

**“ONLY THE FOOL POINTS AT HIS ORIGINS WITH HIS LEFT
HAND”: EDWARD KAMAU BRATHWAITE’S CELEBRATION OF
HIS AUTHENTIC ORIGIN**

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Abstract

Black Africans in the diaspora faced the problem of being transplanted from Africa to the New World during the Transatlantic Slave Trade developed a lot of psychological problems. One such problem is that they feel a sense of disconnection between their existence in the New World and their primary home in Africa. Caribbean writers expose the people's sense of rootlessness and the need for the search for the authentic self. Through Historical Criticism and Post-Structuralism, this study exposes the assertion of the tragic or fragmented self of the people ending in restlessness and sorrow; Edward Kamau Brathwaite's quest for his root in Africa is encapsulated in his attainment and participation in African traditional worship; his communion with his ancestors and celebration of the new dawn of his authentic origin; his return to the Caribbean and the message he sent across by incorporating African language into poetry. It aims at highlighting the need to rediscover the truth of one's being and rehabilitation of one's culture to re-establish one's dignity.

Keywords: Caribbean people, fragmentation, rootlessness, authentic origin, self-assertion
and dignity

Introduction

The cultural diversity and complexity that characterized the Caribbean Islands are traced to the history of slavery in which the strong breeds of Africans were captured and taken to the New World to work in the

plantations of the Whites. Akpuda (2005) in support of this emphasizes how Bob Marley's songs were built on the experiences of these Black African slaves. He writes:

Bob Marley, the Jamaican Reggae Superstar has vividly recreated the experiences and impact of the devilish whips that dehumanized captives in the slave ships that moved the Fanti, Ashanti, Mandingos, Hausa, Fulani, Igbo, Yoruba, Dahomeans, Congo, and Angolans into the new world (Akpuda 2005, 41).

This brings to the limelight the psychological trauma of African slaves from the time they were captured to their being transplanted in the New World which is transferred to their descendants. Urama (2016) asserts that this disconnect from their families in Africa and their not being accepted by the slave masters in the New World led to their fragmented lives and their quest for their authentic selves. Corroborating Urama's position above, Nathaniel, Mogu and Akpagu (2016: 84) aver that "It is an uncommon phenomenon that a people with a hijacked past and history not to have psychological and emotional instability". Through Historical Criticism and Post-Structuralism, this study exposes the restlessness and sorrow of the Caribbean people due to the history of slavery and Edward Kamau Brathwaite's quest for his root in Africa; his self-actualization from his communion with his ancestors and his authentic origin; and how he incorporated his experiences in Africa into poetry for the liberation struggle of the Blacks in the New World. His highlighting of the African language in his poetry brings to the centre of African culture that has been relegated to the margin through Western-oriented paradigms of education. The rehabilitation of African culture, especially through language promoted cultural literacy that helped Africans rediscover their true being and dignity. This is the self-actualization needed for African liberation struggles and the development of Africa and the New World.

Historical Criticism started in the 17th century with religious researchers who delved into the contextual study of Biblical characters and gained prominence in the 19th century. It has been adopted into several fields of study. In literary analysis, Historical Criticism involves understanding the background of the author, the time and space, and the setting of the text to interpret the text. Hunt (1989) asserts that as "Historical Criticism connects a text to certain times or places ..., the reader is required to perform research in order to learn more about the

author's life, the author's time period and culture, and the way of reasoning during that time" (142). It is used in this study to explore the individual life of Edward Kamau Brathwaite and the socio-political structure, cultures, norms, and values of the continental and diasporic Africans. Historical Criticism is also used to examine the transatlantic slave trade and colonial and post-colonial culture of Black Africans in Africa and the New World; the past culture of the people clashes with Western culture and how Western culture places itself on top of other cultures by coercion, and how African culture is suppressed.

Post-structuralism as literary criticism is an intellectual movement that began and developed in Europe in the early 20th century. Gilles Deleuze (2004) points out that Post-structuralism argues that human culture may be understood using modelled structural languages that differ from concrete reality and abstract ideas (171). Barry (2002) presents Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida as the two figures most closely associated with the emergence of post-structuralism by their critiquing structuralism and shifting from it to post-structuralism. Barry (2002) quotes Roland Barthes in his 'The Death of the Author' (1968) and emphasizes that 'Barthes says in the essay that the corollary to the death of the author is the birth of the reader' (66). He also points out that Jacques Derrida in 'Structure, Sign and Play in Discourse of Human Sciences' (1966) argues that there is a radical break from the past ways of thought and in the modern times, a particular intellectual "event" which concerns in the "decentering" of the intellectual universe has arisen. Barry argues that Derrida embraces this decentred universe of free play as liberating just as Barthes' "The Death of the Author" (66-67). He also stresses that in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida involves the higher detailed "deconstructive" reading of literary texts and argues that post-structuralism as a critical method is engaged in the task of "deconstructing" the text. (71). Urama (2016) in support of this highlights that in the post-structural approach to textual analysis, "the reader replaces the author as the primary subject of inquiry" (41). In this study, the reader's culture and society share an equal part of the interpretation of the text with the cultural and social circumstances of the author. Therefore, Historical Criticism and Post-structuralism are relevant to this study.

The Execution of Dispersal and What It Has Left on Its Victims

The Caribbean social reality characterized by physical, psychological, political and economic enslavement dominates Black literature and criticism. The people's fragmented lives due to the traumatic

experiences of the slave trade; capturing and forcefully dragging them across the Middle Passage, and hard labour and ill-treatments from the slave masters formed the major discourse. The traumatic situation left the people in a state of rootlessness and increased their quest for wholeness through acquiring knowledge of their authentic selves. Literature not only provided those who travelled to Africa with the cultural literacy needed to trace their root for the true self but also the revolutionary change from their oppression. Anyidoho (1989) rightly emphasizes that "All over the Black World, literature has frequently functioned as a weapon for revolutionary change", stressing that: "literature of combat is a natural product of any situation of enslavement or oppression" (25).

Kamau Brathwaite has on various occasions argued that the Caribbean man can only see himself as being a "free" man when he embraces his African roots. Thus, his sojourn to the New World and immersion into an alien culture leaves him with a fractured psyche that is yearning for repair and rehabilitation. Pettis (1995) discloses that a fractured psyche is identifiable "through feelings and states of incompleteness, vulnerability, alienation, indirection, displacement, and identity diffusion" (12). For the Black African, who was forcefully uprooted from his continent and denied of any vestiges of appreciable identity and self-worth, his gory situation is encapsulated in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's submission that "black Africans were further stifled any possibility of a continuous culture on the part of the captives by denying them family life. Denied language and a common culture, deprived of political and economic power..." (wa Thiong'o, 1971, 81).

It is this predicament that Brathwaite's *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (1973) portrays. This collection is described as an epic of Caribbean literature which Brathwaite holds aloft as his thoughts on the need for the Caribbean man to get close to his roots, and be able to know, in Chinua Achebe's words, "where the rain started to beat us." This accounts for Brathwaite infusing the African name "Kamau" into his name as a means of identifying with his African roots. As C.L.R. James observes in *The Black Jacobins*, "for West Indian intellectuals or writers to begin to see themselves as a free and independent people, they had to clear from their minds the stigma that anything African was inherently inferior and degraded" (405). It resonates with Ngugi, who argues that the West employ a "cultural bomb" to put down any defiance by the oppressed. The effect of such effort is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their unity, in their capacities and

ultimately in themselves" (wa Thiong'o 1981, 3). wa Thiongo (1981) also asserts that the attendant implication is to make Black Africans ashamed of their past, not willing to return to it, and identify with anything that does not question their origin which leaves them with "despair, despondency and collective death-wish" (3). Some Black writers see the need to document their experiences for those who may not be able to travel to Africa. This fascinated the study of the journey motif in Black literature. Baker Jr. (1980) in support of this points out the journey motif in Black African literature and highlights the importance of documenting it by writers. He says:

"to understand our origin, we must journey through difficult straights. And in the end, we may find only confusion. Most of us take refuge in the safe harbor of dreams, envisaging glorious years of distant past or near future. Perhaps only poets or writers confined to a situation that offers no alternatives can and do the effort at return" (1).

Nathaniel Ojima (2017:279) maintains that "It is an evident truth that every generation...has certain gigantic figures whose works are seen as sublime and thus receive huge readership and patronage". Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Paule Marshall, Maya Angelou, Wilson Harris, Amié Césaire, Aure Lorde and many others typify these towering literary figures that are at the forefront of the fascinating study of the journey motif; the physical journey back to Africa or the cultural memory. Kamau Brathwaite travelled to Cambridge to study History and English and graduated from the school in 1953. He did not go back to Barbados rather he joined the British Colonial Service. Then in 1955, he was posted to the Gold Coast (Ghana) in West Africa and he lived there till 1962. In Ghana, Brathwaite was posted to several rural places where he got acquainted with the traditions of the people, especially the oral traditions of the people. Most Africans did not acquire Western or formal education by the time Brathwaite was an exile in Ghana and according to Anyidoho (1989), "oral literature remains their only medium of communication and self-expression" (31). Chinweizu et al (1980) assert that "African orature is important to this enterprise of decolonizing African literature, for the important reason that it is the incontestable reservoir of the values, sensibilities, esthetics, and testable reservoir of traditional African thought and imagination outside the plastic arts" (2).

Before Brathwaite left Barbados for Cambridge, he noted, "Jamaica is known for its black African ancestry" (Akpuda 2005, 46), and this contributes so much to Jamaican culture. For instance, the Jamaican national languages developed from African languages and Standard English, Jamaican musical tradition – Jamaica is celebrated as the headquarters of reggae music in the world" (Akpuda 2005, 49). Brathwaite's deep knowledge of the remnants of African culture from his experiences in the Caribbean and full African traditional heritage in Ghana influenced his narrative technique and style of writing. African historical heritage largely becomes the tool for his writings because he is interested in exporting the diversity and socio-cultural complexity of Africa and the Caribbean.

Brathwaite's poetry, therefore, speaks volumes about the foundation of Caribbean culture in all of its forms. His poetry is at the vanguard of the rehabilitation of African and Caribbean National languages, especially in African (Akan) language and bringing it from the periphery, margins to the centre. At the heart of it all is the Ghana experience (living in Ghana) which showed in unmistakable terms the possibility of achieving wholeness by identifying with his African roots. It is worthy to mention to the blacks, that the New World presented a different scenario to their ancestral lands in Africa in addition to the ugly and emasculating experiences that emanate from slavery and plantation life. The implication rubs off on their persona and leaves them with an inferiority complex. In apparent realization, Bruce King offers that:

... Brathwaite's occupation as a historian, a pamphleteer and a poet has been to transcend the colonial sense of rootlessness and isolation. This sense of awareness, especially of his historical position and situation in society finds utmost expression in his brooding and slow but progressive attempt to achieve wholeness out of the debris of the past (13)

He, therefore, incorporates orality as Africans' major mode of communication. The orality in the forms of African and Jamaican National languages, music, drama and folk drama in his *The Arrivants* is of great significance because the trilogy, *Right of Passage* (1967), *Masks* (1968) and *Islands* (1969) were written when African writers were battling with the question of "whether to continue creating in an imposed colonial language or an indigenous African language" (Anyidoho, 1989, 20). Many

decide to go on writing, code-switching indigenous and colonial languages while Ngugi wa Thiong'o decides to start creating with Gikuyu language. Chinua Achebe emphasizes the implication of one abandoning one's mother tongue though, but indicates his interest in writing in the English language:

Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces guilty feelings.

But for me, there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it. I hope, though, that there always will be men, like the late Chief Fagunwa, who will choose to write in their native tongue and ensure that our ethnic literature will flourish side by side with the national ones. For those of us who opt for English, there is much work ahead and much excitement (Achebe 1964 in Achebe 1975, 62)

Abiola Irele in support of Achebe highlights that African society has had a double tradition since her colonization and creating a language derived from an African background would serve the purpose. He also stresses that the criticism of modern African literature should be done considering its double relationship to two cultures and two imaginative traditions; the Western and African traditions. He emphasizes:

In our traditional literature, in traditional society, the ideal is to make every utterance as far as possible memorable. This is what underlies the principle which governs Achebe's use of the language, for instance; as he, himself has said: 'A proverb is the palm oil with which words are eaten' (Irele 1971, 20).

The reality, underlying the trilogy is the dual cultural heritage of Brathwaite comprising the traditions of Africa from which he is descended and those of Europe that came to him through the colonial experience of his country of birth, namely Barbados (Angmor 1987, 114). Also, the assertion that: "only the fool point at his origins with his left hand" portrays Brathwaite as being knowledgeable in the African cultural value of proverbs. Indigenous African and Jamaican National languages and modern popular music like reggae, jazz, blues, pop, poetic chants, libation, the prayer of supplication and instrumentals like drumming, and beating of gongs in his poems are to

preserve the experiences of his voyage for the Blacks in the New World. Anyidoho (1989) asserts that “language is a key to the revelation of a people’s true identity” (23). Baker Jr. (1980) also affirms that:

The black writer, having attempted the journey, preserves details of his voyage in that most manifest and coherent of all cultural systems – language. Through his work, we are allowed to witness, if not the trip itself, at least a representation of the voyage that provides some of our emergence (1).

Reconnection with the Ancestors, Restoration of Dignity and Rehabilitation of African Culture

Brathwaite, as a root-searching poet, proves that he is also searching for a creative ambience by incorporating his experience of participating in the Akan people's everyday life throughout the villages he was posted to in Ghana. The narrative technique and style, the themes and subject matter of his *The Arrivants* highlight the history of slavery, which in turn portrays him as a historian and anthropologist. This poetry collection also presents Brathwaite’s argument that connection to the ancestors is a prerequisite for the restoration of the Blackman’s dignity. This is highlighted in his use of language for the rehabilitation of African culture in his poems. Anyidoho (1989) points out that:

A people denied the ability to name themselves, their own experience, and in a language native to their very souls, are a people degraded to the state of shadows, shadows of other-selves. Even more dangerous, they are a people in danger of annihilation (23).

It is fit to acknowledge here that Brathwaite's acceptance of his African roots and culture culminates in the celebration of his authentic origin, manifested in the array of poems in the collection, *The Arrivants*. In the Poem, "Ancestors" the poet/persona passionately engages the reader with nostalgic feelings about his grandfather, which suggests how deeply he is involved with his ancestry:

Every Friday morning my grandfather
left his farm of canefields, chickens, cows,
and rattled in his trap down to the harbour town
to sell his meat. He was a butcher...

He drove the trap
himself: slap of the leather reins
along the horse's back and he'd be off
with a top-hearted homburg on his head:
black English country gentleman ("Ancestors" 239)

The tracing of his genealogy and ancestry underlies this poem. Despite being a "black English country gentleman" in the Caribbean, that does not vitiate the fact of his African ancestry, and it is the acceptance of their culture and history that guarantees wholeness. Brathwaite's return to his roots acquires heightened attention and urgency to assure one's authentic self and reconnection to African heritage. To celebrate this new dawn in his life, Brathwaite through his *The Arrivants* sends his message not only to those in diaspora nor to all blacks but the whole wide world that no particular language should be used as a determinant of knowledge. To him, African indigenous and Jamaican National languages should stand side by side with the colonial languages.

In *Rights of Passage*, Brathwaite focuses on the description of Africa as a wasteland with a rotten environment in a desolate and fallowness mode to portray his tough experiences in seeking his authentic self. One visualizes the loss of many Africans through slavery and the lamentation of the father of slaves and "Folkways" he highlights the fragmented self that characterizes the Caribbean psyche, restlessness due to their rootlessness and sorrowful quests for their individual and collective self and identity. In *Masks*, he focuses on the joy and celebration of finding one's origin. The poems in this section highlight his reconnection with his ancestors and his restored dignity is celebrated. He poeticizes and dramatizes his participation and initiation into African traditional worship in "The Making of the Drum", "Path-Finders", "Limits", "The Return", and "The Golden Stool". He could not have achieved this without using the African (Akan) language and Caribbean National languages to bring out the aesthetics of the traditional ritual performances. In celebrating his origin, he buttresses his being proud of his Africanness. Raji-Oyelade (2005) affirms that:

It is the attainment and the celebration of this new dawn in an authentic origin that Brathwaite attempts to achieve in *Masks* and with an Akan proverb as epigraph... the poet performs a necessary libatory communion with the Earth Mother and Nana Firimpong for total acceptance (129).

Again in the section called "Libation" Brathwaite brings to the fore the cultural practice of his African heritage. The pouring of libation is done to maintain a strong relationship between the living and the ancestors in African cosmology. It is a prayer to the ancestors. Mbiti (1989) states that:

The departed, whether parents, brothers, sisters or children, form part of the family, and must therefore be kept in touch with their surviving relatives. Libation and giving of food to the departed are tokens of fellowship, hospitality and respect; and the drink and food so given are symbols of family continuity and contact (9).

The Significance of Proverbs in African Culture and “Only the Fool Points at His Origin with His Left Hand”

Proverbs is the language of the elders, the wise ones, in African society and so not everyone is expected to understand proverbs. Acbebe (1958) points out that "Among the Igbo, the art of conversation is regarded highly and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" (5). Yankson (1990) also asserts that: "Proverbs reveals a people's cultural values". He further emphasizes that: "They are expressions from intelligent, lived experiences and reflect our forefathers' philosophic wisdom and sense of maturity" (114). Brathwaite uses this proverb, "only the fool points at his origin with his left hand", as the prelude to *Masks* because masking is a prominent and symbolical aspect of African culture. This proverb, incidentally as part of the title of this study underscores the primacy of proverb as an important ingredient in the literary make-up of the African writer or African diasporic writer. Lindfors (1978) reveals that: "proverbs are used to sound and re-iterate major themes, to sharpen characterization, to clarify conflicts, and to focus on the values of the society (the author) is portraying" (64). Even among the Akan people of Brathwaite's ancestry, "a wise child is spoken to in proverbs but not by banal statements." The proverb in question heralding the "Masks" section of the collection captures, in essence, the persona's pride in his ancestry and African roots through his affinity to norms, beliefs, practices, artefacts and African tradition. The identification with African origins in *The Arrivants* is not just mere sentimental affiliations, but rather the totality of his heritage as encapsulated in "Masks." Again, this realization receives joyous expression in the poem, "The New Ships." The poet/persona celebrates his return after three hundred years:

Takoradi was hot.
Green struggled through red
as we landed.

Laterite lanes drifted off
into dust
into silence.

Mammies crowded with clothes,
flowered and laughed;
white teeth
Smooth voices like pebbles
moved by the sea of their language.

Akwaaba they smiled
Meaning welcome

akwaaba they called
aye kooo

well have you walked
have you journeyed

welcome (“The New Ships” 124)

Masking accompanies ritual performances. Brathwaite's initiation into the African traditional worship ritual being poeticized and dramatized in *Masks* has qualified him as one of the elder spokesmen of the Ashanti Kingdom. This is the reason why he is performing like the traditional African griot. The songs, dance, poetic chants, prayers of cleansing, allegiance and supplication, drumming, sitting on the ancestral stool, libation and masking fully represent African theatre which provides him with spiritual healing. Orié (2005) also points out that “dance in Caribbean theatre is generally masking, symbolic, communicative and psycho-therapeutic” (236). Masquerades in Africa represent the ancestors and masking is always accompanied by secrecy. This is why the guttural language is employed by masquerades and women are excluded from masquerade cults in most parts of Africa. Orié (2005) also asserts that: “communication from the living to the ancestors is passed through ritual and or masking and or dancing” (228). Amankulor (1986) emphasizes that

the mask is employed: "to perform such functions that span and yoke together the sacred and secular in human existence. Masks ... are vested the age-old links of the people and their traditions ... they objectify communally sanctioned ideas and beliefs" (52-53). For Brathwaite to be involved in masking in Ghana proves that he has been initiated into the masquerade cult. This is one of the experiences that provided him with the mood, atmosphere or influence as an artist. Burrowing in on this in the poem "Prelude" Brathwaite sets out to identify with the culture of his ancestors by embarking on incantations and invocations that demonstrate his affinity and closeness to such religious rites and cultural practices:

Gong-gongs
throw pebbles in the rout-
ed pools of silence:
of ripples reach the awakened Zu-
lus: Chaka tastes
the salt blood of the bitter
Congo and all Africa
is one, is whole, nim-
tree shaded in Ghana,
in Chad, Mali,
the shores of the cooling kingdoms. ("Prelude" 90)

And particularly interesting is the persona's physical and spiritual reconnection to his ancestry, the mother continent of Africa:

Asase Yaa,
You, Mother of Earth,
on whose soil
I have placed my tools
on whose soil
I will hoe
I will work
the year has come round
again; ("Prelude" 91)

In the Poem "Tano" the persona captures his journey back to the land of his ancestors:

green hearing eyes see.
Exiled from here

To seas
of bitter edges,

whips of white worlds,
stains of new

rivers,
I have returned (“Tano” 153)

Ramchand (1976) discloses that: “greater knowledge and understanding of African history and culture, the trilogy seems to say, will not only remove the self-contempt of the Negro, but it will also stimulate the racial memory and help to bring about a recognition of elements of that culture still functional in West Indian society” (129). Brathwaite’s attainment and participation in African traditional worship in Ghana, therefore, provide him with solutions as a root-searching and creative ambience-searching artist. The celebration of the new dawn of his authentic origin is seen in his desire for all diasporic Africans to have the same experience. That is what motivated the incorporation of African culture into his poetry. Incorporating African culture into his poetry and creating the Blackman’s history through literature prove the relevance of Brathwaite’s self-assertion. Self-realization and assertion remain a continuous process needed by Africans for the self-actualization and development of Africa and the New World. This makes reading Brathwaite’s *The Arrivants* a necessity for Africans. Nwachukwu-Agbada (1990) rightly puts it that:

Literature, by its nature, is an evocation of social ethos, a re-creation of history and experience, and a crucible of unique sentiments about a people. Anyone reading the literature of the oppressed peoples of the world would easily pick this common social consciousness (87)

CONCLUSION

From the analysis of Brathwaite’s *The Arrivants*, one of the major conclusions drawn is that African and Caribbean National languages are presented as the conveyor of wisdom. This is a way of decolonizing the African minds from the colonial mentality that the colonial language should be used as a standard of intellectuality and wisdom. Brathwaite achieves this feat through self-assertion, being proud of his Africanness and self-actualization. This makes reading *The Arrivants* a necessity for all Black

Africans for their self-assertion and continuous struggle for total freedom and to fight neocolonialism in present African society. This will promote the sustainable development of Africa in the 21st century.

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