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RESEARCH

LANDSCAPE AS METAPHOR OF HISTORY IN TIME AND SPACE IN DEREK WALCOTT'S POETRY.

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Abstract

The history and culture of the Caribbean are inextricably linked to landscape. Memories of Caribbean history as a kind of Caribbean consciousness is developed through discourse in which "imagined geographies" deplore a sense of a connect between regional and temporal space, with a sense of the sublimity of the cultures. The context of landscape in Caribbean discourse created an aesthetic that initiated a seamless unity between society, history and culture. The vision of the New World as perpetually tied to historical times is the concern of Derek Walcott and other Caribbean writers. The idea that the landscape has mythical presence, historical associations and elemental connotations which became part of the Caribbean consciousness, and the bases for the definition of the Caribbean man is the idea captured by Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, etc. Landscape in this work connotes the cultural, psychological and socio-political and historical elements. This affirmative vision of the landscape imbued with history; the sense of that feeling for the land, and a responsiveness to its history can be a meaningful way of rooting oneself, and of acquiring an identity. Derek Walcott comes to terms with this issue of history and memory of the ancestral past in Caribbean historiography. This sense of history in the Caribbean world-view of Walcott's poetic universe emphasizes exploration of the self and landscape, especially in his earliest collection – juvenilia - of *25 Poems* (1948). This visionary inquest in Derek Walcott's select poems is what this paper sets to interrogate. This study adopts the Eco-critical theory in the analysis of the studied poems. This theory establishes the relationship between the environment and man and the connect between the socio-cultural in a literary text.

Key Words: Landscape, culture, history, Caribbean, consciousness, aesthetics, vision.

Introduction

The context of Caribbean historical and literary writings is woven around the complex issues of enslavement, colonialism and forced migration. The psychological degradations that resound in all literatures that discuss the Caribbean societies are the responses to the complexities of West Indian history, evident in the perplexing coexistence of beauty and evil featuring as fundamental facts of existence in that society. While other writers degraded the Caribbean landscape and society as drab and barren, Derek Walcott projects prospects of positive developments. He transcends the historical and personal dilemmas due to his compassionate vision that pervades his poetry. Walcott works out a constructive harmony from an otherwise soul-deadening landscape by resolving and transforming acrimony into an enlivening beauty. Hitherto, as noted by Bruce King, Caribbean "poets had learned how to describe the local scenery, but it was only during the forties that landscape was used as symbol of personal feelings" (118). However, in Walcott, landscape has gone beyond the expression of personal feeling: it has become the essence of his poetic vision, "… because landscape is for him the tablet on which history in the Caribbean is written." (Davis, 241). In this sense, landscape is an instrument of narrative stimuli. It facilitates in the narrator the regurgitation of the lived experiences through being the interweaving power of the speaker's intuition.

The use and application of the term 'landscape' in this paper goes beyond the physical geographical expression of the term. It includes the natural land-mass, and also takes on the literary connotations to holistically include the totality of all the essential features of what makes a society. In other words, landscape is used in this work to connote the cultural, historical, socio-political and psychological landscapes that exist within the Caribbean society – landscape is not just the natural environment, but also the various aspect that constitute the society. It portrays the general situation in which some peculiar activities which include human relationships and other socio-cultural activities in a given society are expressed or realized. The history and culture of the Caribbean is inextricably linked to landscape. Memories of Caribbean history as a kind of Caribbean consciousness is

developed through discourse in which "imagined geographies" deplore a connect between regional space and place, with a sense of sublimity of the cultures: landscape created an aesthetic that initiated a seamless unity between society and culture.

Kenneth Ramchand sees "landscape as a stabilizing force and a continuous presence in Walcott's works" and adds that "we cannot read very far into Walcott's early poetry without meeting descriptions of landscape and an attempt to relate and compare human concerns to its varying aspects" (115). As Walcott develops his writings, he affirms that "this wild love of landscape" becomes a deep-rooted strength that sustains the poet, and the meteric flow of his poems. On his part, Ned Thomas contends that one of the high-points of Walcott's poetry is "its rendering of seascape and landscape, islands on long horizons, hands on oars and keels of schooners cutting the waters, sunlight and the open beach" (14). This assertion confirms Walcott's acceptance of the seascape and landscape of the islands as veritable metaphors for creative expression. This premise grants impetus to Patricia Ismond's assertion that "Walcott's concept of metaphor is strictly a poetic one, and comprehends figuration in the widest, generic sense -…" (3). In this guise, he accepts the onus as a dispossessed New World man to rename and redefine his environment in which ever language he finds most expressive of his dream El Dorado. He will find fulfilment in the task he had set for himself and his Gregorias, in his poetic autobiography, *Another Life:* "we are blessed with a virginal, unpainted world / with Adam's task of giving things their names" (152).

In Gerald Moore's "The Negro Poet and his Landscape", he indicated that the poet is in seamless union "with the constituents features of his landscape" (161). This creative submergence places the poet in total and spiritual harmony to the objects of his poetic admiration. This grants Walcott the poetic import of authorial habitation, thus Moore sums up that "He (poet) does not so much inhabit this landscape as become inhabited by it. Its rivers flow through his veins, its branches toss in his hair, its planet burn through the bones of his forehead and irradiate his skull, its volcanoes stir and grumble in his throat" (161).

Walcott's creative ingenuity is set to redress the colonial trauma on the psyche of the Caribbean man. He made strong assertions to, and affirms this in his departure from a literature of despair to a literature of

hope. Such hope is often based on the power of the local landscape and seascape. He adored his St. Lucia home in Edenic imagery and vision to assuage the decades of desecration and despoliation between the colonial masters. Several scholars such as Patricia Ismond have indicated that it is through "… a clear and concentrated engagement with (his) landscape… (26) and "the (his) search(es) for fresh and indigenous metaphors…" (52), that the poet creates a seamless union between the classical traditions that he adapts from, and the West Indian environment. This new culture becomes a veritable source of strength and renewal. For Walcott, "… the process of poetry is one of excavation and self-discovery" (Nobel Lecture, 4). This philosophical premise aligns with Catherine Douillet's assertion that "in Walcott's works, the poetic creativity and imagination can serve to explore and at times unite and reconnect historical gaps, cultural tensions, and racial divisions, … (3). In his best poems, Walcott never quite separate his historical impulse from his desire to tinker with words in his imaginative quest and sense to describe the landscape of Caribbean history.

The critical relevance of the notion of history to Walcott's creative enterprise is fundamentally captured in the epitaph to his essay "The Muse of History", where he indicated that "History is the nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (36) drawn from James Joyce's *Ulysses.* For Walcott, to be at one and feel at home, is to be at ease with his history, but his history is more of a problem to him – he is 'divided asunder by history: "For us in the archipelago the tribal memory is salted with the bitter memory of migration…. And if the idea of the New and the Old becomes increasingly absurd, what must happen to our sense of time, what else can happen to history itself, …? ("The Muse …41). The wounds of that history are made more grievous by factors of colonialism, race, culture and tradition. This history reverberates with pain and anguish!

Wilson Harris in his *Whole Armour,* had observed that the Caribbean is "a landscape saturated by traumas of conquest" (Qtd by DeLoughrey and Handley, 5). Walcott uses the complex experiences of his St. Lucia's home under colonial rule as a metaphor to explore the pains of the history of colonial rule in the Caribbean. St. Lucia landscape and seascape were suppressed under the colonial jack-boot of either French or British colonial control – the two colonial powers switched the control of this country arbitrarily. These changes had negative

effects on the moral psyche of the islanders; while the socio-cultural challenge of which language to speak, either French or English, created an identity crises situation for Walcott and his kins: "Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces of broken off from the original continent." (Nobel Lecture, 4). In the same light, Catherine Douillet adjudges that "poetic creativity serves to truly unify and find points of connections in a disjointed postcolonial world" (6).

Theoretical Framework.

This study deploys the environmental-friendly theory of Ecocriticism in analyzing the select poems. This theory explores how the landscape in its holistic nature is expressed in creative writings, and how the mutually beneficial characteristics can be harnessed. Eco-critics ask questions such as: what is the role of the landscape in a work of art? Are the underlying values of a text ecologically sound? Are the values, precepts and philosophies expressed in a work of art consistent with ecological wisdom? Are the creative and political reconstruction of the environment by writers ecologically intelligible? William Howarth answers these questions when he defines an ecocritic as "a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, *with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action" (my emphasis)* (69).

William Rueckert may have been the first person to use the term 'eco-criticism'. In 1978, he published an essay entitled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". His intent is to focus on the application of ecological concepts to the study of literature, eco-theory and criticism. However, because there was no organized structure to study the 'greener' side of literature, a litany of precepts were advanced to define this novel approach to the study of eco-literary worlds such as: ecopoetics, pastoralism, green cultural studies etc.

In 1990, the term "Ecocriticism" was propounded by Cheryll Glotfelty, who became the first scholar to hold an academic seat as a Professor of Literature and the Environment at the University of Nevada, Reno, USA. He defined ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment … ecocriticism takes an earth-approach to literary studies" (xviii).

The poetics of nature forms the centrality of Derek Walcott's creative imagination. A combination of postcolonial and eco-critical perspectives in Walcott's poetry and plays, illustrates the centrality of construction of a cross-cultural literary ecology, and shows that 'green' philosophies underpinning the work of Walcott are deeply connected with the reality of lived experiences in the poet's St. Lucia. The deep connection between his art and St. Lucia, where he spent his formative years can be exemplified by the life and ideals of one individual's creative development. The metaphorical association that is at the core of Walcott's larger poetic project serves to establish his deep obsession to opening up the epochs of Caribbean socio-historical space to poetic enunciation by turning "… lived experiences into landscape and landscape into text… (Davis, 242).

Derek Walcott's Vision and the Adaptive Landscape in his Poetry

In Caribbean thoughts and literature, engagements with history had always involved critical evaluation and reworking of European master-texts in history and literature. Much more, critics have noted a departure from the styles and historical phases of Wilson Harris, George Lamming, Kamau Brathwaite to Derek Walcott. All these writers differ diametrically in their perspectives and approaches to the documentation of the various phases of Caribbean history. Walcott's regenerative sense and commitment to Caribbean culture and history in his poetry is enthused by the Nobel Committee in 1992, sequel to his award of the Nobel Prize for Literature: "for a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment" (para. 1). This appraisal is very definitive and consummate!

Derek Walcott in several essays and critical writings had dialectically re-defined the meaning of history and created an illuminating stream of thought against which his poetry can be fruitfully explored. His sign-post essay "The Muse of History" is a treatise about the ways in which the linear structures of history and fiction can confine and limit the West Indian people to particular time and space of a negative history. Nana Wilson-Tagoe affirms to the above summation when she avers that "Walcott's distrust of linear time, his vision of the past as timeless, and his conception of history as myth can be seen as the

climax of his groping and exploration in the early stages of his poetic career" (128).

In the poems of *In a Green Night*, Walcott's theme and action explore his inescapable location of his landscape and socio-cultural environment. This poetic armature supports his undertaking the voyage of poetry. The poems are about the identification with the landscape and the people; poems about the history of the place and the poet's attitude towards that history. The following poems – "Prelude", "The Harbour", To A Painter in England", "Elegy" and "A Letter from Brooklyn", treat of the subject of the commitment to the poetic vocation, and the anxieties and challenges of embarking on the voyage of that vocation.

Walcott draws images of his poems from the region's landscape. From here emerges the figure of the "Castaway", the persona of one his poems of same title. In his peculiar style, Walcott creates a distance between the individual and the communal. In the poem, June Bobb avers that "Castaway and the poet exist apart from the society in a world of nothingness" (139). From this void, "A net inches across nothing. / Nothing: the rage with which the sand-fly's head is filled" (9). Within this void and nothingness, the poet however appreciates his bounden duty and role as creator, maker and remake of worlds.

"Tales of the Islands", the sonnet sequence in *In a Green Night*, illustrates the very detailed way in which the poet makes the landscape come alive. Ranging from the beauty of the Doree River, the stone cathedral at Choiseul to Cosimo de Chretien's boarding house, a relic from the earlier time, to the eccentric Miss Rossignol who "…sang to her one dead child…" (23), Walcott places the Islands in time and history. Disillusionment in the Islands come from the inequities of the past, but Walcott imposes on this bleak landscape some semblance of life and renewal. He captures both the ecstasy and nostalgia of Miss Rossignol's time: "Miss Ressignol…, she had white skin, / And underneath it, fine, old-fashioned bones; / She flew to vespers every twilight, … (23). The poet is the veritable source of vibrancy, and the poetic self as the universe in miniature. In spite of the moments of desolation, he believes that the poet is in tune with the tranquil cosmic Order:

Slowly my body grows a single sound,
Slowly I become
a bell,
an oval, a disembodied vowel,
I grow, an owl,
an aureole, white fire (Qtd by June Bobb, 141).

Walcott, being aware of the imperfection prevalent in Caribbean society both past and present, devotes his creative imagination to reanimate the decadent society. Appropriating the power of 'naming', Walcott commands the world and changes it. In his poem, "Origins" from *Selected Poems, 1964*, the persona enters the world, without vivid memory of his past: "Nameless I came among olives of algae, … I remember nothing / No knowledge whatever of metals, not even gold, / …" (11), but in this state, "swallowed in the surf of changing cumulus, … a gap in history closes, like a cloud" (12). But in an effort to regurgitate the amnesic state of Caribbean history, he remembers the rivers of the African continent. He renames the flora and fauna in the New World, in mythic eulogies. In the third section of the poem, he apostrophizes the Troumassee river in his native island, St. Lucia. The river, "… brown tongue … sun-warmed, sun-wooded … (13), carries in its depth, the different stages of the region's history. As an emblem of timeless-history and eternity, it reverberates with the region's tortured past: "… winds that buried their old songs in archives of bamboo and wild plantation, their white sails bleached and beaten on dry stone, the handkerchiefs of adieux and ba-bye! … (13). Even the present has no joy nor glorious hope when their "… children like black rocks of petrified beginnings in whose potbellied drought the hookworm boils, … (13). The sea is a powerful metaphor in this poem about beginnings in the New World. Walcott in his earliest poems, had coalesced the landscape of his imagination from cradle into written scripts, using the sea or sky as metaphors of historical narratives.

Omeros is Walcott's longest and most ambitious poem, and widely believed to have incited the admiration of the Swedish Academy to award him the Nobel Prize in literature in 1992. In Part 1 of Chapter 1 of the poem, he presented Philoctete, the persona, explaining to tourists the value of the gommier tree. Here, the poet captured the wanton killings of the aboriginal Aruacs by the white colonialists in the

metaphor of the despoliation of the gommier tree, in spite of its invaluable medicinal nature. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert affirms that "the ritualistic cutting of the trees, … is depicted in the text as symbolic of the exploitation of nature by the conquerors that followed on the *discovery* (my opinion) of the island by Europeans in 1500. The destruction of the Aruacs ushers in … a new religion, in which the trees are no longer sacred, … (218).

In Chapter IV, we are apprized with vegetational landscape that shields the extant vestiges of the brutal colonialist white regimes. Here we meet with Philoctete, roaming in the forest, with nostalgia amidst the ruins of an abandoned sugar plantation and its milling machines and rusted cauldrons – "the only remains of the island's plantation history" (220). The image of wooded trees and verdant nature is Walcott's constant metaphor to expose how Caribbean history is reclined into recluses. Paravisini-Gebert avers that "the image of woods growing to cover the remnants of the sugar plantation is a familiar one in Walcott's poetry, … (220). In his poetry of *The Prodigal,* Walcott questions thus: "what if our history is so rapidly enclosed/in bush, devoured by green, that there are no signals" (99). This question implies that Caribbean history is ill-fated to be silenced, and dominated by biased White writers' opinions.

The range of imagery of tress, birds, rivers, an entire foliage resplendent throughout Walcott's body of poetry, captured in ecological terms and parlance denotes a double-consciousness of the West Indian society and the poet. On the other hand, we are accosted with the vision of the man rooted in his environment with coptic knowledge of the indigenous landscape and life; creator of a culture that comes only from interaction with the local scenery.

The poem, "The Flock" from *The Castaway and other Poems (1965),* (*Collected Poems*, 77) presents a sensitive example of the connectedness of the poet to his natural landscape. Inspired by the movement of the duck flock, the mind of the poet embarks upon a journey of creativity: "… while I awoke … to a violence of images migrating from the mind" (77). This process of contemplation to recreate and name encompasses many ages, and encircles the entire globe, fore-shadowing the repeated movements of generations of "blue-wing teal and mallard" (77). In this poem, we see a typical instance of Walcott's tendency to "… cull his imagery from the natural setting (sea,

swamp, forest). It is the mode that predominates during this phase, especially in *The Castaway"* (Ismond, 69-70).

The poem is a poignant evocation of Walcott's mastery of his topos of metaphor which he deploys to extrapolate his discourse of the relationship of the human and extra-human worlds. Before the end of the poem, the birds have become part of the poet's imaginative topography, without ever losing their naturalistic authenticity. "The Flock" had been accepted by analysts and critics as an 'involved poetic dialogue' with Romantic representations of the natural world, and as an eco-critical assessment of Walcott's poetic aesthetics.

The poem, "The Almond Trees" from *The Castaway and other Poems (1965),* captures the despoliation of the human and non-human worlds – the flora and fauna – by the brutal colonial powers. Walcott in his poetic construction, establishes the bestiality of the history of colonialism in the Caribbean, coupled with the capitalist commodification of the landscape. He explores the interplay of the animal and human world in the theatre of natural world. Here the connection between peoples and landscape – inter-relationship of human history and history of the environment – is depicted by the "… frieze / of twisted, coppery, sea-almond trees" (36). The trees have borne the brunt of elemental forces of the past, and have also been witnesses of peoples' movement to the islands: Amerindians, Africans, Asian and Europeans.

The fusion of the human forms and humanity's history with the trees as history of the land, enables Walcott nurture the many-layered vision of the history and contemporary modernity of the Caribbean. The trunks and branches of weathered trees, symbolically speak of the history of the enslaved in the Archipalego:

> Aged trees and oiled limbs share a common colour!
> Welded in one flame,
> Huddled naked, stripped of their name,
> for Greek or Roman tags, they were lashed
> raw by wind, washed
> out with salt and fire-dried,
> bitterly nourished where their branches died,
> their leaves' broad dialect a coarse,
> enduring sound
> they shared together. (*The Castaway, 57*).

Here, we find strange names identified with African slaves, a denial of identity, by agents of colonial suppression. Walcott here connects this system of naming with the imperial mind-set of undermining all its African victims of exploitation. The system of slavery cannot suppress the eternal verdict of Caribbean history. The guttural voices of the land echoes across the beaches – an "enduring sound" – from tongues of the descendants of the enslaved.

In the context of the poems, they are obvious overt symbols that invoke the historico-cultural context of the poet's sensibility to his Caribbean milieu. Walcott's innate deep obsession with the sense of negation and dissolution with the landscape and history of the region is also reflected in his poem "Air" (*Collected Poems*, 113), from the volume *The Gulf and other Poems (*1969*).* Drawing from James Anthony Froude's infamous derision of Caribbean landscape, which serves as epigraph to the poem: "The natural graces of life do not show themselves under such conditions. There are no people there in the true sense of the word, with a character and purpose of their own" (306), Walcott presents the desultory nature and effects of the imperial powers that ravaged the land during colonialization. The poem is set on a supposedly invincible and ahistorical space as "rain forest" – "… the forest is unconverted, / because of that shell-like noise/ which roars like silence,"/ with "milling air, … infested, cannibal, / which eats gods, …/ (114). The poem is about negation or destruction.

The poem begins with the description of the "rain forest" as "omnivorous" (113), indifferent and insatiable beast:

> The unheard, **omnivorous (**my emphasis)
> jaws of this rain forest
> not merely devour all
> but allow nothing vain;
> they never rest,
> grinding their disavowal
> of human pain (113).

The rain forest is seen as being responsible for the destruction of minor races: "… they devoured two minor yellow races, and/ half of a black; … (113). As the poem progresses, Walcott identifies the races as

the "… the god-refusing Carib, … and the Arawak/ who leaves not the lightest fern-trace …" (114).

Conclusion.

This study demonstrates that environmental imaginations through an ecocritical perspective informs Walcott's thematic concerns in his poetry. This perspective very fundamentally shapes his aesthetic strategies such that metaphor becomes an eco-poetics through creative imaginings. The landscape Walcott writes about is necessarily politicised by colonialism, such that his subjectivity is intimately implicated in both the natural beauty and the traumatic history of the place. He must naturally acknowledge the history of St. Lucia and the Caribbean, the history of diaspora, of slavery and the Capitalists' exploitation of the erstwhile beautiful and serene landscape. Possession of, and psychical integration or attachment to the land is a bounden necessity for the Caribbean artist.

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