

Fragmented Identities in Derek Walcott's *A Far Cry from Africa*: A Psychological Conflict

Shivender Rahul

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Jiwaji University, Gwalior

Madhya Pradesh, India.

Email: shiven_uk@yahoo.com

Abstract

Derek Walcott's *A Far Cry from Africa*, is not only a brilliant exposition of the imbalance relationship between the colonizer and the colonized but also a depiction of the pain of a man who stands in-between two cultures. The poem exposes the conflict of the identity he goes through due to his state of dilemma. Throughout the poem he continues his quest to get an identity of his own, but at the end, his endeavor remains futile as he finally confesses his love for the English language as well as for his origin. In other words the idea that pervades the entire poem is the conflict of culture and identity, from where the poet finds no way out.

Keywords: Culture, Hybridity, Identity, Origin, Dilemma

Introduction:

Written at the backdrop of Mau- Mau Uprising, an extended and bloody battle during the 1950s between European settlers and the native Kikuyu tribe in what is now the republic of Kenya, Derek Walcott's *A Far Cry from Africa* is not only a brilliant exposition of the imbalance relationship between the colonizer and the colonized but also a depiction of the pain of a man who stands in-between two cultures. Though the principal purpose of the poet is to uphold the revolt of the Kenyan tribe against the civilized white settlers, but while doing so he finds himself in dilemma which tears him between "Africa", his origin and the English tongue and culture he loves.

Fragmented Identities:

While dealing with the identity of his own Walcott writes- "I am a kind of split writer; I have one tradition inside me going in one way, and another going another. The mimetic, the narrative, and dance element is strong on one side, and the literary, the classical tradition is strong on the other." (Meanings 1970).

Narendra Ranjan Malas in his article entitled *Bridging the Gaps: A Reading of Derek Walcott's A far Cry From Africa and Ruins of a Great House* writes – “Like other Anglophone Caribbean poets his poetry registers this socio-cultural plurality, ambivalence and quest for a legitimate identity, but at the same time there is an attempt to resolve the contradictions and bridge the cultural distances”.

He further adds that the purpose of Walcott in *A Far Cry from Africa* is to “explore his desire to harmonize the discord between his African and European cultural inheritance and his endeavor to build a bridge between two cultural traditions.” (Page 41, Malas)

According to Heather M. Bradley, the title *A far Cry from Africa* is very significant in the sense as it indicates, despite his concentration on African themes, Walcott's cultural instability as well as his alienation from Africa. His negative view of his hybridism: “I who am poisoned with the blood of both, /where shall I turn, divided to the vein?” points out the consequence of displacement–isolation. It seems that Walcott feels foreign in both cultures due to his lack of “pure” blood. As he writes “An individual's sense of identity arises from cultural influences which define his or her character according to a particular society's standards”. The poet's hybrid heritage prevents him from identifying directly with one culture and creates a feeling of isolation. The poem provides a textual version of the poet's mental dissertation on the vices and virtues which differentiate each culture.”

Walcott depicts the struggle with cultural and ancestral divisions he and others experience in the West Indies. Walcott begins the poem with images of the Mau Mau Uprising and moves on to address his internal dilemma that tears Walcott because of his mixed race. That is why the poet continuously uses contradictory statements to determine his state between two cultures. He first describes the Kikuyu natives as “quick as flies, / Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt” (Lines 2-3) not only to uphold the perspective of the British towards the native Kikuyu but also to justify the beneficial nature of the British rule in Africa. But at the very next line he contradicts the image of the British, as the principal cause of the suffering of the natives in equally ugly terms, “Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries: “Waste no compassion on these separate dead!” (Lines 5-6). These contradictory statements become more intense as the poem progresses until towards the end of the poem Walcott finally compares Africans as a primitive beast, and the British as a fictitious, yet mighty, super-hero- “A waste of our compassion, as with Spain, The gorilla wrestles with the superman”. In his article “Conflicting Loyalties in *A Far Cry from Africa*” Heather M. Bradley Walcott writes-

“in *A Far Cry from Africa* depicts Africa and Britain in the standard roles of the vanquished and the conqueror, although he portrays the cruel imperialistic exploits of the British without creating sympathy for the African tribesmen.

This objectivity allows Walcott to contemplate the faults of each culture without reverting to the bias created by attention to moral considerations".⁵

A Far Cry from Africa uses metaphors, such as "colonel of carrion", and ironic statements, such as "corpses are scattered through a paradise", to criticize the inhumane and destructive nature of both culture Walcott uses the advantage of his own hybridity to dissect the inherent intention of Africa and Europe. He has tried to express the idea what Fanon has written in his *Wretched of the Earth* that it is the desire of the every colonized to be in the positions of the colonizer

Different critics have argued that *A Far Cry from Africa* is actually a journey of Walcott to determine his own identity. But as the poem progresses we find that his search becomes more complicated as he himself falls in an ambiguous state, from where there is no way out. That is why the last stanza of the poem contains so many lines where we see that the poet himself complicates his search for a legitimate identity. Despite making numerous contradictory statements he cannot turn his head away from facing the question, "How choose/between this Africa and the English tongue I love?" (Lines.29-30), the answer of which he himself does not know. Apart from that, the quoted lines clearly indicate the poet's admiration of the aspect of both cultures. As Heather M. Bradley writes-"He remains partial to the African terrain and way of life, while he prefers the English language and literary tradition. The poet grapples with his affinity for progress and technology contained within the British culture and his nostalgia for the rich cultural heritage of Africa. The magnetism that each culture holds for Walcott causes a tension which augments as the poem continues." Walcott's divided loyalties engender in him a sense for not being able to adopt the culture of his origin. Though he accepts the "civilized" aspects of British culture, he cannot acknowledge the justification of the immoral treatment done by British towards the Africans in the name of civilizing them. In other words, "A Far Cry from Africa" does not provide the poet the way to resolve the paradox of his hybrid inheritance- "How can I face such slaughter and be cool? How can I turn from Africa and live?" (lines 31-32).

Throughout the poem, Walcott continues his quests to know about the true identity of him. He has used words like 'poison' to uphold the fact that how dual identity haunts him and create in him a sense of guilt for not being able to trace out his origin. It creates in him a sense of displacement and isolation. He, despite ,his love for the English language, cannot embrace the culture of the colonizer and at the same time cannot fit himself to the culture of the 'darkness', and as a result he tries to conclude the tussle within himself by blaming his state of dilemma. "I who am poisoned with the blood of both, where shall I turn, divided to the vein?" (line26)

This sad ending upholds the fact that Walcott considers himself as a foreigner due to his mixed blood. Cultural influences play a vital role in formulating the identity of an

individual by defining one's character according to a particular society's standards. Walcott, due to his sharing of mixed blood, is unable to identify his own culture. The result of which is the poet's indecisive state of mind regarding his own identity. In other words, the poet's hybrid heritage is not enabling him to identify his own culture and thereby putting him in state of isolation. Walcott's sceptic look towards both cultures provides him the scope to acknowledge Africa and Britain in the standard roles of the vanquished and the conqueror. It is true that he criticizes the cruel imperialistic exploits of the British but at the same time does not even try to draw sympathy for the African tribesmen. This suggests the fact that Walcott tries to uphold the fault of both cultures without showing any kind biasness either towards Africa or towards British.

The title of the poem is very ambiguous in nature. The title involves an idiom "a far cry" which does contain two meanings. At one hand the phrase 'A Far Cry' suggests the poet's futile attempt to write about Africa from distance for the poet himself feels the difficulty of writing about a culture from where he is literally and metaphorically far away. At the other hand "A Far Cry" "may also have another meaning that the real state of the African 'paradise' is a far cry from the Africa that we have read about in descriptions of gorgeous fauna and flora and interesting village customs. A third level of meaning to the title is the idea that the poet, despite the distance, is able to hear the cry of the African natives due to their loss of their cultural identity. He hears the cry coming to him on the wind and making him feel nostalgic towards his origin. In short by using the phrase 'A Far Cry' in the title the poet not only exposes his anti-colonial outlook but has tried to justify the fact despite sharing the culture of the civilized, he cannot discard his past, his origin.

Another problem that Walcott faces in the poem is the "problem is how to express this painful experience, because it is always difficult to depict Blackman's agony in Whiteman's words". Due to his long detachment from his origin, the poet himself falls in doubt whether he will be upholding the pain of his native Africans in the language of the colonizer.

Conclusion:

To conclude, it must be admitted that Walcott's poem exposes the conflict of the identity he goes through due to his state of dilemma. Throughout the poem he continues his quest to get an identity of his own, but at the end, his endeavor remains futile as he finally confesses his love for the English language as well as for his origin. In other words the idea that pervades the entire poem is the conflict of culture and identity.

Works Cited

Walcott, Derek. "A Far Cry from Africa." The Norton Anthology of Poetry. Ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996. 1820. Print.

<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/caribbean/walcott/bradley2.html>

http://www.thecontour.org/uploads/2/8/3/5/28355439/bridging_the_gaps__a_reading_of_der_ek_walcotts__a_far_cry_from_africa_and_ruins_of_a_great_house.pdf

Walcott, Derek. "Midsummer." The Norton Anthology of Poetry. Ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996. 1827. Print.

Walcott, Derek. Collected Poems 1948-1984. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; London: Faber and Faber, 1986