



## The quandary of the black man in the poetry of derek walcott

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### Abstract

The human life is in itself contradictory. Though it has progressed to great degree from rudimentary past to the glorious present. Man has gained supremacy over the powerful forces of nature. Sometimes he equals and places himself at the level of God. There is no doubt even after attaining so much progress and having supremacy over so many forces of nature still he is naïve, filled with doubt, superstitious, apprehensive and insecure. Alexander Pope aptly describes man in his philosophical poem 'An Essay on Man' as "The glory, jest and riddle of the world". There is no more irony seen in his nature than in the discrimination which he still observes on the basis of skin colour. In spite of making so much progress and development even today he looks defeated. This pain is felt from the past immemorial and is expressed from time to time by many writer, philosophers, intellectuals and witty persons. Nobel laureate for peace Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered by a white racist for raising his voice against the discrimination made by the white people in America. He was recognised for his efforts for non-violence struggle for civil rights for African-Americans in the US. Even the great heavyweight boxer Cassius Clay changed his name and religion from Christianity to Islam and adopted new name Muhammad Ali to reject his birth name, which he considered a "slave name" standing for his black past.

**Keywords:** Negro people, caribbean identity, dilemma, consciousness, conflict, white

### Introduction

English Literature is filled with so many writers such as Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Richard Wright and Alice Walker who have written about and for Black people. They have felt the pain of the black people who even today are seen as the despicable, loathsome, detestable, slave and abhorrent for the human race. Writers have explored the life of Black people through fiction essays and poetry. Nobel Laureate prize winner of 1992, Derek Walcott too raised the voices of black man in his works. He presented the dilemma of black people in his poetry. His work often explored themes of Caribbean identity, post-colonialism, and the fusion of different cultures.

### Thoughts deep imbedded in the human psyche

Since culture operates in the realm of the psyche, the educated black man finds himself at war with his inner consciousness. One part of him tracks back to the cultural past which can which can no longer guide him. The other part half embraces and half rejects the intrusive Euro-American culture. A black man is always conscious of or this thought always lingers in his mind that his ancestors were slave, black, Negro people who descended from Africa and this is basically reflected in the works of Derek Walcott. The first generation of Africans who sold their own people must have experienced the fear of physical destruction. Subsequently, the coming generations of black people were so under shadowed under the white skinned people, their coloniser that they faithfully demonstrate their love for them. It was deep inbeded in the minds of black people that whatever is black is derogatory. They are the inferior, uncivilized people and white have come from the home of God, who are civilised and they have come to teach them the way of life. This negrophobia resulted in a psychopathy which the philosopher-psychiatrist Frantz Fanon has descried in his book 'Black Skin, White Masks' published in 1952. He observed:

Let us say that the Negro lives an ambiguity that is extraordinarily neurotic. At the age of twenty at the time that is when the collective unconscious has been more or less lost or is resistant at least to being raised to the conscious level- the Antillean recognizes that he is living an error. Why is that? Quite simply because and this is very important- the Antillean has recognized himself as a Negro... Everything that is the opposite of these Negro modes of behaviour is white... in the collective unconscious black-ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality."

Fanon sharing his own experiences while presenting a historical critique of the effects of racism and dehumanization, inherent in situations of colonial domination, on the human psyche.

### The apathy and dilemma of black man in poetry of Derek Walcott

Derek Walcott's poetry from 'The Green Night' (1962) to the 'Star Apple Kingdom' (1979) <sup>[1]</sup>, presents the Blackman's dilemma in pluralistic society. In an early long poem called 'Origins' (1964) the poet writes:

### Nameless I came among olives of algae Foetus of plankton, I remember nothing

This drifting plankton has learnt a lot about European myths of Hector, Ulysses, Achilles and Aeneas in the new world in the language of the colonisers but he has no awareness of his ancestral myths. Only blank pages turn in the wind of that fine race of people which came off the mainland. "White bees hiss" in his "Coral skull" that his was a race that had no knowledge of metals, of seasons and that "primitive minds cannot grasp infinity" the poet feels:

### Between the Greek and African pantheon

Lost amidst these islands Have drifted from anchorage... Far from the childhood of rivers." (Origins) The dilemma in Walcott's poems operates at all the three related levels-

Linguistic, cultural and social. "A Cry from Africa", published in *A Green Night*, 1962, which presents the conflict between the Mau Mau revolutionaries in Kenya and the British colonisers, also expresses his own inner conflict of allegiance:

The gorilla wrestles with the superman. I who am poisoned with 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? How can I face this slaughter and the cool? How can I turn from Africa and live? ("A Cry from Africa, p 18)

Walcott's second volume of poems, 'The Castaway' (Pb in 1965) is full of linguistic and cultural polarity which results in psychological dilemmas in the Afro-Caribbean psyche. The poem 'Laventille' which forms a part of this volume and is dedicated to V.S. Naipaul. In this poem it has presented that Africa has been forgotten in the West Indies:

The middle passage never guessed its end This is the height of poverty For the desperate and black; With widening memory On the hot, corrugated-iron sea

Whose horrors we all shared. The salt blood knew it well and those ancestors clamped below its grate... it shrilled In the blood, for those who suffered, who were killed, and who survive. ('Laventille')

In "Crusoe's Journal" the dilemma once again is on the linguistic level. The poet talks about the dual contradictory functions of the coloniser's language.

Parroting our master's Style and voice, we make his language ours, Converted cannibals We learn with him to eat the flesh of Christ. ('Crusoe's Journal') The gulf in "The Gulf and other poems" published in 1969 is not just the Gulf of Mexico, but also a symbol of separation. The emotional and moral separation at individual level re-enacts the curses of Cain. In the South of America, which is full of blacks, the poet feels the cultural gulf widening even amidst the familiar scene of tropical air and the legendary Jazz- The poet curses those who have made him homeless:

But fear Thickened my voice, that strange, familiar soil Prickled and barbed-the texture of my hair, My status as a secondary soul. The Gulf, your gulf, is daily widening, I have no home. ('The Gulf') Walcott's fourth volume 'Another Life' published in 1973, is autobiographical and shows his early fascination for white colour and white culture:

The moon came to the window and stayed there. He was her subject, changing when she changed, From childhood he'd considered palms Ignoble than imagined elms, The breadfruit's splayed Leaf coarser than the oak's, He had prayed Nightly for his flesh to change.

The moon as a symbol of 'White' and 'Woman' occurs again and again in his volume. This white woman in black literature is a target for the man's hostility and aggression. Walcott sees this white colour in nature too -white sky, white rain, white sand, white foam, and white moonlight. These white images are often contrasted with black to establish racial overtones and express double consciousness.

## Conclusion

Derek Walcott right from his earliest poetry volume, he displays the black man's dilemma. His intellectual development reflects his agony in his ascent from the neither world of the depersonalized. He casts a longing lingering look across the gulf at Africa. Some of his poems show his wish to re-enter the African womb.

## References

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