

Multi-Culturalism and Language: A Postcolonial Reading of Derek Walcott's Poetry

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Abstract

This paper entitled “Multi-Culturalism and Dialogue: A Postcolonial Reading of Derek Walcott's Poetry” examines the development of language in the West Indies, a multicultural society. We analyse how the incorporation of cultures introduced dialogue between the different cultures, examining the various manifestations of multilingualism in Walcott's poems as well as tensions that arise because of the multicultural nature of the society. From Walcott's approach to language, we establish that language is power and language is a strong cultural element that determines identity in a given society. When people share a common provenance or understand the same language, there is that possibility of natural bonding. That is why the West Indians had to merge their multiple languages to come up with creole. Some bilingual and multilingual cultures may end up creating division in a society if they do not find a point of convergence because there will always exist a minority which will be suppressed or assimilated. Walcott re-creates a society where everybody is equal and can communicate in a common language which the literate and illiterate, poor and rich can understand.

Key words: Multilingual; multi-cultural; postcolonial; culture

Introduction

We live in a multi-cultural world which has been shaped by the aftermath of history. The consequences of slavery and slave trade still lurk around several communities in today's world and greatly configure our ways of life. A major consequence is cultural diversity which has generated many advantages as well as disadvantages. Some of these disadvantages are seen in the inter-tribal/ethnic clashes that characterise certain societies. In Africa, we have countries like Nigeria, Rwanda and currently Cameroon which have, and still continue to struggle with the clashes that arise from their multi-cultural nature. In Cameroon, the last three years have witnessed clashes between the government which is predominantly French-speaking against the English-speaking minority who want to fall back on history and gain their original status as an independent nation and a former British Trusteeship Territory.

This paper is inspired by the cultural crisis that influences especially former colonies in this century. Using the postcolonial theory as a critical tool, we intend to examine the manner in which Derek Walcott, the 1992 Nobel Prize winner for Literature uses poetry to build bridges in his multi-cultural society. We see language as a major tool used to assert the Caribbean identity especially in the poems of Walcott. The society of Saint Lucia is a crossroad of cultures, languages and races; this linguistic and racial diversity is attributed to colonialism. The island alternated between France and England several times before finally being ceded to the United Kingdom in 1814. Due to these changes in the colonial government, Standard English, English Creole and French Creole are spoken in Saint Lucia. These are the three languages Walcott uses in his poems in order to portray the richness and advantages of cultural diversity. This paper explores the cultural diversity of the West Indies, depicting how dialogue and negotiations are used to reach a compromise and create a united community.

The volume of critical work on Derek Walcott is relatively significant considering his world-wide recognition and his status as a Nobel Prize winner.

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This study looks at hybridity especially in language as a force of building identity and unity as tenets of postcolonial theory that characterise Walcott's poetry. The uniqueness and unity of the society is based on the fact that it is not only as a result of its multicultural nature; we argue that unity can be created out of disunity if people from varied cultural backgrounds merge their differences to create a unified society. This research will establish that Walcott uses his multiple and complex beginnings to create a new identity and reconstruct a new unified nation.

Gareth Griffiths explores the challenge faced by Caribbean and African writers writing in the English language in *A Double Exile: African and West Indian writing between two cultures*, the title referring to the double-edge irony of writers exiled by language from the landscapes they write about, exiled by landscape from the language they are using. Resolving these multiple exiles is the main challenge for the post-colonial and the West Indian writer. In a recent text *Frontiers of Caribbean Literature in English*, Frank Birbalsingh argues for a revised sense of history as a technique for the West Indian poet, a tool to use rather than a solid, stable ingredient. It is working against rather than within the "bondage" of history that Birbalsingh believes may result in a renewed "colonisation in reverse." This progressive reversal of colonisation appears quite strongly in J. Edward Chamberlin's *Come Back to Me, My Language: Poetry and The West Indies*. He uses the Walcott's quote in the title as a door to understanding the gradual progression of his artistic voice. Chamberlin recognises the poetic act as a gift from the poet to the people, giving new freedom and courage to the Caribbean tongue, presenting Walcott in particular as a verbal emancipationist for the region.

Talking about Walcott's "wrestle with the complex of identity", Balakian delves into poems like "A Far Cry from Africa," "Ruins of a Great House," "Two Poems on the Passing of an Empire" which show his dual cultural nature as a "transplanted African in a colonial English society." Balakian praises Walcott's genius seen in his ability to embrace his identity and the language he has inherited. Using the English tongue does not blindfold him to the ills of the Empire against his people. Same is his reaction in "Ruins of a Great House", "The Gulf", "The Castaways", and "Elegy" where he sees the negative effects or flaws of the empire and struggles to adjust to the two worlds he loves.

The postcolonial critical perspective will be used in our analysis. According to Murfin, Ross and Supryia M. Ray in *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, this theory which developed in the 1970s involves the analysis of literary texts produced in countries and cultures that have come under the control of European colonial powers at some point of their history. In other words, it is concerned with literature written in and about countries that were colonies. The theory examines the cultural clash of these formerly colonised states; it can be traced from 1950 with its bedrock in the publication of Chinua Achebe's *Things fall Apart*, George Lamming's *The Pleasure of Exile*, Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* amongst other related publications.

According to Said in *Orientalism*, Literature emerging from former European colonies is a response to a euro-centric view on colonial texts; in other words, it is a counter discourse to European texts on former colonies and which debunks the pejorative world view presented by the coloniser against former colonies. Europeans wondered whether anything culturally and literary productive could ever come out of the "third world". Bill Ashcroft et al. in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* point out that:

Postcolonial theory involves discussion about experience of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, representation, resistance, difference, race, gender, place and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy and linguistics and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these came into being. (p.2)

The theory portrays the mind of the coloniser as he writes about his plights and how his personality was misrepresented by the coloniser in literature. The fact that post-colonial is related to the first contact between the colonised and the West shows that the historical movements have determined the currency of postcolonial discourse. Ania Loomba in *Colonialism and Postcolonialism* says "Postcolonial studies have been preoccupied with issues of hybridity, creolisation, metize in-betweenness, diasporas and liminality, with the mobility and crossover of ideas and identities generated by colonialism" (p.173). From the above, we realise that postcolonial criticism deals with a variety of themes or aspects which culminate to discuss the various elements propagated by the theory.

For the purpose of this work, we shall dwell on the concept of hybridity in relation to language and culture; this study discusses the use of language in creating a culturally united nation.

Multi-culturalism and Language

The language that Walcott uses originated from his experiences derived from his multicultural background which is the distinctive feature portrayed in his art. In Walcott's poems, multilingualism manifests itself in different ways: as different voices in a single poem; as variations in linguistic registers, either within a single poem or between a group poem; and as a dialogue between different cultures, for example African and European. These varied forms of expression exist within the postcolonial paradigm and reveal tensions between the poet and his culture. Walcott however, does not allow these forces to disappoint his poetry; on the contrary, he blends them to form a new and unique culture and language. Walcott's multilingual and multicultural acquired skills come as a result of his openness to the world through education as well as his career.

A key concern for Walcott is how many writers and thinkers in the Caribbean relate to the cultures of Europe, and indeed to the cultures of Africa? These questions challenge Walcott's work and prove to be particularly complex when connected with problems of history, race and language. Walcott calls himself a "single circling homeless satellite," (Walcott, 1986) which sounds absurd because he clearly has a home which is rich in varied culture. The feeling of actually being "homeless" is because his education had at least partially targeted Europe, while his racial demeanour and regional loyalty made him likely to remain a "satellite" and not a fully rooted to a unique region. It is this diversity that attracts many readers to Walcott: his recognition of European cultural influence and anchoring in the Caribbean at the same time was almost unprecedented at the beginning of his literary career

This blend of European and West Indian culture (which also embodies African culture) raises uncertainty of Walcott's authenticity as a postcolonial artist who can objectively represent his society through art. This worry about Walcott's authenticity is in line with Ngugi's school of thought concerning the postcolonial artist who he argues should completely reject the culture of the European metropolis and forge his art exclusively from local sources. Walcott is definitely against such a recipe because, like all other black men and women in the Caribbean, he no longer "feels at home" on the islands of the European colonial rulers. On the contrary, their position in the New World is as banished as that of White Europeans. (Walcott, 1965, p.35)

In the poem "Origin", Walcott portrays the relationship between the European, Americans and the Caribbean. When we read the first verse against the second, the gap left by the natives seems to be filled by Walcott as he emerges from nowhere: while the natives have disappeared, "blank pages" "turning the wind" The poet comes "unnamed" in the world, from "nothing" just after the explosive "explodes its waves", creating emptiness. However, "The Beautiful Race of Humans" emerge, creating a platform for dialogue which can take place between the poet and his people, as well as their native and non-European predecessors. From the title of the poem "Origins", we realise Walcott's goal to define who today's West Indians are and what cultural contexts have emerged from the society.

Even though the roots or genesis of the West Indians can hardly be traced, Walcott falls on language which he portrays as a mirror of culture; it emanates from singular cultures but gradually become multicultural as it comes across other languages. All modern languages have evolved through the interaction of multiple ethnic groups, speaking different languages or dialects, and the language as a product of those continual contacts reflects a single culture's positioning within the surrounding world. When West Indians inter-relate with the varied races and cultures that constitute their society, they develop a new language which they identify with and thereby forge a mirror of their culture that is unique to the local geography. The local language then ceases to exist because it now comprises a blend of Standard English or standard French which have been revived as a creole. There are overtones of Creole in Walcott's poetry because he realises that writing only in Standard English language makes him no different from native British writers; therefore, in order to assert his identity as a West Indian, he brings in words and names from native languages to enrich his writing style. This action is in conformity with the suggestions made by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* about the importance of native language in literature specifically as:

Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at their social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other human beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form of character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (p.16)

As an artist within the post-colonial era writing to empower his society and to boost the importance of native culture and language in literature, Walcott's style is unique in that he blends dialects with English to create an identity for himself, his people and most importantly, create a point of convergence and unity.

In the final two sections of "Origins," Walcott ponders further on the nature of the "new song" that has evolved in the West Indies, as well as on the lost connections between Africa and the West Indies. Keeping up the metaphor of Africa as a land of rivers and the Antilles as a seascape, the poet speaks of the relationship of his people to their ancestral tongue: 'We have washed out with salt/the sweet, faded savour of rivers' (Walcott, 1986, p.15). Indeed, contemporary West Indians now inhabit islands where Caribs and Taino once thrived, and though the voices of those natives have been silenced, a "new song" has risen up to fill the vacant space. This song, however, has only a shaky connection to Africa:

*The surf has razed that
memory from
our speech, and
a single raindrop irrigates the tongue. (Walcott, 1986, p.15)*

The New World experience, it seems, washes away nearly all relics of the ancestral culture but something essentially remains; something perhaps inexpressible, yet nevertheless present. The many voices, dialects and languages of Walcott's experience, of his native culture, have continued to be an aesthetic shaping force throughout his career, initially finding expression in poems most famously, in the closing interrogatives of "A Far Cry from Africa,":

*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? (Walcott, 1986, p.18)*

Walcott chose then, and continues to choose, to "give back what they give," that is; he chooses not to betray either one of his cultural heritages, but to embrace them both. The creolizing impulse has always been strong in Walcott, and it manifests in his verse as dialogue, both multivocal dialogue and dialogue with the self. Among the most dialogic of Walcott's early works is the sonnet sequence "Tales of the Islands". Most of the ten poems that make up "Tales of the Islands" are given titles, both in English and in French; for example, "Qu'un sang impur..." ("That an impure blood..."), the poet intersects standard English and colloquial speech, creating a dialogue that becomes discernible sometimes within a single poem, sometimes when reading one poem against another. Both types of dialogue appear in and around the sixth "chapter" of the sequence, with its forceful patois opening:

*Poopa, da' was a fête! I mean it bad
Free rum free whiskey and some fellars beating
Pan from one of them band in Trinidad,
And everywhere you turn was people eating
And drinking and don't name me but I think
They catch his wife with two tests up the beach
While he drunk quoting Shelley with "Each
Generation has its angst, but we has none"
And wouldn't let a comma in edgewise.
(Black writer chap, one of them Oxbridge guys.) (Walcott, 1986, p. 24-25)*

The creole vocabulary ("Poopa," literally means "papa," and "fête," means "festival"). Walcott may not actually be the "Black writer chap" that the speaker describes, but he does resemble "one of them Oxbridge guys" in the classical English education that he received at the University of the West Indies in Mona, Jamaica. Taken together, the poems of "Tales of the Islands" imply a linguistic pluralism both on St. Lucia and in the mind of the poet.

Indeed, language itself is an ideal tool for the multilingual poet, since virtually all languages draw on multiple other languages for some vocabulary and, occasionally, for grammar; this is particularly true of West Indian pidgins and creoles, since they have been influenced by European, African, and indigenous Caribbean languages.

In some of his poems from the mid-1970s, Walcott taps into his rich linguistic heritage to an even greater degree than he had in “Tales of the Islands,” sometimes to explore his linguistic and cultural origins as he had done in the aptly titled “Origins” and sometimes to define and promote his culture as it exists in the present. The multilingualism of language in the West Indies first emerges when the landscape alters the colonial language, but becomes amplified when another ethnic group alters the language yet again, creolizing those nouns and names:

*The African acquiesced,
repeated, and changed them.
Listen, my children, say:
moubain: the hogplum,
cerise: the wild cherry,
baie-la: the bay,
with the fresh green voices
they were once themselves
in the way the wind bends
our natural inflections. (Walcott, 1986, p. 307)*

The wind may indeed bend the “natural inflections” of the Afro-Caribbean community, in the sense that the geography and the European languages of that geography demand that black West Indians learn to speak differently from their ancestors, but they also, in turn, reshape the European languages. Whether French or English, whether “moubain” or “hogplum,” nouns become creolized, bent by the wind of African inflection. Moreover, the multiple and creolized languages of Walcott’s experience come to represent his very identity, and in these poems from the 1970s the poet begins to engage with his pluralist linguistic heritage. “Come back to me, /my language,” he pleads in “Sainte Lucie” (Walcott, 1986, p. 310):

*O Martinas, Lucillas,
I’m a wild golden apple
that will burst with love
of you and your men,
those I never told enough
with my young poet’s eyes
crazy with the country,
generations going,
generations gone,
moi c’est gens Ste. Lucie.
C’est la moisorti;
is there that I born. (Walcott, 1986, p.314)*

Walcott shifts back and forth between the standard languages of the metropole and the creoles of provincial St. Lucia, but clearly the power of the poet’s speech centres on the island, where all of the languages and linguistic registers intersect amid a creole culture and West Indian landscape. Indeed, “Sainte Lucie” constitutes another oath of allegiance to the island (“moic’est gens Ste. Lucie ... is there that I born”), like the ones Walcott had earlier sworn in “As John to Patmos” and the autobiographical “Another Life”, where he and his friend, modelled on the painter Dunstan St. Omer, pledged “that we would never leave the island/until we had put down, in paint, in words” every detail, however insignificant, of their homeland (Walcott, 1986, p.194). “Sainte Lucie” seems to be a reassertion of those earlier oaths, one that expresses the poet’s multicultural identity. Walcott strives to express his St. Lucian identity, whether he writes from another Caribbean Island or from his second home in the United States.

In his 1992 Nobel lecture, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” Walcott spoke of the convergence of language and the verbal arts especially poetry and drama in the West Indies, claiming that both are products of exiled communities:

“Deprived of their original language,” these communities “create their own [language], accreting and secreting fragments of an old, an epic vocabulary, ... but to an ancestral, an ecstatic rhythm in the blood that cannot be subdued by slavery or indenture.” As he has long done in and through his poetry,

Walcott asserts in the lecture that reassembling these linguistic and cultural remnants is “the basis of the Antillean experience, this shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards of a huge tribal vocabulary, these partially remembered customs, and they are not decayed but strong” (Walcott, 1992, p.70).

In Walcott’s work, Daniel Defoe’s Crusoe character, “the namer”, comes to represent all West Indian writers, whose “utterances, (whose) words, when written, are as fresh, as truly textured, as when Crusoe sets them down in the first West Indian novel”, although their ancestral language lies incomplete, “behind them, borne from England, from India, or from Africa”.

Indeed, the West Indian experience is a diasporic experience, and in that sense, every community has been shipwrecked like Crusoe. Regardless of his or her ancestry, the West Indian poet faces the fragmentation of tradition.

Conclusion

The study of language in relation to Walcott’s poetry by critically examining the multicultural nature of the society and language has enabled us to assess language acquisition in the West Indies which qualifies the region as a polyglot society in which language is one of the major cultural elements that defines the individual’s identity. The route of language acquisition in the West Indies greatly varied because of their colonial history and the hybrid nature of the society which led to the birth of “Creole”, a blend of the various cultures that has fashioned a unique language. We have also seen how members of the poet’s society communicate in spite of their linguistic variations and how language keeps evolving as a platform for cultural renewal. This study of language in relation to Walcott encourages cultural diversity and equality of cultures in today’s world thereby deconstructing the idea of a superior language, culture and race because this only leads to division and destruction of communities.

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