

LITERATURE AND IDENTITY: THE POEMS OF DEREK WALCOTT

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Abstract: The whole world of literature is like a perennial river in which the boats of identity of race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, language and culture float on, each boat carries the cargos of feelings, emotions, sentiments and sense and sensibilities in all the unlimited experiences to share with, to receive them, one must leap into the river, swim along, hold the boat and slide in there to see what it can offer to us. Here is an attempt to describe the relation between literature and identity and examine the position of West Indian literature among the world literatures, the position of Walcott in West Indian literature, the mis conceptions of the nationalists, black intellectuals and critics about Walcott and how the poems of Walcott reflect his universal out look beyond the narrow confines of self definition or egoistic definition of racial identities. The poems of Walcott reflect his yearning as well as his struggle for a race less society and for a free world beyond all differences and discrimination inequalities and violence.

Key words: Literature, Identity, Westindian Culture, Westindian Literature, Definition of self, racial identity, Position of Derect Walcott.

Introduction: Literature may be said to be the creative genius of human beings, it is an artistic representation (in a language) of the intimate reactions of an individual to his or her own self (of his or her own feelings, emotions, thoughts) or others or nature or the world where he or she lives in. The immediate environment always plays a very important role in evoking responses in the individuals. Hence all the literatures in the world some way or other represent the immediate experience of the individuals. Coming to identity, the specific characteristics of some one or some thing may be called one's identity or its identity. The identity of some thing might include literature because literature has got its own identity like American Literature, African Literature, and British Literature and so on. Identity exists where there is human existence. Identity exists where there is literature, literature emerges where there is identity. There is a natural desire in every individual to identify him self or her self with another member in a society or group. Depending on race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, language, culture, people distinguish themselves from other groups and form understanding and belonging with the group whom they identify themselves. As long as there is no obstruction or objection to retain their identity and have the dignity of being a respectable member of a group or culture there will be no question of conflicts or tensions among individuals or groups or it may lead to conflicts and tensions which may range from street brawls to wars of nations. The bulk of literature which was being produced during and after the colonial encounters in many countries in the world as a whole may be said as the literatures of identities. One can see in the literatures of world, resistance, anger, rejection of the natives against their colonial masters through conforming to the themes, styles of

native origin representing their native cultures. During the post colonial phase one would find in the literatures of the world the attempt of writers relocating and redefining of identities, their native cultures due to obliteration of their cultures, memories and sensibilities, displacement and foreign settlements under colonial rule. Where there is threat or humiliation to one's dignity or one's identity an artist's reaction to it will be different from the commonality. The reaction of an artist to such condition will be intellectual and represent his reaction through artistic expression. If one looks into the history of the world, one will find oppressions, suppressions, killings, humiliations, slavery and so on. The dark history of the world can be summed up in the most powerful lines of a Telugu poet Sri Sri thus:

ē desa caritra cusinā
ē munnadi garva karanam
nara jāti caritra samastam
parapeedana parāyanatvam
-Mahaprastanam, Sri Sri

These lines may go in English:

What's there to take pride
In the history of any country
The whole history of man

Is the suppression of the one by the other?

The colonial rule shook the foundations of lives and cultures of the people in colonial countries. Exploitation, oppression, suppression, killing, humiliation, slavery were the fruits of colonial rule. Many native intellectuals left their home lands, settled in foreign countries, experienced humiliations in foreign lands. The works of these writers describe their anguish due to displacement, because their position is very critical that they can not come back to their native lands or lead a respectable life in foreign lands. Some intellectuals resorted to

movements against the colonial rulers promoting native consciousness among the natives through their works. Some sacrificed their lives in the national movements. The experience of West Indies is no different from the experiences of the other parts of the world under colonial rule. There was full of unrest in society, the despair and dejection was the common experience of writers, artists or any others. The view of the world about West Indies painfully echoes in the words of V.S. Naipal thus: History is built around achievement and creation and nothing was created in West Indies.¹ The dark history of West Indies during colonial rule and its resultant impact on writers, artists, on the workers can be understood from the words of Naipal, one may understand the despair and dejection that struck the hearts of West Indian writers and artists. When they look back, they do not have a history that they could take pride in but there was slavery and suffering and a nightmarish past, the present is bleak, and the future is hopeless. Perhaps, under such conditions one could think of nothing. Number of writers left West Indies and settled in England, America and some European countries. The nationalists, revolutionaries, black intellectuals, writers and artists who strove hard to promote national spirit against colonialism and to instill African consciousness among the African descent living in West Indies, those who themselves declared to be the nationalist and patriots and who themselves established a mark in independent struggle against the British and the champions of African campaign settled comfortably in foreign nations. Derek Walcott is the only exceptional poet in this line. Since he did not leave his mother land in spite of many upheavals in his life and career, he stayed in West Indies throughout his life till now. Derek Walcott is the most outstanding poet as well as a playwright in West Indian writing in English and indisputably one of the most renowned writers in the world of English literature. The range and variety of his achievement are quite astonishing. He is a poet, dramatist, actor, producer, painter, educationist, reformer, philosopher, prophet and critic of life and literature. His literary career has extended over sixty eight years till today. Walcott's prolific output includes fourteen volumes of poetry, eleven plays published in four volumes and a numerous essays and critical pieces. He won Nobel Prize for his invaluable contribution in the field of English literature in 1992. In order to understand the nature of West Indian identity to assess the position of Walcott in West Indian literature and what makes him a unique poet among the West Indian writers and to assess how far Walcott has succeeded in presenting West Indian reality in his poems, it is highly essential to look at the back ground of West Indian literature, its emergence and development. Before the political

emergence of the present West Indies, it had its geographical existence in the Caribbean region. Even now, its geographical location, with a few minor changes is in the Caribbean region. The Caribbean is a chain of islands, surrounding the Caribbean Sea. To the north is the Caribbean sea, bordered by the Gulf of Mexico; the straits of Florida, and the northern Atlantic ocean which lies to the east and the north east; the coast line of the continent of the South America lies to the south. Before the European discovery of the Caribbean islands, it was inhabited by three indigenous groups of people. They are Ciboney, The Taino and Caribs. They had close cultural affinities. Caribs were the most powerful among the three groups, and they were mobile and always engaged in wars. The Ciboney were the first entrants of the Caribbean island, they were very less in number and they were found in parts of Cuba and Bahamas. The most numerous groups were the Tainos, who resided in the most of the Greater Antilles Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola (presently Haiti) and Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. The smaller eastern island chain was the home of Caribs, a tropical forest group related to most of the indigenous Indians found in central and South America. Due to their close cultural affinities, they lived very peacefully till the European discovery. Farming, fishing and hunting were their primary occupations. Though Columbus arrived into the Caribbean islands in 1492, the actual colonial settlement started with the Spanish conquistadors about 1600 AD. Gold mining was the main interest of the Spanish. The Tainos resisted the Spanish forces against their settlement in the Caribbean region. But a large number of the Tainos were killed in war. And some of them became slaves. Then the strong resistance to the Spanish forces came from the Caribs. The European settlement in the Caribbean region was resisted by the Caribs till seventeenth century. A number of Caribs were killed in war and those who were caught became slaves. Soon some of them died of epidemics. In this way the population of slaves in the Indo Caribbean was reduced considerably. By the end of seventeenth century the English, the Dutch and the French established their colonies in the Caribbean and they found that the soil was good for sugar plantation. The British took initiative for sugar plantation due to scarcity of the labour force they introduced African tribes into slavery. Later they imported slaves mostly from Africa and indentured labourers from India, China and Middle East. There was a heavy competition among the European powers for sugar trade in this region. They earned huge profits from sugar trade. There were internal wars between the European settlers for power and economic dominance. Thus, the islands in the Caribbean region had come under the control of

the four colonizing countries; Spain, England, France and Netherlands forming consequently four linguistic regions in the Caribbean as Spanish speaking region, English speaking region, French speaking region and Dutch speaking region. Britain had the large number of islands in its possession, though the number of islands in possession under certain colony varied time to time, because of internal wars. St. Lucia was a fine example for this, because it was changed from hand to hand in wars nearly fourteen times. Ultimately the islands that came under the control of Britain were known as British West Indies or Anglophone Caribbean. This region includes Anguilla, Antigua, Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Bay islands, Belize, British virgin islands, Cayman islands, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Montserrat, Saint Croix, Saint Kitts, Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago (from 1797), the Turks and Caicos islands. The Literature that has been written in English by the writers of this region is known as 'British West Indian Literature' and popularly known as "West Indian Literature". Now, there are nationalist literatures in small places like Jamaica and Trinidad as a result of political fragmentation of the whole English speaking Caribbean region in to small nations. If one goes by political definitions of these places as units as Islands or nations the term "West Indian Literature" does not exist. But just as there is a West Indian cricket team, one can generally describe the literature in English written in this part of the world as 'West Indian Literature'. Even, in terms of culture, West Indies does not contain one single culture. As Shaheed Mohammed observes: Migration has been one of the primary forces in the formation and transformation of Caribbean societies. Before the Arawaks discovered Columbus on their shores, and ever since, various peoples have migrated to the region – some by choice, others by force. The colonization of these territories gave way to the formation of independent Caribbean states with the population of each state comprising the descendants of one or more immigrant groups.² Hence the West Indian culture is a synthesis of various cultures. The cultures of native tribes and of the imported slave communities from Africa, indentured labourers from India, China, Middle East and the cultures of colonial rulers promoted to a highly varied and complex culture in the West Indian soil. In this multi cultural context, it is very difficult to define one single notion of 'Caribbeanness' or 'West Indianness'. Walcott's position is even more complex, since he is descended from a white grandfather and a black grandmother, even linguistically, he is heir to conflicting traditions since he speaks English, French and Creole patois. Walcott believes in the unity and collective identity of West Indians, though he is angry with the British

for their cruel policies in West Indies he does not wish for their destruction but the nationalists, revolutionaries, black intellectuals, writers and artists who strove hard to promote national spirit against colonialism and to instill African consciousness among the African descent living in West Indies mistrusted Walcott for his moderate response towards the British, they thought that since he is descended from a white grandfather and a black grandmother he has soft corner as well as high estimate for the British and some prejudice as well as low estimate for the Africans. Even the critics of Walcott seem to have assessed the value and worth of poetry so far on the basis of his mixed ancestry. The chief concern of critics seem to have been centred in two issues that how far he is African and how far he is English in his thought, imagination and treatment of themes and styles. Some critics somehow or other tried to prove that his poetry is an embodiment of his inordinate struggle and conflict to define his position as an individual as well as a poet from his hybrid racial dimension in the multicultural context of West Indies. This view of critics certainly relegates the position of Walcott in the literary world. It would certainly reduce the scope of Walcott's poetry. This view of critics simply imply as if all the poetry of Walcott were a life long struggle that describes his longing to belong to African and English cultures like an abandoned child of divorced parents who longs for love of both parents and receiving none. This argument of critics of Walcott can further make him a hypocrite and his poetry to be a vehicle for his hypocritical mission of establishing his identity as an individual as well as a poet in two cultures, thereby establishing his reputation in two literary traditions. It also confirms one thing that the main essence of Walcott's poetry is an expression of his longing for the establishment of his identity from two racial backgrounds. Finally it confirms as if racial identity and self definition were the chief concerns of Walcott's poetry. The scope of Walcott's poetry is very wide and it is beyond all the critical conjectures. In order to understand how Walcott has been discriminated by certain critics, it is worth mentioning the observations of Mervin Morris. Morris says: The central content of Walcott's verse is not much examined. The accusers who claim he is not West Indian enough get stuck with allusion to world literature or with stylistic influences. Poems which happen to be about death, love, evil, art, the loss of faith are not relevant enough to for those who find compassion or complex ambiguity decadent luxuries in our emerging society, and call instead for poems which speaks stridently of politics, class and race. ³ It is beyond the narrow confines of self definition or egoistic definition of racial identities. It does never end in defining identities of self or race.

The poetry of Walcott reflects his yearning as well as his struggle for a race less society and for a free world beyond all differences and discrimination inequalities and violence. A number of poems would reveal his conviction. His concern over the racial violence is most movingly represented in the poem "A far cry from Africa" as reflected in the following lines: The violence of beast on beast is read As natural law, but upright man Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain.⁴ It is a very straight and bold question to the colonial rulers as well as to the firebrand revolutionaries of West Indies, and for everyone who believes in revenge and violence. Walcott's reaction to colonial rule is not revolutionary but moderate and intellectual. As a matter of fact, his suffering is twofold. In addition to his virtual suffering of being a subject of colonial rule and being a Methodist in a catholic country, he suffered from discrimination and the distrust of native writers, nationalists, revolutionaries and the writers of African sentiment for his tolerant and moderate reaction towards the existing conditions in West Indies. He was mainly distrusted for his association with European literary tradition. He never seems to develop any dislike or hatred on anyone who distrust him on personal lines. Though West Indies got independence it does not seem to have brought any peace to Walcott because of the biased out look of the sectarians. During the British rule he suffered and under self governance he suffered too. The position of Walcott in West Indies can be seen in the following lines: I had no nation now but only the imagination. After the white man, the niggers didn't want me When the power swing to their side.⁵ Though he is discriminated he does not develop any hatred towards the colonizers or the self government represented by the leaders of African descent. He only believes in "imagination". He believes only in his individual strength and in his intelligence. The refusal by the colonizers or the native people does not bring him any despair. He wants to establish himself as a poet to utter the voice of West Indian reality, therefore he believes in imagination. Throughout his poetic career, till today he stood for truth, tolerance, peace, love, unity and integrity, one may find these ideals in the poems of Walcott. The acceptance of reality, as a part of reality accepting his own faults and deficiencies and correcting them is the thing what makes Walcott a unique man as well as a poet. While having adequate sensibility and understanding towards the suffering of the fellow writers and their reaction towards colonial conditions, he seems to suggest through his poems indirectly to them, directly to the entire world that revolution and revenge should not be instruments to fight oppression, discrimination and exploitation of any kind by anyone, because they can also bring same destruction. Through his poems he

seems to suggest to those who feel revengeful out of recalling the nightmarish history and experiencing the bleak present, not to scratch over their old scars to make the wounds afresh by looking into history. Because it brings back the pain and it will lead to revenge. In place of revenge, he suggests tolerance, in place of recalling history, he suggests forgetting history. He strives for a free world where there is no discrimination and disparities and no violence. The poem "Blues" presents the racial tensions in America. The Poet's encounter of these tensions and his reconciliation towards it is the central theme of the poem. The ending lines of the poem are very crucial to understand Walcott's commitment and conformity to non violence as reflected in the following lines: Still, it taught me something about love. If it's so tough, forget it.⁶ He suggests that instead of looking into past one can build up one's present from realizing one's own strengths and weaknesses. He loves Africa as much as he loves England or America, for that reason, he loves any country in the same spirit. But he has a deep love and attachment, both emotional and spiritual towards his birth place. Throughout his personal life or poetic career he has an inseparable relation with his birth place and its people and many of his poems would reveal this fact. Walcott thinks that serving to one's birth place and one's people should be the primary obligation of anyone. His poems would reveal this fact. For him West Indies means the entire archipelago of islands with all its immense variety of cultures, West Indian means anyone who is born there and live there whether their ancestors came from Africa, England, Europe, India or China or from anywhere else. For Walcott birth place and its people is his primary obligation rather than definition of personal identity or racial identity. Many poems reflect highly rich, complex and varied experiences of Walcott in his island home St. Lucia in particular and West Indies in general. The poem "As John to Patmos" presents his island as "a heaven away from the dust blown blood of cities", the poem "Prelude" presents the stagnant living conditions of his island. The poems "The Castaway", "The Swamp" reflect the sense of alienation that Walcott passed through being an artist in adverse conditions of his island home. The poem "A Sea Chantey" reflects unity that exists among the diverse complex cultures in his islands. Apart from the experiences of his childhood as an artist, the poetic autobiography of Walcott *Another Life* reflects also the socio economic and political conditions in West Indies during the early days of his career. A number of poems in the poetic collections such as *Sea Grapes*, the first section of *The Arkansas Testament* celebrate his birth place St. Lucia. Another collection of Walcott *The Midsummer* exclusively reflects the experience of Walcott in Trinidad during

one summer. The epic length poem *Omeros* seems to have been written as an expression of his gratitude to his birth place St. Lucia. Even one may find a number of poems in his later collections *The Bounty*, *The Prodigal* and *White Egrets* celebrating his birth place show his love and attachment to it. For him it is like mother. There are a number of poems which reflect the relation of Walcott with his people and also those poems which reflect his sensible observation, his humbleness to receive influences from the people around him, his openness to speak about their strengths and weaknesses. All the early writers who wrote about people of West Indies wrote about suffering and slavery, even Walcott was aware of those harsh realities and he too presented those realities in his poems, besides these issues the hidden potentialities, the hidden sensibilities and the hidden beauties of his people were discovered only by Walcott, his epic length poem *Omeros* is the finest example in this connection. Number of his poems reflects the living conditions of the people in his island. He never seemed to give any unrealistic picture about his people. He presented them as they are, with all their strengths and weaknesses. Innocence, hardworking nature, sincerity, undivided faith in god, humanity, endurance, courage and there are a number of other fine qualities that could be seen in the people of West Indies as represented in the poems of Walcott; in the same way, illiteracy, ignorance, superstitions, weak man and woman relations can also be found in them from his poems. For instance the poem "Tales of the Islands" reflects the panorama of West Indian life such as the savage rites practiced by certain tribes, superstitions of the people, the hypocrisy and exploitation of the catholic priests, poor living conditions of islanders, the existence of prostitution in islands, weak man and woman relationships and so on. Poems like "Return to D' Ennery: Rain", "Laventille", certain parts in *Another Life*, reflect Walcott's closer observation and association with his people and these poems also represent how he has been influenced by them. The poems like "The Schooner Flight", "Koenig River", "The spoiler's Return", reflect the exploitation of the poor by the corrupt political leaders. The first section in *The Arkansas Testament* is dedicated to his birth place St. Lucia as well as its people. The poem "The Light of the World" is an extraordinary one to present the real strength and beauty of his people. Walcott believes in human dignity, sometimes certain poems of Walcott may reflect his sympathy for the poor and the suffering, but he never thinks that he is a man, capable of sympathizing the poor, and they deserve it. He never plays a patronizing role rather he receives influences from them in return. The poems "Light of the World", "Return to D' Ennery: Rain", *Omeros* are finest examples in this connection. The

greatness of his people is their tolerance and their endurance that they would accept all the suffering in silence and they never give up their faith in god. They never blame anyone or anything for their fate. Walcott was so impressed as to say about his islanders in the poem "Saint Lucie" thus: ...on Sundays between adorations, one were there, if one were there, and not there, looking in at the windows the real faces of angels.⁷ In the view of Walcott they are angels, because their true devotion can be seen in their eyes and in their innocent faces. There are number of poems which would illustrate Walcott's love and admiration for the people who live around him. There is not even single evidence from the entire collections of poems of Walcott that he has racial prejudice. His poems promote unity and integrity. There is not even a single poem of Walcott which represents division or discrimination but the world around him believes in divisions and revenge. But he can not change his conviction for the sake of anyone. Though the British rejected him, though his own people rejected him, his innate love for them has never been altered. He believes in unity, he believed in integrity because: To have loved one horizon is insularity; it blindfolds vision, it narrows experience.⁸ One can understand the impartial view of Walcott about the world. When the world believes in divisions he ascertains the purposelessness of divisions at all levels. And he further says to get away with those narrow racial or national feelings to establish integrity thereby achieving peace. He also believes that the actual frontiers of the world exist only in the minds of individuals. Where there are no psychological barriers, they can have liberty and peace. They can live happily anywhere in the world. They can move anywhere and they can become the part of the world without suffering from divisions. The thing what it separates people is not geographical boundaries but the psychological barriers. Walcott has most precisely conveyed this powerful thought in the following line: Wherever the heart hesitates that is its true frontier⁹ As Walcott have no divisions in his heart or thought, he has been able to become the poet of the world. As he has no barriers, he was able to love the British or the African cultures alike. The critics who tried to prove that his poetry is an embodiment of his inordinate struggle and conflict to define his position as an individual as well as a poet from his hybrid, racial and linguistic dimensions in the multicultural, multilingual context of West Indies may well understand that he does not have such conflict from the following lines: the two languages I know - one so rich in its imperial intimacies, its echo of privilege, the other like the orange words of a hillside in drought - but my love of both as wide as the Atlantic is large.¹⁰ These lines are indicative of the inseparable love of Walcott for the

British as well as the African cultures. He loves English as much as loves Creole. He loves Creole as much as he loves English and they are inseparable and indivisible from him. The divisions seem to have been attributed to Walcott for the purpose of intellectual discussions of the scholars. In spite of the highly complex socio cultural situation in West Indies he saw only unity in its diversity. He believes in the dignity of an individual and the integrity of the world. The false interpretations of the critics and the reaction of Walcott towards the false interpretations of the critics may be understood from his own words from the following lines: Race, despite what critics think, has meant nothing to me past early manhood. Race is ridiculous. Even racial war is, at base, humorous. Different coloured ants fighting. I have no loyalties to one race more than to another¹¹

Different coloured ants fight because they are ants but man with all his intelligence fight just like ants. He does not believe in the very concept race itself. Therefore he proceeds to say in the same interview, "the conduct of race is its own fault, not mine! Black or white!" one can understand the attitude of Walcott towards race and racial wars from the above lines and one can even understand the misrepresentations of the critics and Walcott's reaction to the view of the critics. He never strove for racial identification with any culture as a part of self definition. As a man as well as a poet Walcott has no serious concern for his racial connections, the above instances perhaps would provide sufficient ground to establish Walcott not only a poet of West Indies but also a poet of the world.

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