



A Dream of self-identity in Derek Walcott’s “Dream on the Monkey Mountain”

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ABSTRACT

It is the strong sense of self that makes one to know his/her goals, values and ideals. Self-concept, self-esteem and self-ideal are factors that define one’s sense of self. Therefore, if one’s sense of self-identity is unknown, it leads one into the crisis of the right ‘sense of self as revealed by Derek Walcott. For Walcott the past colonial and racial divisions constitute the crux of Caribbean self-identity crisis and the divided nature of the postcolonial self is central to Walcott’s intellectual quest. Thus recurrent themes of most his works revolves around issues of self-identity crisis and the devastating impact of colonialism experienced by the once colonized West India. This paper examines Walcott’s dream of self-identity amidst Makak’s arsenal of complexes and self-loathing as expressed in *Dream on the Monkey Mountain*. It adopted Postcolonial theory in analyzing the play and Frantz Fanon’s perspective in exploring Walcott’s play as Makak the protagonist in the play reveals how the search for identity in his dream is actualized in reality. The paper concludes that the play is a true reflection of a postcolonial text that uses the past to create a new literary tradition that befits the Caribbean new identity and existence.

Keywords: Caribbean, Postcolonial, Dream, Self-Identity, New-Identity, Derek Walcott

INTRODUCTION

Derek Alton Walcott is a prominent poet, playwright and painter, born at St. Lucia in 1930, an Island in the Caribbean region that formally belongs to British Empire, but gained independence in 1979. He is the founder of Trinidad Theatre Workshop and has written a great number of plays for this workshop. He was a mixed black, Dutch and English origin. St. Lucia had a hybrid British and French influence and it was an island belonging to British and France alternatively. Walcott explores in his writings the process of identity-making in the West Indian colonial and post-colonial era. The intricate relationship between the colonized and the colonizer and the ways in which the Caribbean self-embraces and split between different places and loyalties are central themes of his writing. Some of his publications include; *A Cry from Africa* () *Arkansas Testament* (1987) *T-Jean and his Brothers*,(1970), *Dream on the Monkey Mountain* (1970) *The Sea of Dolphin* (1970) and several other works.

To Derek Walcott “Caribbean people are new arrivals who have had to reconstruct their identities having lost most of what they had in the transmigration from the Old World...”A situation where the slave ancestors have been dispossessed of their motherlands and forced to live in an alien and hostile milieu in which they are meant to feel racially and culturally inferior. The deep seated sense of inferiority complexity and lack of confidence became intensified by the focused of colonial education which

encouraged further amnesia and shame about African past and pushed the blacks towards accepting Europe a good and better than. Commenting on the burden of depressing and hopeless West Indian history Rose Acholonu observes that; “the dehumanizing influence of colonization...is damaging as it is permanent.” As Walcott, puts it; “The sigh of history rises over ruins, not over landscapes, and in the Antilles there are few ruins to sigh over, apart from the ruins of sugar estates and abandoned forts.” (Walcott, 1992, p.5)

The Caribbean literature is unique and interesting. Edward Baugh describes it as; “postcolonial literature.”(13) However, its literature is largely a response by individual writers who hold different views about the West Indian history, while some are apologetic about its history: some reject the West Indians and claim Africa as their ancestral and spiritual home; others reject the concept of Africa and take their cue from Europe. Walcott pontificates that:

...history is not only that which is celebrated by “ruin of castles and forts but is also the chronicle of the past, of the common man and his deeds, the fisherman with his mongrel walking on the beach... you who feel the pain of history-less; look at the work patterns, dances, the dreams, the songs and the memories of your forefathers, analyze these and you will be writing your history (13).

Walcott further insists that, it would be abhorrent to him to say “I wish we were English again,” that the reality is that one has to build in the West Indies” (285). His position as one of the great Caribbean writer became vindicated in 1993 when he gets the world’s literary acclaim; he won the Noble Prize for Literature. This great literary achievement according to Julia Udofa; “Apart from being a reward and recognition of an individual excellence, it is also a celebration of Caribbean literature and since literature is a celebration of life the Noble prize indirectly proclaims and recognizes Caribbean life as valid and authentic” (59). This invalidates the claim that history exerts a definitive influence on the creative imagination. It is evident that Caribbean man can live down the vagaries of history and transcend his milieu.

To Walcott, Caribbean writer breathes two different traditions, namely the African and the European traditions. He affirms; “I am a kind of split writer; I have one tradition inside me going in one way, and another going another. The mimetic, the narrative, and dance element is strong on one side, and the literary, the classical tradition is strong on the other.” Obviously, such a split reality has various consequences for the ways in which the colonized can think of itself, particularly for Walcott, whose mixed racial heritage highlights the historical dilemma between races. In his best known poem *A Far Cry from Africa* he grapples with the issues of conflicting loyalties and asks:

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, who choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live (26-33).

The search for self-identity is the ultimate to Walcott, as he postulates; “...how can people be free and claim to be independent when everything they own, think and believe is not inherent to their culture or the forbearers? According to Stuart Hall; “...this ‘Oneness’ underlying all other, more superficial differences, is the essence of ‘Caribbeaness’ ... It is this identity which a black diaspora must discover, excavate, bring to light and express through cinematic representation” (223). In his epic poem *Omeros* he has given Homeric Epic as a postcolonial twist to establish an identity for the oppressed people. Consequently, the most relevant aspect of his plays *Dream on the Monkey Mountain* is the quest for self-identity. Patrick Colm Hogan reveals that: “Walcott devotes most of his paly to exploring the absolute valorization of whiteness and the absolute devaluation of blackness...” (107). It is against this

background that this paper explores his visionary dream for self-identity in *Dream on the Monkey Mountain* in order to reveal the problems that the alienated Caribbean encounters in his/her search for self-identity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study focused on issues of the Caribbean's identity crisis hence adopts postcolonial theory to investigate colonial impact and its legacy in Caribbean from post-WWII to the present day.

METHODOLOGY

Being a literary research this study is mainly library based. For a thorough understanding of the analyzed text the study relies on critical sources such as articles, reviews, books etc.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Self-identity is the character determining who or what a person or thing is. It is how a person views, identifies and defines his/herself. It is a perception of specific and selective traits, qualities, abilities and characteristics that represent one. Chambers Concise Dictionary (2009) defines Identity as; "...who one is, the way he/she thinks about his/herself, the way one is viewed by the world and the characteristic that defines one. According to Brian Crow and Chris; "The desire to confirm a vital sense of identity and self-worth is a quest by many whose cultural legacy is one of subjugation and oppression." The concept of identity emerges from collective group consciousness that imparts a sense of belonging derived from membership in a community. As subjective phenomenon, it imparts to individual, as Isajiw (35) indicated a sense of belonging and to the community a sense of solidarity which is a vital need of human existence." Isaiah Berlin (19) also pointed out the vital part belonging to plays in human life:

...just as people need to eat and drink, to have security and freedom of movement, so too they need to belong to a group. Deprived of this dimension of life they feel cut off, lonely, admonished, unhappy. To be human means to be able to feel at home somehow with one's own kind (35).

The fact is those who see themselves as an apology to humanity because they believe that Western culture is superior to theirs to Frantz Fanon it is as a result of 'psychological inadequacy' as they try to be as white as possible by adopting Western values. Also to Fanon they are suffering from; "epidermalization inferiority and epidermal schema" while Homi K. Bhabha views this as "mimicry" which is the internalization process of colonial oppression and bodily embodiment of racial oppression implanted on the colonized people by Western systems. Consequently impersonating Western or colonizer's behaviour and style becomes one of the dilemmas of recognizing one's sense of identity as revealed by Walcott.

Post-colonial literature on the other hand is a literature composed by authors that critique Euro-centric hegemony. Ashcroft E.T explicitly states; "that the concept of post-colonialism is to examine the process and effects of, and reaction European colonialism." Nasser Dasht Peyma aptly observes that; "Walcott's works are typically postcolonial in the sense that they acknowledge the blend of European and African heritages that have influenced the development of identity in the Caribbean." Thus, justifies the theoretical framework of the study. Hence, the search for identity constitutes the principal theme that permeates throughout his Play.

A Dream of Self-Identity in *Dream of the Monkey Mountain*

The play is a complex allegory concerned with racial identity reflected in Makak's dream in which he finally discovers his self-worth as a black man. In the play, Walcott unveils tension between the cultural heritage of the old world and the newly emerging traditions of the new one. Syeda Saba Batool describes Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* as: "a representative play that projects the emasculated psyche of the black Caribbean living in a world where self-identity, in Lacanian term, is an ever-elusive signified" (625). For Dwaipayana Mitra, Walcott did not only describe the psychological emasculation of the

colonized but also affirms the dignity and identity of the colonized through decolonization of the mind” (55). The play is a symbolic play that works with different symbolic elements such as an allegory of the state of blacks in the Caribbean and generally in the postcolonial world. It is a ritualized play set in the West Indies, combining carnival conventions, fantasy, and voodoo to explore the deep unconscious sources of indigenous identity.” It depicts the protagonist, Felix Hobain a man whom everyone calls **Makak**. He also has forgotten his name and has been lost between the falsehood identities of Monkey and Lion.

In prison, the play opens with a prologue with two prison cases on either side of the stage, that of **Tigre** and **Souris** in one cell and that of the old Black Makak in the other. **Corporal Lestrade** a mulatto and an agent of the oppressive system of the white colonial rule arrests **Makak** for being “drunk and disorderly! An old man like that! He was drunk and he mash up Alcindor café.” **Lestrade** looks down on the Black prisoners and condemns and describes them as; “...animals, beasts, savages, cannibals, niggers” (216). He orders them to stop turning the place into a stinking zoo. **Lestrade** being seduced and brain washed by the colonizers and colonial system and as an agent of colonial rule perpetuate the system by helping to keep the masses in check. He presents the Black as:

In the begging was the ape and the ape had no name, so God call him man. Now there were various tribes of the ape, it had gorilla, baboon, orang-outan, chimpanzee, the blue-arsed monkey and marmoset, and god looked at his handiwork, and saw that it was good. For some of the apes had straightened their back borne and start walking upright, but there was one tribe unfortunately that lingered behind and that was the nigger (218).

In court, he orders **Makak** to mention his name, status, occupation, ambition, domicile, age and race. Makak replies that he forgets his name, he belongs to a tired race and his denominational affiliation is Catholicism. When **Makak** lift up his head as mouth piece of the colonial hegemony, **Lestrade** jerks it back wildly because **Makak** is a Black native. **Makak** has forgotten his name which relates his self-image, self-esteem and individuality and that of the Blacks. **Lestrade** gloating over his presumed superiority, he proves through interrogation that Makak is an ape, an imitator that must be told how to behave and what to do” (85-86).

Lestrade postulates:

My lords, as you can see this is being without a mind, a will, a tribe of its own. I shall ask the prisoners to turn his hands... I spare you the sound of that voice, which have come from a cave of darkness, dripping with horror. These hands are the hands of Esau, the fingers are like the root as hard as twine and the palm are seamed with coal but the animal, you observe, is tamed and obedient...(222)

Walcott in his "Note on Production, asserts that; “the play is; “ ...a dream, one that exists as much in the given minds of its principal characters as in that of its writer, and as such, it is illogical, derivative, contradictory.” The protagonist of the play is identified by a derogatory name, Makak, which in Haitian Creole means monkey. Part one of the play opens with an epigraph taken from Jean-Paul Sartre’s Preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. As the epigraph depicts that the play engages the black colonial psychosis and the way to get out of this psychosis which is Derek’s dream in the play.

In the play, **Lestrade** loudly declares the charges against Makak in details but Makak admits he is an innocent old man who wants go home. Thus **Makak** asserts; “...I am an innocent old. Send me home **Corporal** I suffer from madness. I do see things. Spirits do talk to me. I all have is dreams and they don’t trouble your soul” (225). This recounts his encounter with an apparition in lyrical language far more superior to **Lestrade’s** mimic language. **Makak** reveals that:

Sirs, I am sixty years old, I have live all my life/Like a wild beast in hiding. Without child without wife, people forget me like the mist on Monkey Mountain. Is thirty years now I have look in no mirror, Not a pool of cold water, when I must drink, I stir my hands first to break up my image. I see the woman singing and my feet grow roots, I could move no more A million silver needless prickle my blood, like rain of small fishes. The snakes in my hair speak to one

another...and I behold this woman. The loveliest thing I see on earth I like the moon walking along her own road (226).

Makak's speeches characterize his abjectly poor and self-doubting man as a gifted maker of words. In his speech; "he has not look into mirror for thirty years and when he wants to drink from a pool of water he stirs it first." Obviously colonialism has ingrained, or epidermalized **Makak**, a situation Fanon described as; "donning white mask over black skins resulting in a duality and experiencing a schizophrenic atmosphere, a sense of inadequacy and insecurity." The arsenal of inferiority complexes" is so deep within **Makak** that he cannot look at his reflection and realize that he is an animal, a beast, a savage, a cannibal or a nigger. He is the exact opposite of Narcissus who kept staring at reflection in a pool until his death. Not until he rids himself of the feeling of inferiority that he will be able to embrace his sense of self and realize his worth. **Lestrade** sees **Makak**'s vision as a mere hallucinations and the rage for whiteness that does drive niggers mad.

Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skin, White Masks*, describes this in detail and stresses that the desire for white women is easily seen in black men. The apparition, the white woman of **Makak**'s dream, appears, at the end of his speech. This apparition, whom he alone sees, and which makes **Lestrade** and the other two prisoners think that he is mad, inspires him: **Makak** on his knees reveals that:

Lady in heaven, is your old black warrior, The king of Ashanti, Dahomey, Guinea, Is this old cracked face you kiss in his sleep appear to my enemies, tell me what to do? Put on my rage, the rage of the lion.

Makak, the sixty-year old broken-down man, suddenly becomes a warrior, a king, who wants to defeat his enemies, the colonizers who are responsible for his plight. His speeches dramatize his belief in his own ugliness inscribed on him by decades of imperial oppression and he is craving for beauty and vision that can give him a purposeful life. **Makak** falls at the end of the prologue and his delirious dream begins. This is the dream for self-identity which Derek crave for his play.

Scene one of the play is set in **Makak**'s hut on Monkey Mountain. **Moustique**, Makak's only friend whose name means mosquito in French, arrives to wake him up to go to the market to sell charcoal. **Moustique** at first does not believe in **Makak**'s dream. He is the colonized man who accepts totally the inferiority willed in him by the colonizer. He mocks the mask, an element borrowed from carnival which represents the white woman for Makak; "This is she? Eh? This cheap stupidest black children putting on!" (229). In spite of this, reaction **Makak** still repeats his long lyrical description of his encounter with the apparition but in prose this time. Moustique refuses to accompany him on his quixotic quest to Africa. He agrees, however, when Makak uses blind force with him, he agrees upon coercion since colonialism taught him to obey under coercion, even though he is not convinced of what he is doing. With this, the scene ends and the quest begin. **Makak**, however, does not undertake healing through his knowledge of bush and herbs. He does so through his prophetic powers and through burning coal. (The use of coal is a clear indication of **Makak**'s wish to give value to the thing he is associated with and, thus, value to himself. Since coal is made from trees, there is a geological conceit linking **Makak**'s description of the people as uprooted trees to his exhortation during the healing: You are living coals, you are trees under pressure, you are brilliant diamonds, In the hands of your God" (238).

Makak, at this point, claims that his powers are local, that they are rooted by divine authority in the soil of his home in the West Indies: Like the cedars of Lebanon, like the plantations of Zion, the hand of God planted me on Monkey Mountain. The people, in contrast, are trees like a twisted forest, like trees without names a forest with no roots! Makak asks them to believe in him and in themselves, to break the inferiority complex rooted in them by decades of colonial oppression: He asserts that; "...And believe in me. Faith, faith! Believe in yourselves. Nothing happens, and for a moment it seems that his efforts have failed. Makak blames that on the people themselves: Let us go on, *compere*. These niggers too tired to believe anything again. Remember is you all self that is your own enemy." **Makak**'s words, as Breslin suggests, recalls his answer to **Lestrade**'s question in the prologue; "What is your race

WIFE: The old woman's husband **Josephus** had, snake bite, and they called the priest and everything. From the edge of his bed he could see hell. Then **Makak** arrive-praise be God. And pass his hand so twice over the man face, tell him to walk, and he raise up and he walk. And before that, he hold a piece of coal, so in his bare hand, open and the coal turn into a red bird and fly out of his hand. The schizophrenic psyche of the colonized native is revealed when **Makak** says; "treading their own darkness. Snarling at their shadows, snapping at their own tails and devouring their own entrails like the hyena eaten with self-hatred" (279).

In the play **Makak** holding **TIGRE** and **SOURIS** and near-weeping with rage, he says:

Drink it! Drink it! Drink! Is not that they say we are? Animals! Apes without law? O God, O gods! What am I, I who thought I was a man? What have I done? Which God? God dead and his law there bleeding? Christian, cannibal, I will drink blood. You will drink it with me. For the lion, and the tiger, and the rat, yes, the gentle rat, have come out of their cages to breathe the air, the air heavy with forest, and if that moon go out . . . I will still find my way; the blackness will swallow me. I will wear it like a fish wears water . . . Come. You have tasted blood. Now, come! (283)

Makak leaves with his newly found companions. His perspective changes in preparation for his climactic act before the end of the dream. **Makak** says; "if that moon goes out . . . I will still find my way; the blackness will swallow me. I will wear it like a fish wears water . . . Come." (288) He no longer needs the apparition, the white woman, in other words, his desire for whiteness, to lead him. What leads him now is the darkness he saw in Moustique dying eyes, racial violence, which dominates part two of the play. The scene ends with **Lestrade**, who was only wounded slightly, ready to hunt down the fugitives. His last speech summarizes the reasons colonial systems keep the colonized in a state of servility. In the play **Lestrade** imbibed the mimetic of the white denying his own self-identity. The following conversation between **Lestrade** and **Basil** in the play is instrumental in bringing out the hollowness of this slavish imitation. Thus: **Corporal:** my mind. What's happened to me? **Basil** it was never yours, **Lestrade** (297). The **Corporal** becomes aware of his Blackness and joins **Makak's** dream of going to African movement. Bruce King in his book, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life* rightly observes; "Walcott's Dream on the Monkey Mountain was about the West the Corporal now accepts black identity and admits his African origin...he becomes an advocate of the Black race's law and confesses his fragmented consciousness. Indeed, **Corporal's** action is a manifestation of liberating self-actualization. A situation Fanon described as; "Black Consciousness of retrieving their self-esteem, dignity and freedom thus resume their rightful place as respectable members of the world community." **Corporal** affirms in his ignorance:

Too late have I loved Africa of my mind . . . I received thee because I hated myself, my eclipse. But now in that heart of the forest at the foot of Monkey Mountain . . . I kiss your foot. Monkey Mountain . . . I returned to this, my mother. Naked trying very hard not to weep in the dust, I was what I am, but now I am myself . . . I sing the glories of Makak! The glories of my race!... O God, I have become what I mocked. I always was. Makak! Makak! Forgive me, old father" (299-300).

The deification in (scene iii, part-2) follows with dream within a dream. Transporte to Africa, **Makak** accepts his position as an African monarch. The **Corporal** rejects his colonial uniform and wears African robes. **Makak** sets up a court to pass judgment on the enemies of Africa who have dominated over the Blacks. **Basil** reads out the names of the offenders who common crime is their 'whiteness', the enemies are condemned to death because they have contributed to the repression of the Blacks. **Basil** again mentions a catalogue of tributes offered to **Makak** from the white world. But **Makak** shakes his head and all the tribes reject those tributes. Even the dead Moustique is not exempted; he is executed for betraying **Makak's** dream. Finally, the figure of the apparition of the white goddess who made **Makak** aware of his African origin is brought before him. **Makak** beheads the apparition of the white goddess at the instigation of **Lestrade**. He reveals:

She is the wife of the devil, the white witch. She is the mirror of the moon that this ape looks into and finds himself unbearable. She is all that is pure, all that he cannot reach. You see her statues in white stone, and you turn your face away, mixed with abhorrence and lust, with destruction and desire. She is lime, snow, marble, moonlight, lilies, cloud, foam and bleaching cream, the mother of civilization and the confounder of blackness. I too have longed for her. She is the color of the law, religion, paper, art and if you want peace, if you want discover the beautiful depth of your blackness, nigger, chop off her head! When you do this, kill Venus, the Virgin, and the Sleeping Beauty. She is the white light that paralyzed your mind that you into this confusion. It is you who created her, so kill her! The law has spoken (319).

In the epilogue of *Dream on Monkey Mountain* Makak awakens from his dream and is still in the jail. He now discovers his essential self. He remembers that his legal name is **Felix Hobain**. In fact **Makak** regains his true self-identity. Turning to them, he says:

God bless you both Lord, I have been washed from shore to shore, as a tree in the ocean. The branches of my fingers, the roots of my feet, could grip nothing, but now God, they found. Let me be swallowed up in mist again, and let me be forgotten, so that when the mist open, men can look up, at some small clearing with a hut, with a small signal of smoke, say, Makak leaves there. Makak lives where he has always lived, in the dream of his people. Other men will come, other prophet will come, and they will be stoned, and mocked, and betrayed but now this old hermit is going back home, back to the beginning, to the green beginning of this world. Come, Moustique, we going home (326).

CONCLUSION

Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* articulates the remedy for inferiority complex through decolonization of the mind. It engages the black colonial psychosis and all sorts in trying to hold up an alternative world for the black Caribbean a world free from the influence of colonizers. Indeed the play expresses Walcott's redemptive dramatic affirmation of the psychological freedom from the enslavement of the West Indian man. For **Makak** to free himself from the way the system represents him in the play, he had to regain his lost sense of self. Describing in Catherine Doulet's aptly Walcott as "A writer whom Plato would have repudiated from his republic, because he makes various critical commentaries on the Caribbean contemporary socio-cultural situation in his writing and also investigates the postcolonial experience, probing and revealing its discontents, ambivalences, struggles for power and dignity as well as its various points of disconnections and tensions in the local and global context (12). No doubt, the play epitomizes what Fanon admonishes, 'recreating of one's history through rewriting of one's story.'

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