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## DEREK WALCOTT AND THE DRAMA OF AMBIVALENCE

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### ABSTRACT

This study is on Derek Walcott's drama. It focuses on the underlying currents that propel Walcott into the writing and production of the drama of ambivalence, which thematic pre-occupations include: race and colour, history and colonialism, selfhood and identity, exile and alienation, gender and language, all which exist in dual mode. These divergent themes are extradited into **Ti-Jean and His Brothers** and explicated upon, so as to bring about a wider understanding of Derek Walcott as a writer of no mean repute, and the larger Walcottian dramatic canon.

### INTRODUCTION

"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".  
("The Schooner Flight")

The above four lines, "reminiscent of Herman Melville's declaration that America... [is] not a narrow tribe, no: our blood is as the flood of the Amazon, made up of a thousand noble currents, all pouring into one. We are not a nation so much as a world" (Daryl Cumber Dance, 336), underscore the subject and thematic pre-occupations of Derek Walcott works: race and colour, history and colonialism, selfhood and identity, exile and alienation, gender and language. These various themes, though dualistic in nature, will be extradited from "the context of the larger Walcott canon" (Daryl, 334) and transplanted into the discuss of *Ti – Jean and His Brothers*, one of Walcott's drama, with an aim to explicating the under-currents that propel Walcott into the creation and production

of the dramas of ambivalence. And this informs the purpose of this paper.

Sir Derek Alton Walcott, KCSL, OBE, OCC, was born in Castries in St Lucia, on the 23rd day of January, in the year 1930. He is of mixed heritage on both sides of his parents – the father is a White, while his mother is a Black, amidst White grandfathers and Black grandmothers. He attended the University College of the West Indies, and was the founder of The Little Carib Theatre Workshop (later known as The Trinidad Theatre Workshop) in Trinidad. He is not only a dramatist, but equally a poet, an artist and a teacher. Being a prolific writer and talented man, he has succeeded in “winning almost every prestigious award available to writers in the Caribbean, the United States, and England”, (Daryl, 334) and these include: the Rockefeller Fellowship on Drama, the MacArthur Fellowship and the Nobel Prize for Literature, among others. Walcott has written almost twenty-eight (28) plays, including his juveniles, fragments and manuscripts that represent his start and growth as a dramatist of note. His works include: *Franklin*, performed in 1960 and published in 1973; *In a Fine Castle*, 1970; and *Joker of Seville*, 1974; *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1957), a collection of plays that encompasses, *The Sea at Dauphin*, 1954, *Malcochon*, 1959, and *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*, (1958), and other literary creativities, too numerous to mention.

Walcott’s family background is modest and genteel; and his parents are self-denied Methodists that barely survived in abject poverty, as a result of his father’s death, when Derek Walcott and his twin brother, Roderick Walcott, were fifteen months old. The mother was the headmistress of the Methodist infant school, a privileged position, then, that enabled her to raise train and encouraged the young poet cum artist to complete the cultural ideals of his late father. Howbeit the poor family background, Walcott is highly knowledgeable with regards to European history and literature, and has equally being in contact with the dominant African culture in St Lucia. This same background, in various ways, isolated and alienated him from other St. Lucians, because by colour, he is Rred while others are Black; by religion, he is a Methodist, while others are Catholics, and Walcott speaks and writes in English, while others speak and write in French Patois. The only common thing that he shared with them is just poverty, but fortunately, not at present, due to “the countless grants and awards” to his person, the “constantly increasing remuneration

for teaching reading, and lecturing”, coupled with “the record-breaking success of many of his plays and publications” (Dance, 332). He died on the 17<sup>th</sup> day of March, 2017.

### **Thematic Pre-Occupations of Walcott’s Drama**

As stated earlier, Walcott’s major pre-occupations in his drama include race and colour, history and colonialism, self-hood and identity, exile and alienation, gender and language. In terms of race and colour, most of his dramatic works explore the divisions within his person – a man of mixed race attempting to come to grip with two notorious words, “Ashanti” and “Warwickshire” that constantly prickle his existence. As a mixed breed, Walcott has no iota of pride for the first, and has shame for the other, which he regards as bastardization of one and his language. In Derek Walcott words, he says:

My generation had looked at life with black skins and blue eyes, but only our own painful, strenuous looking, the learning of looking, could find meaning in the life around us, only our own strenuous hearing, the hearing of our hearing, could make sense of the sounds we made. [Based on the above statement, Walcott insist thus]: So that mongrel as I am, something prickles in me when I see the word Ashanti as with the world Warwickshire, both separately intimating my grandfathers’ roots. Both baptizing this neither proud non ashamed bastard, this hybrid, this West Indian. (9-10)

This concern for ambivalence is comprehensively dramatized in his play, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, which depicts Walcott’s philosophy that to be entirely free from the domineering influence of the Whiteman, the one major task expected of a colonial or Blackman, is to rebel against the Whites.

Regarding history and colonialism, Walcott conscientiously draws from the various influences on his life, as he grew up in the Castries of his childhood. For this singular reason, he draws from his African tradition, the dance, mimetic and narrative elements, as inherent in the cultural life in St. Lucia, where he grew as a child. Colonialism brings to bear on him, the literary and classical tradition of Europe, which he acquired through

Western education. On this basis therefore, Walcott attempts at the creation of neo-classical theatre, where casts can play Shakespeare and or sing and dance to calypso, without prejudice. Herein, his play, *Malcochone*, readily comes to mind, as a theatrical piece that its success depended largely on the employment of music, dance and mime into its enactment, than on the socio-political concerns of this same text. Again, Walcott's writings are generally pre-occupied with self-hood, that is the personal identification with a specific region, or historical condition. For this reason, Castries St. Lucia tends to inform the background or setting of most of his works, for example, *The Sea at Dauphin*, a realistic play depicting the life and everyday language of the average fishermen in St. Lucia. In short, the overall heritage dominant in his childhood, as explicitly explored by Walcott in his works, inform the major thrusts that propelled him to attaining a prestigious place in the literary world.

One is aware that Walcott was isolated from the rest St. Lucians in terms of colour, religion and language. These three factors almost became impediments to his establishing relationships with St. Lucians, themselves, but with the progress of time, his attitude leans towards reconciliation, rapprochement, acceptance and empathy, so as to avoid being unimaginative and uninventive. On these bases therefore, his writings record his awareness of history, from childhood, down to adulthood, and the attendant cruelties reminiscent of such historical happenstances. For example, *The Cape Man*, co-authored with Paul Simon, is a record of most of Walcott's experiences as a West-Indian in an environment manipulated by White masters, who are not only cruel to the Black slaves, but are equally cunning and avaricious.

As an eminent writer, the duality of Walcott propelled him towards a continuous search for the ideal form and language appropriate for works on literature, most especially drama and poetry. For this reason, he wrote books on Standard English and the dialectical form of the Queen's English, where often times, he experiments on a fusion of the two varieties of same English language. The dialect is spontaneous while the Standard English language possesses grace in its syntactic constructs, therefore, how best to merge these co-existing language forms, becomes one of Walcott's thematic thrust, as depicted in *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*.

### ***Ti-Jean and His Brothers – As Exposition***

This play revolves round the life of a poor Negro woman and her three children, whom all, alongside their mother, live in an isolated forest home – Gros -Jean, Mi-Jean and Ti-Jean, the latter being the youngest. The antagonist is the devil, who doubles as the old man and the White planter, respectively. The agent to the devil is the Bolom through whom the devil bargains with the three brothers to execute his' (that is, the devil's) bidding – to count all the leaves of the sugar-canes in the devil's sugar-cane plantation.

The setting of this play is in the rainforest region of Trinidad Creole culture. It is a fable as being narrated by Frog, alongside other rainforest animals, such as the cricket, through dialogue, dance and songs. Accordingly, one can be assert that *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* "takes place in the collective unconscious of its spectators, a land where life is a quest in a haunted forest, animals speaks to humans and each other, and the Devil gambles for the souls of the self-satisfied. Ti-Jean, "the swift and elegant hero who is but a boy accepts the [devil's] challenge. It is an Aechyllus-like adventure turned into a charming, poetic and romantic fable with a deep undertone". (Google: Journal of Haitian Studies, n.p).

The first to embark on this herculean mission is Gros-Jean, depicted as physically strong and all powerful, but because he ignored the advice from the old man and the animals he met on the way, he fails to complete the task, therefore, is devoured by the devil.

Mi-Jean comes next. He is portrayed carrying a book and a fishing net. He pretends to be an intellect, but in his contentment in shallow intellectualism, he could not attempt the piece of work assigned to him, and is ultimately outwitted by the devil, himself.

The last to embark on the journey of life is Ti-Jean, the youngest of the three brothers. He is not only wise, but equally powerful and intelligent. That means that he aligns his wisdom and initiative with the qualities possessed by his two elder brothers. He listens to and abides by the

advice of his mother (representing the older generation of Africans) and those of the animals', two solid bases on which Ti-Jean takes off to confront the devil, symbolizing the White lords. The first encounter Ti-Jean has with the devil is the latter's metamorphosing into an old man with a cloven foot. On a critical assessment of the old man, Ti-Jean remembers the significance attached to such an old man, or "Papa Bois", as the old man is referred to in Caribbean history; the conclusion therefore, is that such an old man might mean something else to Ti-Jean and other Caribs. In Caribbean folklore, the bolom is a two or a two and a half foot man that was brought into this world on a Good Friday, by someone with evil intention. He is that evil agent that usually misdirects a lone traveler, depending on the Papa Bois' disposition towards the same itinerant. Since Ti-Jean, in his prime, has encountered the devil as an old man with cloven foot, he, Ti-Jean, becomes matured when he finally arrives the devil's gate. As usual, the devil instructs him to count all the leaves of the sugar-canes in the devil's plantation; but rather than embarking on such a foolish adventure, Ti-Jean asks the workers to burn down the devil's farmstead, thus avenging the death of his two brothers, Gros- and Mi- (Jeans). This hazardous act, to Ti-Jean, invariably, Derek Walcott, is not unlawful, since the best way to becoming a victim, is to carry out the Devil's orders to the letter.

The major thrusts of this play, which are disobedience and eventual freedom hinge on the quotation, "Who with the devil tries to play fair, weaves the net of his own despair" (*TAHB*, 156). The significance of this statement lies on the fact that a man in a competition, must definitely loose, if he adopts the same strategies employed by his game opponents. That is to say that the best and surest way to defeat the crafty devil to his game, is outright disobedience to all his rules and intrigues. While Gros-Jean and his elder brothers are symbolic of the black race in the Caribbean's, the devil, the old man and the White plantation owners represent the Europeans and their associated interests in under developing Africa. Herein, Walcott sees the plights of his people, most especially the majority poor Caribs, as incessant, as can be envisaged in the poor dwellings and the dilapidated roads amidst the plenty that is the affluence that is the life of the Whites. Therefore, for Blacks to attain unhindered and uncontaminated freedom from Whites, all things related to Europe must be dealt with and discarded as appropriate, hence the burning of the devils property by Gross-Jean.

### **Derek Walcott's Critical Views in *Ti-Jean and His Brothers***

Derek Walcott, in this play, criticizes the prevalent evils in the Caribbean federated union, which invariably, are the major thematic pre-occupations and subjects of this same text. They include the themes of colonialism, exploitation, slavery, abject poverty, religion and disobedience, among others.

As an individual, Walcott abhors all forms of exploitation, especially those practiced by the Europeans on the Blacks and other coloured slaves working in the White owned plantations and factories. The existence of such sharp practices is a resultant effect of colonialism in the federated Islands of Caribbean, where for decades, the Whites were in control of the workings of government, with the coloured as subordinates carrying out the biddens of their masters, within unfriendly environments. The devil therefore, is the cruel creator of colonialism, which itself, bred chronic dishonesty and abuse of power as practiced by the White man.

Again, there is the criticism leveled on religion, most especially, Christianity. This centres on the issue of the unresponsive god that remains adamant in spite of the sufferings of the Black slaves in the Caribbean. Inversely, Walcott is critical of those who whole-heartedly depend on God for the needs of life and eternal providence – that is the belief that whatever comes ones way is God-sent. This is the major reason Walcott fails to give the attributes or virtues of poverty to Ti-Jean, whose disobedience against the devil can be liken to that of the devil against God in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

### **Style as Text**

Ti-Jean and his brothers, a St. Lucian folktale with vestiges of traditional African animal fables, depicts the story of a poor woman who lives in a forest, alongside her three male children, whom all, were tempted by the devil, until the same devil is finally defeated by the youngest boy, Ti-Jean. In this very text, Derek Walcott employs various dramatic techniques in order to attain all, specifically, one of his thematic pre-occupations – the outright revolt against White colonialism and the domineering influences against the Black man: Blacks should rebel against all laws of disadvantage as established by the Whites.

In the first instance, the text has as its source, the traditional oral folktale as recounted during story-telling sessions in African moonlit nights. In this regard, Walcott makes use of folk characters, folk language, choral

repetitions and myths, among others. The folk characters are depicted in the mother and her three sons, the animals (like the frog and the firefly) that converse and talk on the impending developments and the devil that exists in the mythic imagination as Papa Bois, or the deceptive old man, in the story telling tradition of the Caribs.

In terms of language, Walcott blends folk language with the Queen's English, with an aim to achieving a dramatic conflict in this text, invariably portraying the duality that is his heritage. The use of music, alongside the choral repetitions as reflected in the carnivals, Christmas and New Year celebrations, make for the characteristic Anglo-African theatrical features inherent in Walcott's dramas. What with the fact that the text is just a three act play in which the major characters hatch their roles in successions – Gross-Jean first, Mi-Jean as second, and Ti-Jean coming last.

The prologue, which equally serves as the background to the dramatic episodes, dictates the tone of the drama and unfolds the major thematic pre-occupations of the same text. It was against this background that the forest animals reveal the expected events that subsequently form the dramatic narratives.

Walcott makes extensive use of symbolism to drive home his philosophy. The old woman of the story, symbolizes mother Africa who bore the children that were forcefully carried to the Caribbean Island, as slaves working in the White men's plantations. It is this same mother that shows unwavering faith as the children go forth to confront the devil. And for the fact that she naturally loves her children, she advises and warns Ti-Jean to beware of the devil that comes in many forms.

Gros-Jean, who is the eldest of the three brothers, is a representative of the first generation of African slaves, whose raw powers were forcefully exploited by the White slave-masters and died later. Mi-Jean signifies the second generation of Blacks who acquired the smattering education of the Western World, but could not employ it to outwit and defeat the White devils. They are proud and unaccommodating, hence they alienated their own brothers, symbolized by the forest animals. In slavish mythology, Mi-Jean is a pen-pusher who could not catch fish to feed his family, therefore he is a woeful failure, despite his education that hitherto, was designed and programmed to fail, by the White man. The death of Mi-Jean



connotes the demise of his colonized character, invariably the passive nature of our first African educational instructors. Ti-Jean is the real man in the moon, who through his resistant spirit, freed the entire black Caribbeans from the shackles of colonialism. As a decolonized revolutionary, he relies on his own smartness and wisdom to undo the devil and his empire. In short, Ti-Jean signifies the amalgamation of the entire Caribbeans under a unified front to achieve a common goal – the liberation of the Black race, as depicted in the life of the Bolom, or the oppressed nations of the Caribbeans.

The Bolom on the other hand, is that individual living in bondage. He signifies that first child that was stolen from his mother, by the White men, after the incessant rape of this same woman, by the same Whites. That was before the journey into actual slavery. The devil is the White man, the plantation owner and colonial master, who assigns the heinous task to the old woman and her family of tree, therefore, lord it over the Blacks. The rain, as used by Walcott, symbolizes the ever-flowing tears of the oppressed black slaves that have insistently been crying for freedom, while the moon is indicative of the desirous hope for the end of colonialism and the regaining of independence.

### **Implications of this Study on Education**

This study will kindle the reader's interest towards reading the literatures that are Caribbean, invariably, the passion to knowing more about the literary-history of the Black race. Again, this study will bring to lime-light the true nature of the White colonizers, who are greedy, exploitative, cunning, veracious and accumulators of wealth, among other vices.

Furthermore, this work will serve as an exposition of the craftsmanship of Derek Walcott as a poet, an essayist and a dramatist per excellence, among others. Moreover, this write-up can bring about further research works on comparative literatures on the nature of slavery and or colonialism in the Caribbean and other places, like the American continents, among others. These are not all. This same study will serve as a veritable guide towards establishing and equipping of theatre to becoming Afro-Carib, in terms of the music, folk characters, choral repetitions and the issue of myth, among others.

Above all, this research work will serve as a resource material when embarking on researches centered on Caribbean literature, most especially those hinged on the works of Derek Walcott's dramas.

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