



IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

ISSN-2321-7065



Editor-in-Chief

Volume V, Issue IV April 2017

www.ijellh.com

Impact Factor: 5.27

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ISSN :2455-0108

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(INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL ONLINE OF SCIENCE)

CARIBBEAN PREDICAMENT OF IDENTITY CRISIS: AN EMBLEM IN DEREK WALCOTT'S PLAYS

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Abstract

The Caribbean is “a place with no stable cultural origin” (Bongie 23). According to Samad, the West Indian whose self is a “heterogeneous entity” has been playing the character assigned to him/her by “other ‘cultures,” and the West Indian has admitted the character “uncritically” (227). The hybrid character that the West Indian has played is evidently equivalent of a “mimic man” (Samad 227). It is this imitation that creates the West Indian identity as a fusion of the colonial and colonized perspectives. The fusion of different cultures creates a *de novo* hybrid culture depicting the characteristics of both the foreigner and indigenous. Walcott’s work bestows upon us a glance of the creation of contemporary Caribbean identities; and investigating his work can facilitate us to recognize the contemporary Caribbean predicaments and efforts in identity-making in the context of the colonial inheritance of global socio-economic and political inequalities.

Keywords: Caribbean, hybrid, identity, inequalities

Introduction

The Caribbean is “a place with no stable cultural origin” (Bongie 23). According to Samad, the West Indian whose self is a “heterogeneous entity” has been playing the character assigned to him/her by “other ‘cultures,” and the West Indian has admitted the character “uncritically” (227). The hybrid character that the West Indian has played is evidently equivalent of a “mimic man” (Samad 227). It is this imitation that creates the West Indian identity as a fusion of the colonial and colonized perspectives. The fusion of different cultures creates a *de novo* hybrid culture depicting the characteristics of both the foreigner and indigenous. This hybrid culture originated

as a result of Imperial colonialism has led to the development of contemporary identity crisis in the West Indies. In the 1950s and 60s, as the “islands prepared for and moved into independence, so too did the calls for an indigenous Caribbean theatre, free from the taint of colonial influences” (Balme 181). But even after being independent, the West Indians of different national and racial origins continued to be affected by European values and characteristics.

The poet and playwright Derek Walcott is one of the great literary figures from Trinidad. Walcott’s work bestows upon us a glance of the creation of contemporary Caribbean identities; and investigating his work can facilitate us to recognize the contemporary Caribbean predicaments and efforts in identity-making in the context of the colonial inheritance of global socio-economic and political inequalities.

The Nobel Prize winner, Derek Walcott was born in Saint-Lucia in 1930 and his writing elucidates the course of identity-making in the colonial and postcolonial Caribbean. Walcott’s writings represent the complex relationships of the colonized and the colonizer as Saint-Lucia has suffered centuries of colonialism under French and British control. The Homeric epic poem, *Omeros* (1990), is considered as Walcott's finest work by many critics. Apart from the prestigious Nobel Prize, he has won many literary awards during his career including an Obie Award in 1971 for his play *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. Most of his plays address, either directly or indirectly, the subaltern position of the West Indies in the post-colonial period. As Bharatender Sheoran in his article, “ A dilemma of Caribbean Populace: Post-Colonial conflicts and Identity crisis in Derek Walcott’s Plays” observes that, “ Walcott's view of identity is too great to be restricted to the Caribbean society per se. I believe his works to be beneficial for studies of identity all over the world.”(6)

Walcott's vision of identity is valuable for studies of identity of the Caribbean society and the colonized all over the world. However the proposed study aims to analyze particularly the mixing of diverse cultures and identity predicament experienced by the West Indians in the postcolonial age with reference to selected works of Walcott and to postcolonial theories.

Derek Walcott’s play *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* depicts ideas of colonization, identity and the perpetual conflict between good and evil. The protagonist, Ti-Jean’s life revolves around his island, home and family. The twist comes into his life when he and his two brothers, Mi-Jean and Gros-Jean, are confronted by the Devil to make them feel human emotions: anger, compassion, weakness and so on. Each character symbolizes a wider group in society. The devil symbolizes

the colonial masters and each brother represents a different type of people in the nation at different intervals.

One of the esteemed works of Derek Walcott, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, is based on the cultural and racial predicament that the characters encounter. The central character, Makak, is embarrassed of his black colour and wants to be like a white man. In *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, there is a hunt for and recognition of one's identity. When Makak is questioned at the beginning of the play, he cannot tell Corporal Lestrade his real name or much about himself. To the question, "what is your race?" Makak replies, "I am tired" (Walcott 48).

An work, the most interesting of his plays, which Walcott wrote at the end of the 1960s is *Pantomime* which discloses the complicated identity problems in the contemporary Caribbean. The two characters, Trewe and Jackson, performing Friday and Crusoe, continuously shift from one role into another. In fact, the play imitates the complex identity crisis in the Caribbean islands through Jackson and Trewe who swing between master and slave identities. It is the demonstration of the recurring problem of the colonial master and slave relationship along with the white and black binaries and polarities in the postcolonial period in an upturned form.

In another eminent work, *O Babylon* Walcott talks about the condition of language in the Caribbean, the symbolic story of a Rastafarian community (who succeeded in establishing their own language, but were compelled to live isolated on the mountains) and discloses the unfeasibility of building up a national language which will only escort its people to isolation.

Walcott's *Remembrance* apprehends the subject of national identity through the life of a simple Trinidadian family seven years after independence. The play brings to light the three foremost factors that influence national identity in the Caribbean: Great Britain as a carrier of civilization, the general discontent in the new government and the sturdy wave of American cultural imperialism.

Henri Christophe by Derek Walcott is based in Haiti in the years instantly following the slave rebellion that uprooted the French colonists from the island. The leader of the revolution, Toussaint L'Ouverture, was deceived by Napoleon's agents and prisoned to France till death. His absence leads to a power struggle among the remaining leaders – a struggle that forms the material of this play. Christophe, the protagonist was a revolutionary hero, determined to make his people independent from the French oppression but he was also incapable to envisage power outside of frameworks that imitate white style and structure.

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