

The Images of 'In-between' in Derek Walcott's Poetry

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Abstract:

Derek Walcott, by using in-between images like 'twilight', and 'beach' in his poetry, establishes his position as 'something besides,' which is more than his hybrid position of 'neither the one nor the other,' to locate his split state of being. There is a correspondence between Walcott's split in-between states of being with the in-between images with which he repeatedly identifies himself. These images, on the other hand, have become the metonymic signifiers of the poet's consciousness.

Keywords: In-between images; cultural studies, hybridity.

Caribbean born poet Derek Walcott's in-between position is not only biological— his grandfathers were white and grandmothers were black—but also cultural representing white and Caribbean culture at the same time. This 'neither the one nor the others' state of consciousness seems to guide the poet towards the spaces which incorporate the elements of both which are 'something besides' the both. This phenomenon of split consciousness resembles Homi K. Bhaba's concept of in-between space, which according to Bhaba is—postcolonial writings are always at the crossroads of two or more cultural traditions. The crossroad in Bhaba's language is 'in- between space' which means "neither the one nor the other but something else besides, in between" (224).

Bhaba describes the in- between position of hybrid existence as a 'third space' which emerges in-between the traits of two mixed cultures. It is the space which incorporates the complexities of postcolonial realities. Bhaba describes this space as a productive space because it enables to address both colonial and postcolonial issues at the same time. He writes "it is significant that the productive capabilities of this third world space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance" (56). 'The third space' culture that Bhaba describes is the postcolonial culture that is of hybridized nature. This space provides an arena for the postcolonial hybrid writers to define their own selves.

Walcott's poems exemplify the articulations of the in-between spaces. He poeticizes post-colonial spaces from the hybrid position. Such spaces provide the poet with many images corresponding to his own fragmented self. Stuart Hall states, "such images offer a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation" (224). Walcott's play with such images connotes a postcolonial Caribbean poet's attempt to heal the cultural wound caused by colonial intervention. The Caribbean pain of "loss of identity" being to be held when the forgotten connections are set in place (244). At the juncture, the in-between imaginary, mere than being locations to locate his self, enables Walcott to set place the forgotten connection of his identity, culture and cultural root.

'Beach' and 'Twilight/Dusk' are the governing images in Walcott's poetry. In his poem "Harbor," a poem from Walcott's first published anthology *In a Great Night*, Walcott observes a fisherman returning home in the dusk, a time of day immediately following sunset: a transition between day and night. It evokes the idea of intermediate condition of being between two points. A hybrid poet always feels to be at the frontier of two cultures and is hunted by the sense of 'home' and lack of it. The fisherman's return to home from harbor is poet's symbolic journey towards his homeland. Walcott's tendency to invoke home, Africa and the past from in-between spaces has a signification as it implies the hybrid existence within the poet, which is linguistic, literary and racial at the same time.

Twilight hints at the transition between daylight and darkness. Another aspect of twilight is an indirect light. This image as appears in Walcott's poetry "implies a reflection on poetic writing especially on the power of metaphor, a metaphor being a transition between two meaning, a

'partial illumination' (Macarie 67). The image of twilight to Walcott is very significant as he begins his autobiographical poem, "Another Life" with the same image—"Begins with twilight"(Selected Poetry 42). To begin a poem with twilight, which generally suggests the end of a period, sounds ambiguous but Walcott's vision is clear. The image in the poem is used as a historical metaphor. This image evokes a marked change in the society which was then ruled by a colonial power. The opening lines of "Another Life" describe such a transformation:

Begin with twilight, when a glare
which held a cry of bulges lowered
the coconut lances of the inlet
as a sun, tired of empire, declined. (42)

The decade of 70s was the time when Caribbean countries were being independent: an epoch comes to an end, another has begun. We literally watch the twilight of the empire. Nearly the same image he has used to mark the change in his epic *Omeros*:

[T]he sun went out, and the horizon

enclosed the schooners, the canoe and an empire
faded with one last, spastic green flash, but so soon
they hardly noticed. (119)

The 'spastic green flash' is the light of liberation that Walcott envisions in the poem. Walcott uses this image to talk about the transition in the political sphere of Caribbean world from pre-colonial to the postcolonial. Similarly, the poem "Ruins of a Great House" is preceded by an epigraph which also underlines the importance of twilight.

Though our longest sun sets at right declensions
and makes but winter arches,
it cannot be long before we lie down in darkness, and
have our light in ashes. . . (Line 1-5)

To use twilight to talk about the great is remarkably meaningful. The first line of the poem clearly states the ruins of majesty of the great house. The 'Great House' no longer stands there: what remains are the stones. The house has lost its structure, beauty, and glory. It is dejected and has changed into a fertile place for lizards. The gates are stained, and the axle and coach wheel are thrown with the cattle droppings. The dejected and destroyed "great house" has begun to smell the dead lines. The images of stained and odorous remnants of the house remind the declining state of empire.

The Images of "great house" conjures up the house of the colonial master. It has metonymic relationship with the colonial power and is associated with twilight. The ruin of the "great house" is equal to the twilight, the end of the period. However, from the threshold of twilight he sees the possibilities of the emergence of new potentialities and new realities as he writes, "the rivers flow, obliterating hurts" ("Ruins" line 27). At this point, the twilight in poet's creative world bears the traces of both ruins and regeneration. The atmospheres of setting sun indicate that the poet is envisioning a bright day to come that obliterates the 'hurts' caused by the ills of empire.

More than this, Walcott draws many historical references. The reference to "marble like Greece" ("Ruins" line 18) reminds the architecture and scripture of Grecian empire which is ruined.

Similar is the intention in *Omeros*, in which we find the poet brooding on the possible decline of the empire when he writes:

Once after the war, he'd made a plan to embark on
a masochistic odyssey through the empire
to watch it go in the dusk. (90)

The lines are the last lines of the chapter XVI of Walcott's epic that suggests Achille's dream to embark on a journey towards Africa. What is important here is the association of 'dusk' with empire. The speaker watches "it"(empire) that goes in the dusk is a metamorphosed expression of the decline of the empire. Furthermore, Walcott's frequent reference of setting sun reminds us the well-known grand narrative that the sun never sets in British Empire. The poet, on the contrary, by emphasizing the importance of "twilight", "dusk", and the "setting sun", undercuts the so-called adjective given to British Empire and stresses that a remarkable change has taken place: "Their sun that would not set was going down/ on their flushed faces, brickwork like a kiln" (qtd. in Whitlock 165). In these lines too, Walcott's is hinting at the political transformation from the colonial (their sun) to post colonial (was going down). Here, Walcott implies the fact that colonialism is not unavoidable. By poeticizing the end of British Raj through the pattern of the images of the setting sun the poet hints at the fact that the sun was supposed to shine forever was just an invention, a construct of power which received a severe blow in the anti-colonial struggles and more rigorously in the post colonial counter discursive practices. By implying a possibility of change the poet suggests that a new period is impending. Thus, referring to the temporal image of in-between location, the poet exhibits his dependence on these images to dramatize a period a historical change, a postcolonial condition.

Twilight, a temporal image of in-between space, also tells about Walcott's imagination, his creative faculty and his conception of poetry which is related to the liberation of mental anxiety, there is a "correspondence between Walcott's creative act and the twilight. Indeed creative art is coterminous with twilight"(Macarie 81). As twilight occurs during the period of transition between daylight and darkness, creative art takes place between "the period of consciousness and the period when unconscious contents of psyche are realized" (81). The phenomenon finds its best expression in the following lines of the poem.

Darkness climbs their knees until their hands were dark
The wind, wave- muscled, kept its steady mowing
He followed, that was all,
his mind, one step behind
Pacing the poem, going where it was going. (*Selected Poetry* 116)

Metaphors appear in his pivotal point of day and the nexus between brightness and darkness is thus related to his act of writing poetry. Poetry is associated with twilight because its modus operated is metaphor, which is also stated as intermediary condition or partial illumination. In his

poem "Nearing Forty" he refers this because he thinks his creating power is fading. He wishes for an extra energy to retain his creative power.

. . . I may judge my work
by the bleak modesty of middle-age
as a false dawn, fireless and average,
which would be just, because your life bled for
the household truth, the style past metaphor
that finds its parallel however wretched
in simple, shining lines, in pages stretched
plain as a bleached bed sheet under a gutter-
ing rainspout, glad for the sputter
of occasional insight (*Selected Poetry* 38)

Walcott, here too invokes the same recurring image "dawn" to talk about his fading imagination, which is 'near weak vision'. Though Walcott qualifies dawn as "false dawn" is a time when first light appears on earth. That is why, the dawn that precedes Walcott's yearning for 'occasional insight' implies that the dawn or twilight is related to partial illumination of his creative world.

Walcott's autobiographical poem "Another Life" provides a special case of how Walcott's imagination is formed and influenced by temporal images of in-between location. Among the central concern of the poem are "West Indian history and the poet's own cultural ambivalence, the nature of imagination, the author's apprenticeship as a painter, and a landscape waiting verification" (*Selected* 122). In the process of translating contents of his consciousness into the verse lines, the poet advances the notion of identity, describes his crucial expressions in the adult life and recalls how he was attracted by the ordered colonial world. Finally, he argues about the primacy of the creative imagination and its capacity to incorporate and surpass the events of history. The poet declares that another life began when he fell in love with art: "that the fell in love with art/and life began" (*Another Life* 49). Thus, the poetic world provides the poet the platform to discourse on the blurred vision of the pedigree and to raise the question about the 'true light' that lights the dim vision of his pedigree: "but which was the true light/ blare noon or twilight" (48). The poet's confusion about 'true light' seems from his conscious desire to be a pure African—the loyalty that has hidden the 'light' of ancestry. On the other hand, it comes out from his brought up in white culture and tradition, which gave him the "light" of the English culture. This confusion caused by the poet's exposure to two distinct types of situations, finds its resolution when the poet's exposure to two distinct types of situations, when the poet takes refuge to poetry, the written twilight of conscious and unconscious desires and longing:

[T]eetering and tough in unabashed unhope,
as twilight like amnesia blues the slope,
when over the untroubled ocean, the moon
will always swing its lantern (*Another Life* 67)

In these lines, twilight is driving the moon. Moon stands for creative power and imagination is nurtured by the twilight. Therefore, the twilight has a metonymic relationship with the poet's creative world.

The in-between phenomena of Walcott's poetry reflect the fundamental heterogeneity and hybridity of West Indian subject. This phenomenon is not only reflected as the images of space and time but also in Walcott's creation of marks as they appear in his poems. All his characters whether they are named or not are likely of hybrid nature. The narrator of *Another Life* describes himself as "a monster" and "prodigy of the wrong age and color" (qtd. in Curry 202). Sabine, another Walcott's persona in the "The Schooner Flight" describes his hybridity as a West Indian when he says, "I have Duuch, nigger, and English in me/and either I am nobody or I'm a nation"(Line 42-43). We perceive heterogeneity of identity in each individual. Sabine's identification with nation implies that the West Indian nations or citizens are seen as hybrid, with multiplicity of identity. The identification of West Indian subject with nation is also reflected in his epic *Omeros* when the poet makes a declaration that each man was a nation in himself. Moreover, this epic is Walcott's discourse on the West Indian culture in itself.

Therefore, Walcott is a poet situated on the in-between location with hybrid prototypes of his own creation in order to evoke discourse on the cultural root and identity. Walcott's poems are the examples of a hybrid poet's muse on cultural duality and its simultaneously poetic resolution. He puts the anxieties of self- betrayal so as to seek a space for his bio- culturally split self. By creating the human and spatial equivalent images of his own self, he established the relation of interdependence with such images, the in- between images like 'twilight', 'beach' provide him important frames of reference to locate his split state of being. There is a correspondence between Walcott's split in- between states of being with the in-between images with which he repeatedly identifies himself. These images, on the other hand, have become the metonymic signifiers of the poet's consciousness.

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