
Hybridity in Derek Walcott's poems: Self-identity and Passive Resistance

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I. Introduction

The term "hybridity" is one of the main ideas of Homi K. Bhabha, who puts the emphasis on the relations between the colonizer and the colonized in his *The Location of the Culture* (Bhabha). He claims that hybridity serves to teach how "a range of class, culture and occupational forces" together with different ethnicities and people can become one entity (Bhabha 41). Hybridity and double consciousness are also clearly portrayed in other literary works where poets share their ideas about in-betweenness during the postcolonial period.

Derek Walcott, a Caribbean poet, and playwright is famous about the harsh legacy of colonialism, the difficulties colonial poets faced through his living and writing in two different cultural worlds. Born on the island of St. Lucia in the British West Indies, once educated in Jamaica, having lived in Trinidad, having been poet-in-residence at several American colleges and universities, Walcott introducing the speakers as a hybrid identity in his poems, is not a surprise for the readers. The main characters in majority of Walcott's poems deal with divided identity dilemma, where they feel a sense of belongingness to their original backgrounds (African tribes and Caribbean islands) while at the same time favoring cultural Englishness. Most of his poems are written in binary opposition where he faces the psychological conflict of rather favoring English language and rich English culture or criticizing fierce British colonial discourses.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss Derek Walcott's several poems in detail in terms of hybridity during the postcolonial period. His poems are analyzed in two different sections. First, the speaker's divided identity in "A Far Cry from Africa" is studied thoroughly where he has a sense of ambivalence whether to love or hate colonizer's culture as well as his relationship with homeland, Africa. Second, Walcott's passive resistance and self-awareness using the through the help of language works as a tool to stand against the colonialism in hybrid way.

II. Divided identity

Being born in Caribbean, Derek Walcott still included Africa and its tribes in his poems. The goldsmith

from Benares, the stonemason from Canton are the characters who are portrayed in the poem “Names”, or when the poet does not know “How [he] can turn from Africa and live” in “A Far Cry from Africa”, the reader can feel a strong connection between a Caribbean writer and Africa. When Edward Hirsch asked about the Caribbean poet’s specific relationship with Africa during the interview with Walcott in 1977, Walcott answered “There is no West Indian, who is black, or even who is not black, who is not aware of the existence of Africa in all of us” (285) saying that he was closely related to Africa with his heart and through his poems. “A Far Cry from Africa”, published in 1962, tells about the Mau Mau uprising that happened in Africa during the 1950s. Falcı, also mentions that the poem “troublingly and productively charts the complexities of postcolonial subjectivity during the moment when independence movements and colonial wars reshaped the political substance of Britain’s colonial world” (46) Although the poem provides the historical the bloodstained war between the British colonizers and the indigenous Kikuyu tribes in Kenya that happened in the early 1950s, the main issue that the poet discusses is his ambivalence toward his postcolonial hybrid identity throughout the poem. The colonizers were invading majority of African lands brutally and native people of Kikuyu tribe rose against the colonizers vigorously under Mau Mau organization. The atrocious battle ended with the death of a large number of native people of the African tribe together with some white troops. And Walcott blames not only the colonizers, but the ethnic people for their violent response to the British troops and thus, I believe the speaker shows his ambivalent, uncertain feelings not knowing which side he entirely turns into.

The speaker in “A Far Cry from Africa” turns out to have mixed feelings towards the British colonizers. Regardless of the victimization and abuse towards his people by the colonizers (in Africa), he also cannot completely hate them as he has learned a lot from them. Speaker’s love for the English culture and the English language leads him into the state of in-betweenness when he says “Where shall I turn, divided to the vein? / Between this Africa and the English tongue I love” (Walcott, lines 27, 30) Although being born in Africa, the speaker learns the colonists’ language which is English and that language opens the new wonders to him as he gained cultural enrichment and proper knowledge, thanks to the education of the colonizers. Even with oppression and brutality, the British Empire “realize the necessity for interesting themselves more deeply in the education of the indigenous people and the importance of creating an overall education policy to move African education forward in the desired direction.” (Urch 253) The speaker considers himself as a divided identity not knowing which side to turn into, Africa, his homeland which has suffered from the violence of the colonialism or the British Empire that has taught him the language and the education.

Derek Walcott’s “A Far Cry from Africa” speaks about the racial as well as cultural problems happened during the colonial occupation in Africa and the speaker in the poem is believed to be Walcott himself. Walcott’s family is of Dutch, England and African decent that he is divided in his own identity. Walcott’s hybrid identity is also clearly portrayed in *The Schooner Flight*, where he clearly claims that:

I’m just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,

I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
And either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation. (40-43)

The speaker, being a red nigger, could have "a sound colonial education" because of the colonialism (41). However, even with this strong educational background, and with several identities he has through his ancestors and race, he can still be a nobody, "within the normative, white model of the British subject" as Falci says (52). Being a nobody or a nation, and its link with the education is ironically described in the poem as Walcott also can be lost within his education not knowing where his identity belongs to.

Walcott eloquently criticizes the violence made by both the colonizers and the ethnic tribe, knowing that the colonizers could also become the oppressed. The speaker in the poem is "poisoned with the blood of both [nations]" (26). The specific word "poisoned" is cleverly used to show he is negatively affected by the brutality of not only the British colonizers, but also the Kenyans who killed "the white child hacked in bed" inhumanely (9). African tribes' fierce attack towards the white people is also not welcomed warmly in Walcott's poetry as that attack made the colonizers even more inhumane. Harsher and more cruel response by the British colonizers is compared to Nazi fascism in the poem, who brutally incarcerated "expandable... Jews" during the Holocaust, here making the African people like Jews (10). The speaker, failing to find the peace while both of his nations keep doing more and more violence, ends up with dilemma "where shall [he] turn, divided to the vein" (27). Walcott's speaker in the poem faces the perplexity from the cruelty of his own African tribe as he asks himself "How can I face such slaughter and be cool? / How can I turn from Africa and live?" (32-33). Even with his close connection to both the British and African roots, he is left in the middle without knowing where to go, which side to favor. On the one side, it is his home, Kikuyu tribe who started the rebellion and the violence, while on the other side it is England with its abundant culture and language and by choosing the one side, the speaker may end up condemning the other. At the end of the poem, the speaker still hesitates to decide his choice, seemingly a struggle he will face throughout his life because of colonialism.

However, even though Walcott shows the cruelty and violence of both his African and British sides to each other at the first stanza of the poem, still he does not portray his hybrid identity in a negative way. It is impossible for him to turn away from his African origins, but at the same time he cannot ignore the English literacy he received through the colonial culture. Instead, "there is an attempt to resolve the contradictions and bridge the cultural differences (Malas, 1). He tries to narrow down the gap between them, admitting the cruel history but also the rich cultural accumulation of both African and European sides, by recognizing the hybrid nature of his identity without forgetting its colonial past.

III. Passive Resistance

Even though, the poem "A Far Cry from Africa" is written against the strict colonial ruling of the

British Army and to emphasize the slaughter of Kikuyu tribe during the Mau Mau rebellion, the language of the poem (English) together with its traditional metrical patterning portrays the poet's resistance towards colonialism in a unique way. The poet uses "the English tongue [he] "loves" (30) which is the official language of the colonists to stand against the brutality of colonialism. Although, England showed violence and ferocity to the colonies (including Africa in the poem), English language with its great cultural heritage taught him knowledge and self-realization which urged him to use English language to resist against colonialism. Walcott says that "it was a privilege to grow up as an English colonial child because politically and culturally the British heritage was supposed to be mine. It was no problem for me to feel that since I was writing in English, I was in tune with the growth of the language, I was a contemporary of anyone writing in English anywhere in the world" (Hirsch, 282). Thus, with the advantage of the sound colonial education, Walcott explores the hybrid nature of his self and uses the specific poetic form (closely linked with the colonizer's poetic form) to express the cultural oppression of British colonialism.

The poem is written in three stanzas and it consists of 33 lines. The first stanza consists of 10 lines, while the second and the third one has 11 and 12 lines, respectively. While, a casual reader cannot observe the increasing length of each stanza in a glance, a detailed analysis can show that the poem is not just simply written in a traditional poetic form which is a commonplace for English poetry. However, with just a slight difference in the form, Walcott makes his move to show the resilience against the colonialism in his own way. Interestingly, when translated from Italian, stanza stands for "room", however this room can also be understood as prison cells for some poets. The form of the poem is also interlinked with colonialism in a sense where the English language can be the tool for expressing one's own opinion and at the same time unavoidable tie with British colonizers. Walcott uses almost traditional poetic form in his poem to address the fierce nature of colonialism with a slight change in the poetic form because he is not simply describing the Mau Mau uprising to the public, but as a person who saw the colonial brutality in Caribbean himself, he could not become just an observer in this poem. Instead, he added an individual touch to the poem, making the stanza lines increasing from the previous one (10-11-12 lines in the first, second and third stanza, respectively) which justifies why Walcott is closely related with African nation.

The poet illustrates British imperialistic ill treatment of British empire but at the same time not showing ethnic people as a victim. He keeps the state of in-betweenness, and this state can be found in the poetic form of the poem too. "A Far Cry from Africa" is written in uniquely formed iambic pentameter which shows the deep connection of the poet with British poetry. Traditionally, iambic pentameter is a type of metric line that belongs to English poetry and drama, that is seen both in early forms of English poetry as well as the later forms, where famous English poets including Shakespeare also used this metric line in most of his sonnets. Although the poem starts with traditional iambic pentameter in the first lines, however, it does not necessarily follow the pattern through the whole poem. For instance, the beginning of the 2nd stanza is:

Threshed out | by **beat-** | ers, the | **long rush-** | es **break**
 In a | **white dust** | of **i-** | bises | whose **cries**

Have **wheeled** | since **civ** | **iliza-** | **tion's dawn**
From the | **parched riv-** | er or | **beast-teem-** | ing **plain.**

where the poet utilizes four stresses in each line and interestingly, none of those stresses follow the standard iambic pentameter and instead, the lines are written to have their unique rhythm different from the iambic pentameter. Such differentiation in the form of the poem proves the bond between Derek Walcott and British poetry, which is pretty versatile, wherein one hand the poet cannot entirely give up his deep knowledge and love into the English poetry, but at the same time to show that this deep knowledge is learned through the cultural oppression of English colonization, he creates his own unique form in tradition iambic pentameter verses.

Walcott as a postcolonial poet uses the "writing back" notion to stand against the fierce legitimacy and dramatize the power of the colonizers. Through using the colonizer's official language and its poetic traditions in an unconventional way, Walcott achieves to portray the savagery of the colonizers without favoring the cruelty of ethnic tribes. Traditionally, the metaphorical meaning of the meter itself shows the restrictions used by the colonists in the colonized places in Africa. Colonized people had to follow the strict rules of the British Empire and the colonizers made them feel inferior and second-class citizens in their own homes whereas the colonizers announced themselves as the dominant culture of the society with their language and even religion. Peter P. Ekeh in his studies mentions that:

"The successful ideologies used to explain the necessity of colonial rule was the emphasis placed on what was described as a backward ahistorical past. Africans, according to this view, should be ashamed of their past; the only important thing is in the present. Missionaries openly told Africans that ancestor-worship was bad and they should cut themselves loose from their 'evil' past and embrace the present in the new symbolisms of Christianity and Western culture. Indeed, Africans were virtually told that the colonizers and missionaries came to save them, sometimes in spite themselves, from their past." (97)

However, Derek Walcott, not following the traditional metric pattern in his poem, strikes against the strict ruling of the British colonizers. Specifically, Walcott writes: "I who have cursed / The drunken officer of British rule, how choose" (28-29). The former two-foot line, which is not completely suitable for iambic pentameter, displays his protest towards English colonialism, while the latter line proves that protest against "British rule" as if he is cursing the British rule through not following the meter that the colonists imposed during their occupation. The ongoing tension between Walcott's love into the English culture and language and the oppression against the indigenous communities by the English colonizers urges the poet to create the distinctive poetic form in the poem to show the hybrid nature of postcolonial poets.

IV. Conclusion

Walcott writes about hybridity and double consciousness initially used in W.E.B Du Bois's essay, where the individual faces an inner conflict as the result of oppression and sufferings from the colonizers. In Walcott's poems, the speakers face the dilemma of choosing either their own cultural decent (the colonized countries) or the dominant British culture. Through his works, he tells the readers about his long-lasting battle between his love and affection of English language, and at the same time, this language, being the oppressor's native tongue, displays his hybrid identity showing the cruel past of colonialism. The speaker in "A Far Cry from Africa" as well as the other oppressed people from British colonialism who at the same time have connections with English culture during the colonial period, cannot escape from the dilemma of choosing the motherland or English culture and end up with hybridity, a state of in-betweenness. The poem ends with the speaker facing the dilemma of choosing his native land or the England and English language, leading him into the state of in-betweenness, creating a hybrid identity. The specific poetic form of the poem also describes Derek Walcott's position on colonialism where the poet shows his strike towards the colonizers through writing in traditional English form, but with slight individual change. That change is clearly shown in the number of increasing lines in the stanzas as well as the basic structure which nearly follows the traditional meter in English poetry. Overall, in "A Far Cry from Africa", Derek Walcott emphasizes the hybridity of the colonized communities, and at the end of the poem, the speaker still stays in the state of in-betweenness and cannot celebrate his hybrid identity, but instead stays unable to settle his conflict cultural identity.

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