



NEGATIVE CAPABILITY IN THE POETRY OF DEREK WALCOTT

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ABSTRACT

Derek Walcott occupies a unique position in the world of West Indian poetry. His uniqueness as a poet relies in his sincere commitment to his native place and native people. Though he was against all kinds of oppression of the native people by the colonizers he treated his themes most brilliantly with modesty. He took the common people as protagonists or even heroes in his poems. He represented them all in their suffering but their dignity and heroism lie in their ability to bear suffering. This paper deals with how simple the themes that Walcott has chosen including the persons and places and how great the themes he turned into. This is what meant by negative capability of Walcott.

Key Words: *West Indian poetry, West Indians, Caribs, Arwaks, The Africans, The Europeans, The Spanish, The Portuguese, The Colonizers, Exploitation, The Poor and The Common people, Native people, Slavery and Suffering, endurance, Beauty and Strength, Heroes, Negative Capability.*

INTRODUCTION

Derek Walcott occupies a unique position in the world of West Indian poetry. He had natural love and attachment to the people of West Indies in general, his island home St. Lucia in particular. His imagination always used to be filled with his immediate surroundings. He had been sensible enough to see his people with great love and admiration since childhood. He took up his poetic career with a great devotion to his island home and with a great commitment to his people. He realized his primary obligation to his people as well as his

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country. Speaking about his people and the obligation of him as a poet in an interview with Edward Hirsch in 1985, Walcott said:

I knew that the poor people around me were not beautiful in the romantic sense of being colourful people to paint or to write about. I lived, I have seen them and I have seen things that I don't need to go far to see. I felt that, that was what I would write about.¹

His poems do not reveal any kind of prejudice against Africans or Europeans. In his view whoever they may be, whether they are Spanish, English, or African or European, when they were born and brought up there, they should have some obligation to serve their people and their soil. But people who were born and brought up in West Indies were differed from each other on account of their different racial connections, on account of their different origins of Africa, Europe, Britain, Spain and China or India. They forget their primary obligation to serve their birth place West Indies. Instead of seeing it a birth place, they see it is place of punishment. People of African origin they see Africa their home, the Europeans see the European countries like England, Spain, Portugal as their homes. They totally forget their primary obligation to their birth place West Indies. Ideologically Walcott is against all those who thought whose birth place is as a place of punishment or is a place of exile. Walcott's deep love and attachment to his native place St. Lucia most powerfully echoes in the following line:

But to Curse your birth place is the final evil²

Serving his people, and soil, in some way or other seems to be the sole aim of his life. The indivisible love of Walcott for his people is illustrated here in this line.

We can hear the affirmation of Walcott's aim as a man as well as a poet here. These lines are very crucial to understand the depth of love he had for his people and the weight of responsibility he felt for his people. It is his undivided love and attachment for his people and for his soil which made Walcott a unique poet among all the West Indian writers. Those who try to define the poetry of Walcott only on racial terms would surely miss the reality about the people of West Indies. Most of his poems written about his people do not idealize them or glorify them, or beg sympathy of others for them instead, they describe actual reality about his people with all their strength and weaknesses.

For Walcott, West Indians mean not just the African descent who were born and brought up there in West Indies but also those people whose ancestors came from India, China, The Middle East and Europe by chance or choice or by force and settled down there and live along with the native tribes like Arwaks and Caribs in the islands who are part of West Indies. Being a man of integrity, he cannot view them separate from each other on their



racial or ethnic grounds. Instead of considering they are separate from each other, he considers them to be West Indians. He believes in the unity and integrity rather than in division. Therefore we can find him loving Africa and Europe alike.

As far as the people are concerned Walcott's preference always seems to be with the common and ordinary. He loves his people and his place with utmost sincerity. His keen observation of men and manners shows his depth of sensibility as a man, as well as a poet. A number of poems related to his people only reflect the poor and the common men and women in West Indies. Poor fisher men, pig farmers, workers, common folk, peasants, taxi drivers, coal carrying women, char coal burners, carpenters, cripples, dancers, singers, dreamers, philosophers, artists, and people with number of eccentricities are part of his creation. The other poets who wrote about the people of West Indies wrote only about their slavery and suffering. It is Walcott who discovered the hidden beauties, talents and sensibilities and strengths of his people. His epic length poem "Omeros" is a landmark not just in the West Indian literary scene, but it is a land mark in the world of English literature. He made the poor and the common fishermen to be the heroes of his epic. Their strength is their power of enduring pain. The whole poem is a celebration of his birth place as well as his people. Whereas the other writers wrote about slavery and suffering under the colonial rule, Walcott defines the true spirit of West Indians. While taking the facts such as slavery and others into consideration, Walcott defines the strength of his people, at the same time he is very objective and open in speaking certain deficiencies of his people. Walcott never seems to be creating a false image for his people but he seems to present them as accurately as possible through his poems. He represented the problems of the common man. He criticized the colonials for their inhumanity. Yet he never hated them or had revengeful feeling against them. He criticized the politicians of local governance for their separatist and cruel tactics played on the poor and innocent people. He also criticized the corrupt nature of politicians who make his islands into tourist spots and who make his people slaves in another form. Such is the love and commitment of Walcott for his people.

The European colonial world or the rest of world may look at West Indies, as a birth place of slavery and darkness and the people of West Indies to be most uncivilized and barbarous, and that they deserve such in human treatment for making them civilized. But it is Walcott, who noticed the strength and power of ancestral negro slaves who were imported into West Indies. The poem "A Sea Chantey" is one of the famous poems of Walcott which is a kind of celebration of the islands and of the life of the islanders. It celebrates the strength of the islanders and also repudiates indirectly the false notion of the European colonizers that there were no people there in West Indies before European settlement and, it were they who discovered the land first. They were the founders, creators and heroes of the West Indian history. It is Walcott who presents the heroic nature of West Indian ancestors by offering a picture of people facing most powerful hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, storms at sea and

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facing strange creatures of the deep sea. The following lines would illustrate the heroic spirit of islanders thus:

In feverish waters
Of the seafarer's islands,
Their shorn, leaning palms,
Shaft of Odysseus,
Cyclopic volcanoes,
Creak their own histories.³

Epics were written around the national heroes. Every advanced country has interpreted its history to reinforce its national pride. Almost all the colonial countries have their national heroes. The slave traders and the bloody adventurers have become national heroes. Drake, Hawkins, Raleigh, Morgan became the heroes of the West Indian history and they were worshipped. The real significance of the people of West Indies were subsided and submerged in the false colonial interpretations. Even there were certain epics, about the people who conquered the world with their swords, who occupied the land and seas and who commanded the land and seas with violence. It is Walcott who interpreted his islanders in the right spirit. The islanders who stood against the perilous storms in seas and who faced volcanic eruptions are no less heroic than the epical heroes of the world. In the same poem "A Sea Chantey" a reference is given to the islanders' tradition, "a young sailor is playing /his grandfather's chantey/ on trembling mouth organ" that the young sailor learns to play his mouth organ from his grandfather, Walcott's intelligent way of suggesting a tradition almost in defiance of the view that their islands have no history to be proud of, can be seen here.

Most of his poems related to his islanders or his people who celebrated the real virtues of the poor and the common men in his islands. Because, they were marginalized slaves in the history, they were wrongly interpreted that their history was only slavery, and they were ignorant of power and they were tamed up by the British or other European colonizers and they were taught religion and education and civilization by them. Walcott gave a dispassionate and objective delineation of reality about his people. Besides virtues, there are number of poems that would describe the innocence, ignorance, poverty, illiteracy, superstitions and other backward traits of his people as the present paper focuses only on the strengths and the heroic nature of the poor and the common people it will not focus on the inadequacies of the people of West Indies in general St. Lucia in particular.

The people he represents in his poems are not the kings, queens and valiant Knights or royal dignitaries but poor fisher men, taxi drivers; char coal burners, drunkards and so on. He never despises his people for any reason, even though they have their own lapses. The following



lines would reveal not only the attachment of Walcott to his people, but also reveal his literary agenda in future thus:

These dead, these derelicts,
that alphabet of the emaciated,
they were the stars of my mythology.⁴

The poem presents a wide variety of characters from West Indian soil. The portrayal of characters in the poem reminds one of Chaucer's "The Canterbury tales". The depiction of each character is so lively and interesting. Some of the characters are even addressed by their nick names. Chapter 3 of the poem "Another Life" contains a list of characters arranged in an alphabetical order with a fine introduction to each character. The stars of his mythology even contains: "Ajax/lion-coloured stallion from Sealey's stable,/by day a cart horse, a thoroughbred/on race days, once a year,/plunges the thunder of his neck, "Berthilia/ the frog like crippled crone,/ a hump on her son's back is carried/ to her straw mat", "Choiseul /surlly chauffeur from Clauzel's garage,/ bangs Troy's gate shut!" "Gaga,/the town's transvestite, housemaid's darling," "Helen?/ Janie, the town's one clear-complexioned whore/ with two tow headed children in her tow,/she sleeps with sailors only," "Joumard,/the fowl-thief with his cockerel's strut," "Ligier,/ reprieved murderer, tangled in his pipe smoke" and "Uncle Eric/ sits in a shadowed corner,/ mumbling, hum-eyed,/ writing his letters to the world," are only some of the stars of his mythology. The characters in his epic length poem "Omeros" seem to have been created from his stars of mythology. If one observes one or two characteristics of the stars of his mythology, one would certainly get impressed by the realistic delineation of the people in the poem by Walcott.

There are plenty of instances that reflect the living conditions of islanders. Whatever be their living conditions, they have their own significance, and Walcott tried to present them as they are. There are certain poems which reflect the people who are hardworking and whose faith in church will never falter. Those who believed that these innocent black people were taught religion, culture and civilization by the European colonizers would certainly realize the falsity of their belief. The islanders received the worst treatment and the utmost inhuman treatment from European colonizers, they suffered even after they have got self-governance. They accepted all the suffering in silence and they never give up their faith in God. They never blame anyone or anything for their fate. Walcott was so impressed as to say about his islanders in the poem "Saint Lucie" thus:

on Sundays
between adorations, one were there,
if one were there, and not there,
looking in at the windows



the real faces of angels.⁵

In the view of Walcott they are angels, because their true devotion can be seen in their eyes and in their innocent faces. Those who thought that they had taught these innocent people religion and civilization had become corrupt, too much selfish and profit seeking priests. They adapted various ways to exploit these innocent people. Even for the French priest or for the English priests earning has become their primary preoccupation. The following lines would illustrate this point, thus:

They had all caught the missionary fever:
they were prepared to expiate the sins
of savages, to tame them as he would tame this river
subtly, as it flowed accepting its bends;
he had seen how other missionaries met their ends—
swinging in the wind, like a dead clapper when
a bell is broken, if that sky was a bell—
for treating savages as if they were men,
and frightening them with talk of heaven and hell. ⁶

We can understand, the colonial priests were clever enough to frighten these innocent people with their talk of heaven and hell, which the innocent people were not familiar before. They manipulate these innocent people in a number of ways. The main motif behind the establishment of missionaries is conversion, at the same time commercialization of religious services. Cultural dominance is another factor behind these religious services. But the innocent people would go to churches only with devotion in their hearts. We can understand by now, that Walcott's keen observation, his kind consideration of the conditions of islanders, the way he protested against the prevailing exploitive trends of the colonizers in the poems discussed so far.

The following lines illustrate his introspective thought regarding his people thus:

Abandonment was something they had grown used to.
And I had abandoned them, I knew that there
sitting in the transport, in the sea-quiet dusk,
with men hunched in canoes, and the orange lights
from the Vigie headland, black boats on the water;
I, who could never solidify my shadow
to be one of their shadows, had left them their earth,
their white rum quarrels, and their coal bags,
their hatred of corporals, of all authority. ⁷



As far as the poems of Walcott related to his people are concerned, they always revolve round the poor men and the common men and we can understand they are the major pre-occupation of Walcott. He never identifies himself with the rich and the affluent. He confines himself to his closest surroundings, where one would find these common men. They are the real human beings in the view of Walcott. They want nothing other than love and a human touch. Though they suffer poverty, they never become corrupt. The following lines describe the honesty of his islanders:

Then, a few yards ahead, the van stopped. A man
shouted my name from the transport window.
I walked up towards him. He held out something.
A pack of cigarettes had dropped from my pocket.
He gave it to me. I turned, hiding my tears.
There was nothing they wanted, nothing I could give them
but this thing I have called, "The Light of the world".⁸

Here Walcott was overwhelmed with sympathy and love for the sincerity of the man from the transport window, who gave him back his pack of cigarettes that he had to hide tears. The tears were pooling up from his eyes because of his deep felt gratitude for his people and their simplicity and their sincerity. He is able to find in them the real "Light of the world". One can understand it is Walcott, who discovered the real strength of his people, and who presented it to all those who thought of his islands to be dark, and its people to be uncivilized and barbarous masses. There may be superstitions, there may be illiteracy, there may be poverty, there may be hundreds of other deficiencies yet they have sincerity, they never deceive any one, but they may be deceived; it is the greatness of his people. Walcott's observation of minute things and the simpler facts about his people, considering those things, receiving the importance and significance of those simpler things shows his depth of observation and sensibility as well as his love and understanding of his people in the true spirit. There was a misconception that the West Indian islanders were slaves; their culture was slave culture, their history was nothing, they had to receive everything from the world but they have nothing to offer anything to the world. It is Walcott who has shown through his poems that they too have personality, they too have dignity with all human emotions. It is Walcott who found the true "Light" in them and he indirectly suggest to those who had very low opinion about his islanders that there is a light in them and the world can receive it from them.

Their cultures were shattered, their beliefs were mocked at; their gods are thrown away, their wealth was plundered, their labour was exploited, their love was exploited, they were subjected to a number of exploitations during the colonial rule stand even after the self-governance established, but they never leave their elemental simplicity, they have not lost their faith yet, they are only slaves in the view of the world. Their creative energies were



killed, and their aesthetic sensibilities were oppressed. It is Walcott who discovered their innate strength and their creative power. The poor consideration of the European world about his people and about their cultures and convictions most powerfully echoed in the following line:

Our myths are ignorance, theirs are literature. ⁹

It is the common view of the world about West Indies and its people and this feeling might have set a foundation in Walcott to write his great narrative “Omeros”. The whole poem seems to be an assertion of his gratitude. It is a poem that seems to have been written for celebrating his birth place St. Lucia in particular and the West Indies as a whole as well as its people. He seems to give a complete utterance about his soil as well as his people. The poem reflects the unending struggle of his people to live everyday life among risks and dangers on the sea and off the sea. The beauty and heroic nature of these people exists in their power of endurance. They are not the ignorant and barbarous but they are hard workers. Their simplicity and hard work and graceful behavior make them all the more heroic than the kings and emperors who could expand their empires by the powerful swords.

The poem “Omeros” presents a number of facts about the culture and convictions of the islanders. Their beliefs, customs, myths, folklore and traditions were drawn most effectively by Walcott. The aboriginals, the explorers, slaves, indentured labourers and the colonists and every other who happens to be a part of West Indian soil has been given a voice, especially the marginalized people have been given voice. The poem focuses on the lives of the marginalized, Walcott wants to reveal their virtues, their struggle for life. Even the people of Europe who shared the colonial legacy, who settled in West Indies being unable to leave the place because of the attachment they grew up with the soil even after the withdrawal of the colonial rule are also treated impartially, sympathetically. West Indian culture is a synthesis of many cultures, its identity is a collective identity or synthesis of the Europe and Africa. Therefore one should believe in their birth place rather struggling to establish separate identities as Africans or Europeans or the English. Therefore the progeny of aboriginals, slaves, explorers, indentured labourers and colonists became the part of the narrative. The protagonists in the poem may move anywhere in search of their identity but ultimately they realize that they have their base as well as their roots in West Indies because it is their birth place after all. Achilles, the protagonist in the poem “Omeros” realizes this fact. Even Major Plunkett realizes this fact. The wound of Philoctete would get its healing only in his birth place. The cultural wound is only healed up by Makilman with some native herbs. Till then he would not get healing. The magical power of the place would heal up his wound. Their culture, convictions, beliefs and everything is centered in their birth place. Walcott’s representation of the folklore of his people can be found as Philoctete, Hector, Achilles and their mates pay homage to the spirits of trees, for their violation of cutting them to make canoes. They believe that these trees contain the spirits of ancestral tribes which would



protect them and see their safe sail by accompanying them in the form of canoes. Their lives are closely associated with the trees and rivers and the islands. Their association with such natural elements such as sea, rivers, forests and their deep faith in them reflect their culture. The poem presents how much struggle the poor marginalized people do need to have to lead their lives. Their emotions are not different from the heroes of the great epics. There is struggle and suffering in lives of the protagonists. The life of Achilles is not so easy, his everyday life is connected to many risks and dangers on the sea. Even in his personal life to win the heart of Helen he has to strive very hard. Hector, who has lost his Canoe, has broken his affiliation with the sea life and broken his friendship with Achilles for Helen, also equally become restless. His restlessness brought him an abrupt end to his life. The racial wound of Philoctete and her perpetual suffering is no less. The stinking smell of the wound made him an alienated soul. He also suffered equally as any other. Plunkett's hidden love for Helen, both for the woman and the island also has so much suffering. But they face their lives in the face of risks and dangers on the sea as well as in the sea of life. Helen also suffered because of her divided love for two persons Hector and Achilles. She has been a subject of a great unrest and conflict between two fishermen. In the depth of emotions, in their dignity, in suffering and in restraint they are no less to any other heroes of the renowned epics of the world. The aim of Walcott is not glorifying their heroism, but presenting them as they are. Walcott's purpose of writing this narrative poem "Omeros" may be summed up in the following lines:

I sang of quiet Achille, Afolable's son,
who never ascended an elevator,
who had no pass port, since the horizon needs none,
never begged nor borrowed, was nobody's waiter,
whose end, when it comes, will be a death by water
(which is not for this book, which will remain unknown
and unread by him). I sang the only slaughter
that brought him delight, and that from necessity—
of fish, sang, the channels of his back in the sun.
I sang our wide country, the Caribbean sea.
Who hated shoes, whose soles were as cracked as a stone,
who was gentle with ropes, who had one suit alone,
whom no man dared insult and who insulted no one.¹⁰

Here we can find the dignity of Achilles in these lines. The dignity of the whole islanders and nature of the people is most powerfully described in these lines. All the characters were delineated with sympathy and love. Even the people from Europe or Africa have been given an impartial human treatment by Walcott. The poem has many references to the African and European cultures. The handling of the folklore and the native culture are highly admirable. However, there are number of parallels run between the characters of the poem "Omeros"

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and the epical characters of Europe. As far as the European influence is concerned, the title of the poem “Omeros” itself is a Greek name. The names of the protagonists Achilles, Hector and so on are Greek names. No other writer of West Indies has chosen such complex subject as a theme for their epic narrative. Even there are other writers, they write about only suffering, but the internal potentialities of these marginalized people were never given an adequate expression. The poem conveys one message, it is a message of human integrity, in place of division he suggests integrity, in place of conflicts he promotes harmony, in place of differences and discrimination he promotes co-existence. The poetic lines which have been considered so far provides ample evidence to establish the gift of negative capability of Walcott as a poet.

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