *North and South* (1981), *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981), *Midsummer* (1984), *Arkanas Testament* (1987), *Omeros* (1990), *The Bounty* (1997) and *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000).

Derek Walcott's first important volume of verse, *In a Green Night: Poems* (1948-1960), was a land mark in the history of West Indies poetry, breaking with exotic native tradition of shallow romanticism and inflated rhetorical abstractions. In such poems as "A Far Cry from Africa", "Ruins of a Great House",

and “Two Hems on the passing of an Empire”, he began to confront the complex personal fate that would dominate all of his works - his identity as a transplanted African in an English organized society. In “A Far Cry from Africa”, he concluded:

I who am poisoned 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, “A Far Cry from Africa” 14-21)

Most of the Black writers suffer from the same inferiority complex. Inferiority complex may be too harsh, so couched words like wounded race can be used. The suffering of the Blacks’ ancestors is still alive in most of the writer’s minds. Derek Walcott also belongs to the same category for he is confused about the society to which he belongs. His innermost mind supports the English language. As a person, he believed in the purity of culture and tradition, and that is why he used the word “poisoned” in the poem “A Far Cry from Africa”. He is unable to turn to any direction, and because his grudge for the English atrocities is still alive, he is not able to love them, but at the same time, he is not able to hate them. However, he does not like the English culture, his love for English as a language crosses all bounds.

Using the English tongue he loved does not preclude Walcott from feeling outrage at the degradation to which the British Empire has subjected his people, “the abuse/ of ignorance by bible and by sword (qtd.in Postcolonial Literature 214)”. He calls “Hawkins Walter Raleigh, Oradey/ Ancestral murderers and poets (Volume I 211)”. For these voyagers laid the foundation for planned extortion from colonial countries. Yet this rage-filled poem ends on a note of comparison,

as the speaker recalls that England was also an exploited colony subjected to “bitter faction”. The heart dictated anger, but intelligence controls and mellow feeling, perceiving the complexity of human experience. So this poem “A Far Cry from Africa” has the theme of the brutality of Europeans on the African life, culture and people. The very title of the poem stands as an example of this brutality. The expression “far cry” may be constructed as a distant cry or ancient cry.

Derek Walcott, as a Caribbean also felt the loss. But his loss was something superior to the above mentioned writers. Postcolonial writers assimilated a new mixture; they were dwellers yet rootless, for his roots were in African continent.

This was the typical postcolonial feeling. Derek Walcott fits into the groove to be called a perfect postcolonial poet. His problem was his split culture. Internally his culture was different. He laments that his deepest love was for his unknown African culture, but externally he had to like the British culture. Derek Walcott shows a deep postcolonial feeling. A good writer is one who assimilates both the cultures and thereby achieves universality to fulfil his multi-cultural commitment.

In Walcott, one is aware of his African origin, the West Indian birth and upbringing and the recent American stay has kept him at a distance from his environment. He is caught in a dilemma of choose between the country of his origin and the country of his upbringing. The dilemma between one’s tradition and medium of expressing is beautifully expressed in “A Far Cry from Africa”. It is a very significant poem for it gives expression to multicultural experience for which he was awarded the Noble Prize for literature.

Colonial hangover is present in the West Indies poems and the memory of the past haunts the mind. The opening lines of the poems set tone of the poems. The agony of colonial torture is still fresh and the memory of the past hunts the

mind without end and Walcott puts it as, “A Wind is ruffling the tawny pelt/ Of Africa, Kikuyu, quick as files” (Walcott, “A Far Cry from Africa” 18-19).

The gruesome picture of torture inflicted by the colonizers is suggested by the image of “worm” which vitiated the atmosphere this is a recurrent image in Walcott’s poetry. He is pitted against the colonial policy. He revolts against the injustice meted out of natives of Africa. The discrimination against race and color is brought out in the following lines:

Statistics justify and scholars seize
The salient of colonial policy
What is that to the white child hatred in bed?
To savages, expendable as jew? (Walcott, “A Far Cry from Africa”
21-24)

The voice of humanity is drowned in the hatred of man for his fellow human being as the colonizers choose to discriminate against the people on grounds of colour and race. With a touch of pathos tinged with irony, Walcott records:

The violence of beast on beast is read
As natural law. But upright man
Seeks his divinity with inflicting pain. (Walcott, “A Far Cry from
Africa” 26-28)

The result of inhuman torture is the “native dread/ of the white peace contracted by the dead”. Man’s cruelty to man resulted in a waste of compassion against the backdrop of the colonial exploitation. The West Indies poet has to choose between the cultural past and the English language but he also struggles to hard to keep up multi-cultural commitment and therefore, it appeals to people cutting across continents. The last stanza of the poem contains a series of questions partly rhetorical, for Walcott has chosen to retain both his native tradition and the acquired English language.

The themes of the poem “A Far Cry from Africa” is often repetitive. Themes like dislocation, desolation, oppression, cultural instability, and his split ancestry predominate the poem. Race plays a very vital role in the poem. Walcott is a passive fighter for the rights of blacks because his own maternal grandfather was a White man. However, his love for black culture crosses all bounds, though his love for English also knows no bounds.

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