

Conflict Between Culture and Identity in Derek Walcott's *A Far Cry in Africa*: A Critical Assessment

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Abstract

It is beyond doubts that Derek Walcott's *A Far Cry from Africa* is not only a brilliant exposition of the imbalance relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, but also the portrayal of the pains and agonies of a man who is torn between two cultures. The poem deals with the question of the conflict of the identity he goes through due to his state of in-betweenness. Throughout the poem, he continues searching his identity, but at the end, he remains a bewildered and enigmatic personality as he finally confesses his love for the English language as well as for his origin. In other words, the idea that pervades the entire poem is the conflict of culture and identity, from where the poet finds no way out.

Keywords: Origin, In-betweenness, Dilemma, Culture, identity, hybridity

Introduction

Derek Walcott is a famous poet and playwright born on the island of St. Lucia, a former British Colony in West Indies. The present poem, *A Far Cry from Africa* is a powerful exploration of the socio-political and epistemological implications of post-colonialism. It is a painful and agonized expression of the poet's own state of mind who feels himself torn between two cultures. It is a well-known fact that Walcott was the product of mixed heritage or cultures. Walcott has both African and European roots; his grandmothers belonged to black race and both grandfathers were white.

The present poem is a powerful illustration of the time during which the poet's country of birth St. Lucia was still a colony of Great Britain. The poem throws ample light on Walcott's opposition of colonialism and therefore, he seems to be kind and considerate to a revolution with an anti-colonial cause. He not only found insurgence of Mau Mau movement as extremely exploitive-not only to animals and whites, but also this terrorist organisation to the Mau Mau cause.

There is no doubt in denying the fact that of *A Far Cry for Africa* by Derek Walcott is an exposition of the poet's dilemma of colonialism. It is an authentic and honest delineation of the speaker's predicaments of painful legacy between the colonizers and the colonized. At the same time, it also focuses on the Mau Mau rebellion that occurred in the mid twentieth century when African Kenyan struggled hard for freedom against the British colonial rule.

Analysis on Culture Conflict and Identity in Derek Walcott's *A Far Cry in Africa*: A Critical Assessment

The narrator of the poem is very much conscious of his bonding to both Africa and England, and he seems to be perplexed how to explain the violence of this conflict. As the speaker identifies himself with the poet Walcott, he is painfully divided even among the African colonists in his connection with English. So, what the poem vividly and graphically represents is totally misguided identity, and it seems a bit alarming because colonialism is an element that exercises a firm control over the veins of painful legacy.

At the same time, the poet continues to search his true identity as he, despite of his love for the English language, cannot embrace of the culture of the colonizer and, consequently, attempts to come at a point when he describes the conflict within himself by blaming his state of in betweenness when he asserts:

I who am poisoned with the blood of both

Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?(11)

The title of the poem is symbolic of the narrator's cultural instability. The above cited lines reflect how the poet believes that he is cursed because of his mixed race. In the title of the poem, the readers perceive an ambiguity as the title of the poem, *A For Cry from Africa* connotes two meanings-at one level, it suggests that the real state of Africa is far away from what we have read in descriptions of the fascinating flora and fauna, while the title can be read on a different level putting forward that the unsuccessful attempt to write about African from a distance, but the poet himself experiences challenges in writing a culture that he is factually far from

Walcott has graphically used various metaphors and sarcastic statements in order to manifest critics of the cruel and damaging nature of both African and European cultures as is evident through the following lines

Only the worms, Colonel of carrion cries:

“Waste no compassion on these separate dead!(11)

Here, the poet blames the British because of their imperialistic technique to control the native culture (African) devoid of any sympathy and compassion. Through the above quoted lines, the poet shatters the image of a paradise that many associate with Africa by describing a landscape littered with corpses. The poet, further, adds a sickening detail by referring to a worm or maggot that reigns in this setting of decaying human flesh. The worm's admonishment 'to waste no compassion on the separate dead' is very complex and puzzling as it is an implication of the victims somehow got what they deserved.

In other words, Walcott tries to hold both the cultures responsible without showing any kind of discrimination either towards Africa or towards British. In the lines quoted above, the poet blames the British for their imperialistic ways to grasp the culture of the natives, but without creating compassion and kindness towards the colonized.

Bharatender Sheron, in his well-known article, “A Dilemma of Caribbean Populace: Post Colonial and Identity Crisis in Derek Walcott's Play” explores the postcolonial concerns dealing with dual identity and culture which, as a problematic legacy of colonialism, affects postcolonial people.

In this diversity and hybridity, the colonisers have lost their original selves. Those, once colonized are multicultural people, and colonized cultures cannot be considered pure, rather they are heterogeneous cultures. Colonialism, even though it is said to have ended, has left its traces in the postcolonial age making the people a mixture of Western and indigenous qualities.

Derek Walcott, being a postcolonial writer, has used in *A Far Cry from Africa* the advantages of hybridity to illustrate unhomeliness by describing himself as a 'mongrel'. He hates the English culture, but loved the English language and emphasized with the Irish for they were also the victims of colonization as he asserts while dealing with his own identity: "I am a kind of split writer, I have one tradition inside me going in one way, and another going another." *A Far Cry from Africa* is an attempt by the poet that does not provide him any way out to solve the problem of his hybrid inheritance as he has propounded efficiently in the present poem.

In this way, the idea of Identity crisis lies at the centre of the poem, but this search for identity is more complex with the progression of ideas in poem. The poet, in his ambiguous state, is not left with any option. In spite of the diverse questions, Walcott asks:

How to choose between this Africa
And English tongue I love(11)

Being an admirer of both cultures, the poet does not know answer to this question which indicates that the poet chooses to remain an African partially in his way of life, but he prefers English language and literary tradition which resemble the colonizers.

The pull that both cultures have for Walcott results into a considerable conflict and tension with the progression of the poem. The poet's divided loyalty and devotion create a sense in him not to accept and appreciate a culture of his own but, on the other hand, he admits the civilized side of British culture. This is also an exposition of Walcott's efforts to acknowledge the faults of both African and British cultures without the depiction of any form of biasness.

Walcott's mixed identity and existence between the two cultures portrays him with the scope to pull apart the wickedness of both the cultures- colonized and colonizer. In this way, the idea of post colonialism is generally concerned with the double identity where the colonised lost their original selves and the coloniser's culture is imposed on them. The fragmented and divided identity of the poet is the direct result of the idea that Indigenous people are empty of compatible identity.

This also brings to the light that they are uncertain of who exactly they are and where they belong. It is a fact that Indigenous people are embodiment of both traits-Western culture and native culture, and hence, they are in between therefore, the colonised cultures are never considered pure and real, but manifests multicultural features with mixed cultures.

It is a fact that the poet shows his inclination towards African culture. The main reason behind it is that they have been colonised and he cannot turn his back from their miseries, sufferings and predicaments. It also reflects the poet's compassion and sympathy for those who are oppressed and humiliated. This is evident through the following lines when the poet points or asks a question:

How can I turn from Africa and live?(12)

The above quoted lines reflect Walcott's strong inclination towards the nature African who are tortured and exploited mercilessly by the colonizers. The poet's sympathy lies with the fellow beings who are deprived of equality in all spheres of life-social, cultural, political and economical.

The last two lines of the poem, *A Far Cry from Africa* are realistic portrayal of the poet's present situation as he is torn apart between both the cultures. He feels inferiority regarding the situation. This perplexed state of mind is the direct result outcome of his mixed hybridity that enables him to decide to which he should be partial.

Although it is a fact that there is an end of colonialism, but still there are some features and significant elements left during the postcolonialism that delineate colonised culture as a bending of Western and native qualities. Walcott's use of the phrase 'mixed blood' is a demonstration of his mixed identity is time and again haunting him. He does not he recognise the cruel done to African by the British claiming to civilize them.

The line 'I who am poisoned with the blood of both with where I shall turn divide to the vein' is a reflection of the poet's psyche. It manifests the poet's sensibility and sensitivity to avoid hypocrisy. Colonial history has given him a mixed blood. It has forged in many Africans, like him, peculiar relationship with England and its white people. He is bold and frank enough to say that his compassion extends to the stupidity of the whites and the waste of the blacks. The compassion reaches the colonisers' language English.

The word 'poisoned' conveys powerful idea of provoking the Mau Mau rebellion in the narrator's mind. Being the product of both cultures-European and African, meaning descendants of either side- his blood feel poisonous connecting the speaker to violence no matter it would be.

This tradition also makes the poet poisonous as he finds him divided into veins. It is evident through this twist that half of the speaker's blood is half violent. That is the main reason why the poet thinks the present poem as personal and even physically divided by composing this conflict. For the speaker, this is not a matter of abstract politics, but truly intimate struggle that has taken place within him struggle over the legacy of colonialism. In this way, colonial history has compelled the speaker divided by colonised and colonizers.

The poet endures his search to establish his true identity and uses phrase including 'poison' to support the conviction that his mixed identity haunts him. It also develops a certain level of guiltiness for failing to trace his origin. He feels being alienated and deportation despite him expressing his love and passion for English and technology; he cannot clap to his bosom the culture of the colonizer, similarly he cannot fully associate himself with the culture of 'darkness'. Consequently, he grapples with the question of identity and the conflict within himself by excusing sense of in-betweenness.

The last six lines are a powerful dramatization that portrays Walcott's confusion more vividly and graphically in his essay "The Muse of History" where he says: "most Black writers cripple themselves by this separatism. You cannot be apart and believe in the division of man." (*The Muse of History*, 12) In fact, here we witness a shift in the author's viewpoint as he deals with the changed scene, that is, of Africa. Being torn between two cultures, the poet is unable to decide and feel about the Mau Mau struggle as he is not convinced with the multiple responses of those from the outside. Walcott is depressed and disillusioned by the behaviour of Mau Mau rebellion just as he has been disappointed by the British.

The pessimistic ending of the poem with the line: 'How can I face such slaughter and be cool?' is suggestive of his contemplation being an alien because of his mixed identity which is the chief reason of his sense of isolation, alienation,

detachment and devolution. It is a fact that culture effects play a significant role in confirming the identity of an individual's character by a particular society's values.

Due to this fact, Walcott's doubts are obvious as he suspects and doubts towards both cultures-Africa and British that make him confess in typical function of victorious and conquered. Although, he criticizes the cruel regime of England for its imperialistic domination, but he does not show sympathy and consideration for his African kinsmen. This is perhaps it is the main reason why he failed to identify his true identity.

Another challenge encountered by the poet in the present poem is to express his agonising circumstances. The main reason behind it is that it is often very challenging to express black man's pain in Whiteman's arguments. The poet is perplexed as he thinks whether he will be safeguarding the middle of his fellow Africans using colonialist language due to his protracted detachment from the African culture. In that sense, the poem is an honest expression of the struggle for identity that the poet is fighting. His name symbolises the culture of the colonizers, while his injured dark body allegorises their brutality.

In this way, this dilemma concerning his double identity continuous till the end of the poem as he finds himself perplexed whether to betray both ore to opt for one-Africa or England, but eventually his Love for Africa wins over his identification with the English and through rhetorical questions, he makes his clear alliance with Africa when he says:

How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live? (12)

It reflects the poet's deep rooted affiliation and harmony as he is not able to tolerate the exploitation and maltreatment meted out to the Africans. Also, it delineates the poet's endless struggle with his attraction to advancement and technology inherited in the British culture coupled with his ironic longing for the African culture.

Conclusion

In this way, after making a close and incisive study of Derek Walcott's poem, *A Far Cry from Africa*, we can safely and rightly aver the fact that the poet identifies the characteristics of the culture that he admires the most. He desires the 'African terrain lifestyle and favours the English language and literary tradition.' According to the poet, both cultures have specific elements that attract him that prolongs the poem, and at the end, he has not found any solution to resolve his bewilderment. He opines that his divided loyalties troubles him and desires that he embraces the civilized British culture, however, he cannot confirm their cruelty towards the Africans.

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