

**A dilemma of Caribbean Populace: Post-Colonial conflicts and Identity crisis in
Derek Walcott's Plays**

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ABSTRACT

Today, it is said that the colonial age is over, and the new age is called “postcolonial”. However, the traces of colonialism can still be observed in the postcolonial period, for colonialism opened a big wound in the psychology, culture and identity of the once colonized people. Thus, the major themes in the works written in the postcolonial period have been the fragmentation and identity crisis experienced by the once colonized peoples and the important impacts of colonialism on the indigenous. Nobel Prize laureate Derek Walcott, a victim of colonial legacy has represented these conflicts in reference to Caribbean region with depth and self-evaluation through his writings. In this paper I will examine the identity crisis and fragmentation undergone by West Indians in the postcolonial age with reference to selected works of Derek Walcott.

Keywords: Postcolonial, Colonialism, Fragmentation, Identity crisis

Introduction

Today, it is said that the colonial age is over, and the new age is called “postcolonial,” meaning “coming after colonialism.” However, the term “postcolonial” is a problematic one since to many people it may connote “a concern only with the national culture after the departure of the imperial power” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1). Post-colonialism is an interdisciplinary movement that endeavors to reform the panorama of those colonized countries. While its point of exodus was to examine the lost identities and languages else it turned out to be a rich and multilateral interdisciplinary area under which one can investigate into many concepts and issues with new approaches and views. For example, the perception of nationalism, race, identity, language and marginality are all being explored into, each time deciphering new things through postcolonial academic studies. Thus, it will be better to understand the term “postcolonial” in the way that

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin describe it. They point out that the term should be used “to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression” (2).

The traces of colonialism can still be observed in the postcolonial period, for colonialism opened a big wound in the psychology, culture and identity of the once colonized people. The meeting and mixing of completely different cultures in the colonial period led to a great identity crisis and fragmentation in the postcolonial age during which culture is seen as a battleground where postcolonial indigenous and colonizer identities all the time to fight each other. Thus, the major themes in the works written in the postcolonial period have been the fragmentation and identity crisis experienced by the once colonized peoples and the important impacts of colonialism on the indigenous.

Synchronization of West Indians in Post-colonial Literature

During the colonial age, the Western world created a hierarchy, which put Westerners at the top of the colonized to separate the two culturally different groups as the colonizer and the colonized. Western colonization was founded upon binary oppositions such as “the colonizer and the colonized, the Occidental and the Oriental, the civilized and the primitive, the scientific and the superstitious, the developed and the underdeveloped” (Prakash 3). That is to say, the line between the colonizer and the colonized was drawn clearly with many adjectives and stereotyping by the Western world and the colonized were put into a “subaltern” position.

However, after World War II ended and many colonies became independent, art, literatures and cultures of the indigenous people flourished ; colonial cultures and characteristics mixed with “indigenous traditions, myths, and mores,” in the end, giving way to a new type of work, which is called “the postcolonial text” (Mohanram and Rajan 4). In postcolonial writing, the experience of the once colonized is told again from the point of view of the once colonized “Third World” people. As Young notes, postcolonial cultural critique re-examines the colonial history from the “perspectives” of the ones who experienced its impact and its important role in contemporary social and cultural areas. Postcolonial criticism studies this colonial history that defines the present condition of the postcolonial countries, and postcolonial writers rewrite their own histories.

For example, in *Orientalism*, like many other postcolonial writers, Said discusses the condition of “the Oriental” confronting the West and argues that because of the European colonial discourse, people who were once colonized are still in the margins. He writes: “such locales, regions,

geographical sectors as ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’ are man-made” (132). In other words, in order to define the differences between the “East” and the “West” more clearly, Westerners created the “Oriental” as “the other.” Said also emphasizes that Europeans maintain the idea that “the Orient existed for the West” (143).

Brydon and Tiffin define decolonization in terms of both getting rid of the “trappings of imperial power and looking for non-repressive alternatives to imperial discourse” (12). To express the same thing differently, postcolonial literature rejects Western literature as “the norm,” and postcolonial writers have developed a totally new kind of outlook and perception in which there is no way of discrimination that makes use of concepts like “margin” and “centre.” In this sense, it may be without reservation argued that postcolonial writing and postcolonial criticism question the Eurocentric ideas and give voice to the postcolonial people who experience severe cultural problems.

Postcolonial theory deals with “doubleness” in terms of identity and culture, which, as a problematic legacy of colonialism, affects postcolonial peoples. In this diversity and hybridity, the colonized have lost their original selves. The present condition of the once colonized is nothing more than a fragmented state, which comes to mean that the indigenous people are devoid of a unified self. They do not know exactly who they are and where they belong because they show the characteristics of both their own cultures and the western culture. For this reason, it may be stated that they are, in Bhabha’s words, in the “third space,” “the *in-between*” where “we will find those words with which we can speak of ourselves and others. And by exploring this hybridity, this ‘Third Space’, we may elude the politics of polarity” (209). Those once colonized are multicultural people, and colonized cultures cannot be considered “pure”; rather than pure, they are heterogeneous cultures. Colonialism, even though it is said to have ended, has left its traces in the postcolonial age making the colonized cultures a mixture of Western and indigenous qualities.

At the age of this cultural chaos and identity crisis, place and displacement turn into issues of central concern in postcolonial literature. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue that it is at the point of displacement that “postcolonial crisis of identity” emerges (8-9). As a result of the experience of the imposition of Western style and culture on indigenous cultures and of the problematic meeting of two different cultures, a great clash eventually leading to an internal conflict in the indigenous people may be observed: One may become alienated from one’s surroundings together with one’s own self with the result that the healthy, unified self-changes into a split, fragmented, rootless and dislocated one.

Post-Colonial Dilemma of Caribbean

Today, the postcolonial Caribbeans are face to face with such great problems as mentioned above. The Caribbean is “a place with no stable cultural origin” (Bongie 23). Considering this fact, it will not be wrong to argue that West Indians have 8 fragmented postcolonial identities. As Samad points out, the West Indian whose self is a “heterogeneous entity” has been acting the role given to him/her by “other ‘cultures,’” and the West Indian has accepted the role “uncritically” (Samad 227). The new role that the West Indian has assumed is nothing more than a “mimic man” (Samad 227). It is this mimicry that makes the West Indian identity “neither one nor the other, but a distinctive fusion of the two” (Juneja 242). The fusion of different cultures creates confused minds. About this, Bongie points out that the island can be thought to be “a fragment,” a non-completed “ex-isle, a loss of the particular”; hence, the island is the metaphor of an identity “in exile” and the place of “a double identity” (Bongie 18).

It is this legacy of British colonialism that causes the contemporary identity problems in the West Indies. The exile feels as if he/she belongs to nowhere, as if he/she is a stranger to his/her own country as well as to other people. In the 1950s and 60s, as the “islands prepared for and moved into independence, so too did the calls for an indigenous Caribbean theatre, free from the taint of colonial influences” (Balme 181). It is obvious that even after gaining their independence, the West Indians of different national and racial origins continued to be influenced by European values and characteristics.

The poet and playwright Derek Walcott from Trinidad, in St. Lucia has become a great literary figure among postcolonial writers. Walcott’s literary work gives us a foretaste of the making of contemporary Caribbean identities, and critical analysis of his writings might help in understanding the struggles in identity-making in a context of a colonial legacy of global socio-economic and political inequalities.

Delving into Nobel Prize laureate Derek Walcott’s plays is a dive in the depths of the Caribbean past, present, and futures. Walcott explores in his writing the dilemmas of identity-making in the colonial and postcolonial Caribbean. Saint-Lucia, a Caribbean island has faced several centuries of colonialism under French and British control and achieves its independence in 1979. The intricate relationships between the colonized and the colonizer and the ways in which the Caribbean is gashed between different places and loyalties are central themes of Walcott’s writing. His works include the Homeric epic poem, *Omeros* (1990), which many critics view "as Walcott's major achievement. He has published more than twenty plays, the majority of which have been produced by the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, and have also been widely staged elsewhere. Many of them address, either directly or indirectly, the liminal status of the West Indies in the post-colonial period.

Symbolization of Identity Crisis and Fragmentation in Derek Walcott's Writings

One of the acknowledged works of Derek Walcott is *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*: In *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*, the themes of colonization, identity and the ancient theme of good versus evil are prevalent. Ti-Jean is the youngest of three brothers and is the “Dreamer” in the family whose life revolves around his island home and his family. All that changes when he and his two brothers, Mi-Jean and Gros-Jean, are challenged by the Devil to make him feel human emotion: anger, compassion, weakness... It is a bet that only the Devil can make: he who succeeds gets riches and happiness, he who fails will suffer eternal torment. Symbols also include each character who is inadvertently a symbol for a wider group in society. The Bolom is a symbol of the strangled, deprived and abused nation, the devil represents the colonial masters and each brother represents a different type of people in the nation at different intervals. Ti-Jean of course, being the one (or group) that will eventually lose the shackles of colonialism on the nation.

Another most famous Walcott's work is *Dream on Monkey Mountain*: It is based on the cultural and racial dilemma that the characters encounter. Makak, the protagonist of the play, is a character who is ashamed of his black color and who wants to be like a white man. At the heart of *Dream on Monkey Mountain* is a search for and acceptance of one's identity. When Makak is questioned at the beginning of the play, he cannot tell Corporal Lestrade his real name or much about himself. To the question, “what is your race?” Makak replies, “I am tired.” Makak tells the corporal, Tigre, and Souris that he has not even seen his reflection in thirty years.

The plays that Walcott wrote through the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s deal with the “changing social patterns” observed in the West Indies after the independence: One of the most interesting of these is, no doubt, *Pantomime* which reveals the complicated identity problems in the contemporary Caribbean as the two characters, Trewe and Jackson, performing Friday and Crusoe, continuously shift from one role into another. This condition raises many questions in the reader's mind such as who the real Crusoe or Friday is, if Jackson is the black servant to the white master, Trewe, or if he is a black master to a white servant. In fact, the play reflects the complex identity crises in the Caribbean islands through Jackson and Trewe, who sway between master and slave identities. It is, in this respect, the representation of the repeated problem of the colonial master and slave relationship together with the white and black binaries and polarities – this time in the postcolonial period – in a reversed form.

English is the language through which oppression and humiliation were practiced on Caribbean people. Therefore, the idea that people are perpetually forced to use the language of the

oppressor to express their life and their problems creates many incongruities in the Caribbean's sense of self-identification. There are different approaches through which people try to set their identity freely, but the most significant was the trend of creating a national language which is basically a modified version of English. However, *O Babylon* is a play in which Walcott discusses the status of language in the Caribbean on two levels: on one level, the allegorical story of a Rastafarian community (who succeeded in creating their own language, but were forced to live secluded on the mountains) reveals the impracticality of creating a national language which will only take its people to live in isolation. On the other level, Walcott's text is a practical example of a beautifully written English text that bears a lot of resemblance to the Caribbean culture and peculiarity.

Walcott's *Remembrance* concerning national identity among the Caribbean people. In this play, Walcott presents the life of a simple Trinidadian family seven years after independence. Through such a family Walcott highlights the three major factors that affect national identity in the Caribbean, which are: the myth of Great Britain as a carrier of civilization, the general disappointment in the new government and the strong wave of American cultural imperialism. Yet, Walcott's positive attitude of acceptance is presented through the character of a young actor in the family who chooses to stay inside the country, and understands the difficulty of its political situation.

Henri Christophe by Derek Walcott is set in Haiti in the years immediately following the slave revolt that drove the French colonists from the island. The leader of the revolt, Toussaint L'Ouverture, was hoodwinked by Napoleon's agents and spirited off to France, where he died in prison. His absence led to a power struggle among the remaining leaders – a struggle that forms the material of this play. The first “winner” of the deadly game was Jean-Jacques Dessalines; after his demise, the country was divided between Pétion's rule in the South and Henri Christophe's in the North. Christophe was a revolutionary hero, dedicated to freeing his people from French oppression but he was also unable to envision power outside of frameworks that mimic white style and structure.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, I point out the idea that Walcott's view of identity is too great to be restricted to the Caribbean society per se. I believe his works to be beneficial for studies of identity all over the world

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