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Clash between ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ in Derek Walcott’s *A Far Cry from Africa*

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Abstract:

Derek Alton Walcott’s “A Far Cry from Africa” not only highlights the imbalances between the colonizer and the colonized, but also the helplessness of a person standing between two societies. The poet, through this masterpiece, expresses the conflict of identity which he encounters. Quest for identity is one of the focal points in this poem as the poet seeks his true identity throughout the poem. Ultimately, he fails his attempt of knowing his true identity as he was stuck in a dilemma – love for the English, on one hand, and love for his heritage, on the other hand. In other terms, it is the clash between culture and identity that keeps the poet in a dilemma.

Keywords:

colonialism, masterpiece, quest for identity, dilemma, culture

Introduction:

‘A far Cry from Africa’ was written by Derek Alton Walcott in 1962, just one year before Kenya gained its independence. In ‘A far Cry from Africa’ what can be seen as the most representative poem of a period despite its surface simplicity of language is the wreckage by the violence of racial conflicts on the islands. Thus, when he looks back at “the towney pelt” of Africa, he remembers the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya.

Derek Alton Walcott was born in Castries, Saint Lucia, the West Indies on January 23rd, 1930. He is a St. Lucian by religion. He was educated at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. He is a precious writer, poet, playwright, teacher, and a theatre activist. He is the founder of the Trinidad Theatre Workshop and had written several plays produced throughout the United States, ‘The Odyssey’, ‘A Stage Version (1992)’, ‘Dream on Monkey Mountain and other plays (1970)’, just to name a few. He founded Boston Playwrights’ Theatre at Boston University in 1981. His first collection of essays, ‘What the Twilight Say’ was published in 1998. His father and mother are half West Indian and half British making Walcott of mixed racial heritage. Walcott’s poetry blends themes associated with his heritage, his West Indian culture, British rule, and inequality. The tone of Walcott’s work is persuasive and emotional, and draws the reader in with questions and comparison. His works examine the

cultural division he experiences in the West Indies, the identity issues with his heritage and his use of imagery to depict change, all lending to the richness of the discipline of British poetry.

Walcott's earliest poetic influences were Modernist writers such as T.S. Eliot and Pound. His themes most often touch upon the relationship of a postcolonial West Indies with the culture and tradition of Britain, and particularly the literary heritage of writing in English that he has inherited. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992. Interesting enough, Derek Alton Walcott is still alive. His latest work is 'O Starry Starry Night' (2014).

The first note of discord is found when the Kikuyu are described as "*quick as flies*", "*Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt*" but the poet cannot sympathize completely with any one side and orders.

"Waste no compassion on these separate dead!"

He sees both enemies as murderers who have strewn dead bodies across a beautiful land, brought dead to a veritable Eden. He sees that decolonization had reduced the African people to the level of uncivilized savages or helpless animals that must be hunted. He perceives their transportation to and exploitation on American continent through the Biblical suffering of the Judaic people - a metaphor in several poems. His people too are as "expendable as Jews".

"To savages, expendable as Jews"

Through this line, the poet draws out the similarity between the exploited natives and the Jews who traditionally suffered great losses as are expressed in various incidents in the Bible. A further reference is to the holocaust during World War II when six million Jews were killed in Hitler's concentration camps as though their lives were worthless and could be sacrificed as unimportant.

The vivid animal imagery like the "white dust of ibises" and "the beast-teeming plains" evoke the physical environment of an ancient civilization with its own 'natural law' of evolution which animals survive through necessary killing. But there is anguish in the words "but upright man seeks his divinity with inflicting pain".

Man appears more monstrous for he kills without reason and celebrates with a war-dance of victory by sadistically oppressing those that are weaker. The cultural African symbols of drum-beat and dancing resonate through the havoc wrought by the white masters in what they may call 'the white peace' -

"Of the white peace contracted by the dead"

Because of certain benevolent aspects of colonial rule that they have given to the people they have smothered into submission. Walcott uses the word "delirious" for the white people who, intoxicated by the conquest in the colonies, have lost all sense of human compassion.

Again, the "brutish necessity" instituted by those in power must wipe its guilt on "the napkin of a dirty cause", where any real regret is missing -

*"Again brutish necessity wipes its hands
Upon the napkin of a dirty cause."*

There is also a symbolic representation of the African as monkey-like because of their dark skin and apparent lack of civilization in terms of the Western World. The Superman is the white race which represents progress, especially in technology and implies that the colonizers wield magical powers to their subjects. Walcott's metaphors indicate his appropriation of a language that is at its unusual best because it is least restricted by cliché's : To draw another parallel, he refers to Spain and the pity of the civil war. He does pity them all the blacks and the whites - who have chosen violence and are victims of the destruction they themselves have unleashed. If the conqueror is a 'superman' and the savage is a 'gorilla', then he cannot deny his involvement and suffering in the actions of both races as he is "poisoned with the blood of both."

"Where shall I turn, divided to the vein"

The poet compares the administration of the British to a “drunken man” who is in charge and gives orders needlessly, and without justification. There is a suggestion in this metaphor that colonized people have been so intoxicated by the cultural benefits of an English education that they are loath to give it up and identify solely with their own race.

However, his question cannot be resolved much he is born apart by the conflicts of history. Moreover, how can he choose between them – ‘the Africa and the English tongue I love’

The just option would be to betray them both or accept his literary talent by admitting what he owes to his dual heritage –

“give back what they give”

Though this last as a rhetorical question in this poem, it is also a statement that the poet’s identity comes from a flow of history and events that have taken his past and given him the present. He cannot retaliate without suffering immense loss in the future.

Conclusion:

The dilemma between ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ is one that confronts all West-Indian writers and many others of post-colonial world. Walcott is, perhaps, at his best when he is most autobiographical. He seems to be working on his thesis ‘what is history’, ‘what is identity’, for Caribbean Islanders as he composes integrals and sums up his most mature thoughts in each succeeding collection of poems. The poem “A Far Cry from Africa” depicts the complexities of the history and identity of culture. Walcott, through this masterpiece, turn his ambivalence into an artistic work. Despite being haunted by his inner turmoil of dual belongingness and sorrow of broken personality, he embraces hybridity and intellectual cosmopolitanism; he never loses sight of his imperialist history and remains critical of the influences that form his future and praises his nativity deep rooted in his heart.

“Walcott is one of the handful poets who are capable of convincing the readers. His fundamental concern is to give an account of the simultaneous unity and division created by the ocean and by human dealings with it.” – remarked Sean O’ Brien.

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