

Religious Influence in Derek Walcott's Select Poems

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Abstract

Derek Walcott holds the view of religion in his poems. Though he laments on the loss of chief Caribbean tradition, he shares and shows a ray of hope, at the same time doesn't forgets to make a try to have a look on the opposite congregation's positive views. Moreover he invites the presence both righteous and wicked minded explorers in his poetry after having a deep study on them. He gives a suitable title to each one of them without hurting directly but cunningly critics and shows his deep emotion on them. Thus examining three poems based on the contribution of invaders in Caribbean islands, the reader can draw out the conclusion that the poet Derek Walcott is the voice of Saint Lucia, an example of mixed legacy, passion of colonised people, mirror of Caribbean Islands, a genuine painter of themes existing in his society and the ambassador of human ethnic values.

KEYWORDS: Religion, Tradition, Passion, Ethnic Values.

Christianity is the dominating religion in Caribbean countries. It is the Religion which has most followers. Before the European arrival, three major Amerindian indigenous peoples lived on the islands; the Taino in the Greater Antilles, the Bahamas and the Leeward islands; the island Caribs and Galibi in the Windward Islands; and the Ciboney in Western Cuba. These people were concerned by European as barbaric beasts fit for enslavement and considered them as the souls whom are in need of redemption as they were the practitioners of witchcraft' lacking true religious sensibility or unfortunate idol worshippers in need of conversion. Each region in Caribbean islands possessed different neotraditional African religions. Some of them are Vodou of Haiti of Trinidad, Santeria in Cuba, Shango in Cuba, Kumina in Jamaica, Winti in surname, Kromanti dance of Jamaica Marroons, and Comfa in Guyana. All these religions were formed out of religions practiced by various ethnic groups in different parts of Africa. Through these regions they believed in the elements of nature. They also shared a belief in the unremitting intertwine of the world of living and the world of the dead. They viewed death as a continuation of life in another form.

European settlements in the Caribbean began with Christopher Columbus. But the first proper European settlement in Caribbean began when Nicholas de Ovando, a faithful soldier from Western Spain, settled about 2,500 Spanish Colonists in eastern Hispaniola in 1502. Thus the European countries began to conquer West Indies. Along with their arrival they introduced their culture, tradition and above all their religion to Caribbean islands. The Spanish and French were devout Roman Catholics, while British were Protestants. Irish migrants from Britain brought Catholicism with them, and the Dutch brought both Catholicism and Dutch reform beliefs. The region's religious became more mixed When different countries claimed the ownership of islands. But even in this time few islands remained unchanged holding their traditional beliefs. Still, the biggest

support to the growth of Christianity was slavery. Many of the Caribbean - born slaves were indoctrinated into Christianity.

In St. Lucia French were the island's first European settlers. Later England took control of the island. In ensuing years, the rule of the island changed frequently. Thus both the nations deeply influenced the ethnic groups. About 70% of the population is Roman Catholic, a legacy of French colonization of the island. The remaining belongs to other Christian denominations.

The selected author, Derek Walcott, his family was part of a minority methodist community, who felt overshadowed by the dominant Catholic culture of island established during French colonial rule. Influence of religion shadows in many of his poems. Even his first poem, written at the age of fourteen itself is a religious poem, 'Miltonic', was published in the newspaper St. Lucia. The poem received both critical appreciation and condemns. An English Catholic priest condemned the Methodist-inspired poem as blasphemous. But he continued to write religious poems.

The influence of religion in his parents and the passage of religious values from his parents to poet himself is drawn out in the poem, 'A Letter from Brooklyn', which was published in the year 1962.

The poem, 'A Letter from Brooklyn' offers religious hope to those who grieve on the death of their beloved. The poem repeats and assures the fact that there is a life in heaven after death for those kind and noble lives. At a time, the poet was estranged from God's presence and love. He existed as a Christian only by the name and fame but this letter from one of his family friends reassured him to stick within the faith.

Derek Walcott begins the poem with the description of a letter that he received. It is a letter from an old lady whose handwriting is trembled and the author can foresee 'a veined hand' which is translucently clear as a paper, writing a letter. The letter's words, content and thought is not brightful to poet's sense but later it shines like steel and he can feel the letter. The letter describes about poet's birth. The poet was not able to recollect the sender's face but he can remember her outfits without much clarity. She wears buttoned boots and the place where she sits in their wooden church whenever she is grey-haired, thin-voiced and perpetually bowed.

In the next stanza the poet comes to the content of the letter. The sender introduces herself in the letter. She's Mable Rawlins and she herself in the letter.

She very well know poet's parents. She describes his father as a dutiful, honest, faithful and useful person. He was a gifted painter and he paints delicately. He died at the age of twenty-eight and she says that he has been called to home.

Then the poet thinks of the letter and its purpose to him. He says that the Letter from Brooklyn from a frail hand restores his duty that is, his affirmation of faith in religion. For the writer the heaven is a home which she hardly believes on. She is not bothered about the withering beauty of the world or the tears which world presents. Instead according to the letter writer heaven is a place where painters go and all those bring beauty in the world. They do their work in world by producing a light and beauty then they return to God, from where they come to do their duty well. The poet concludes the poem by saying that hence he believes in the existence of heaven he will not grieve for any man's death anymore.

The poem, 'A Letter from Brooklyn' is created upon the basic foundation of Christian belief that there's life after death and for those noble persons who bring

happiness to others in the world will live in heaven after death. It conveys the message that there is nothing to worry about thinking the death of a noble person for they are in heaven. The poet's father through his paintings gifted smile in face and happiness in heart for those viewers hence he too will be safe in heaven.

Looking the poem in religious point of view, the poem shows poet's father's religious faith and influence that had on his life and on poet's life. His father, who had been a painter and poet, a member of Methodist community died while his mother was pregnant with the twins the poet himself and his brother Roderick. Hence the poet, Derek Walcott had not seen his father and doesn't know anything about him personally, other than what he know from others. It is in this situation, the letter comes. The simple faith of old lady helps him to Restore himself in God. The poem begins with a metaphor comparing the old lady's handwriting to 'spidery style'. This phrase stands for complex sensitive treatment of old age, art and death. It seems that the old lady have some special purpose to write this letter. She may have felt that the son of her friend, that is the poet unlike his father have travelled away from God almighty. So she may have thought to write how her friend had been in religious faith saying that,

your father was a dutiful, honest,
faithful, and useful person
a horn- painter, he painted delicately on horn,
he used to sit around the table and paint pictures
inorder to make her friend's son to stand with God. (16-20)

She says that the poet's father 'was called home' (28) instead of saying he was dead. This implies that this man is at God's side in heaven. In the poem, through the lines of poet it is almost clear that poet in his own mind have few doubts upon existence of God. The spidery handwriting of woman turns into a web of memory for the poet and he himself analyses how much he resembles and differs from his father in the field of faith and worship towards God. The woman also tries to convey that since poet's father brought beauty through poetry writing he is safe in heaven. Like that if he use his poetic gift truly, he will also have a part in heaven. The heaven belongs to those bring beauty and light in the world through their words and deeds. For this he uses the Latin phrase, 'lux-mundi' which means light of the world. In Holy Bible Jesus says that 'I am the light of the world'. Jesus came to the world as a roll model for others. Likewise, according to Christian belief, the followers of Christ are about to follow the life of Jesus so that they can light up the world throughout their life.

Moreover the poem also implies that poetry is a divine gift and it is emplified in the story of his father's life and death. Inorder to write this poem the poet captures the old-fashioned religious language. He uses loose relaxed narrative form using dialogues and description. The poet tries to quote maximum lines in the poem from the letter. There is a complex use of couplet and it offers hope to bereaved.

In short through the poem, 'A Letter from Brooklyn' Derek Walcott passes the universal message that when faith in God is challenged, there may be a loss of hope, but chances will be there and it can restore the faith through the guidance of others.

But, in the poem 'Saint Lucia's First Communion', Walcott presents another feast of religion. The reader can observe that Walcott is a strong believer of his religion that is Christianity. But he is well aware of the defects if one does

not realise the solidness of the decision that he may himself take or forced to do so, the survival in that particular decision is hard.

The poem describes one of the most important religious festivals on St. Lucia. It is also an important occasion in every traditional Christian believer's life. Hence the poet offers critical perspective on traditional religious practices of Catholicism. The poem is in the pattern of four-line quatrain in five stanzas. There is a wide use of metaphor and simile which reveals a wonderful visual imagination. The poem consists the rhyme scheme as.

As mentioned earlier, Christianity reached the Caribbean islands through Europeans. With them their patron saints too reached the lands and the hearts of Caribbean island and its people. Thus St. Lucia became the patron saint of Caribbean island of St. Lucia, which is one of the windward islands in Lesser Antilles. Every children of St. Lucia grow up in such an atmosphere and its influence can be seen in this poem.

Holy Communion is an important sacrament in every Christian's life. According to the Holy Bible, Holy Communion is the next step of Holy Baptism. Through these sacraments a believer is believed to become a part of God's kingdom, heaven. Though it is a holy sacrament and it may save one's soul from eternal death, Walcott finds out that there is no use in observing these sacraments without knowing its purpose and need. here in this poem few children who have not entered adulthood is preparing for accepting Holy Communion.

The poem begins with sad tone of poorness. The reader can visualize black children in white cotton frock, and cotton stockings. In the first few lines the image of black children in white clothes is a contradiction to show the influence of foreign religion that is the religion of white people on black land. They are holding pink ribboned missals in their hand and are about to attend the holy sacrament of first communion. The author uses exclamatory symbol after the word 'first communion' and thereby shows his surprise for children on taking a brave decision.

The children are metaphorically compared to caterpillar which have not yet become the butterfly. The children too have not yet reached a maturity to stand of their own or to take a crucial decision in their life. They does not realize what they are doing but are obeying without questioning. They part their mouths to accept wafer in belief without questioning even a single word 'if'. The poet then draws out the image of his whole island,

So, all across Saint Lucia thousands of innocents
were arranged on church steps, facing the sun's lens,
erect as candles between squinting parents,
before darkness came on like their blinded saint's. (9-12)

Saint Lucia, the patron saint of the island is also the patron saint of blind. So, in an island which is known by her name thousands of innocent standing in churches between their parents blindly accepts for what they are subjected to. Thus they too becomes blind to the reason and Saint Lucia again proves to be the patron saint of blinds.

Then there is a change in reason of poem, for the poet want to do something for those innocent souls. He regrets that if it is possible he could have pulled out these minds from their current state and could have been a house to each child until they are old and mature enough to understand things. After he could have allowed them to fly. But that's

not possible and what's awaiting them is a world filled with prejudice and evil. Here, before realizing facts behind their acts they are unsteadily walking into this world of prejudice and evil.

The poet in this poem sees religious ceremony as akin to a form of slavery. He views children as innocent victims of an institutionalized religion. They are subjected to a well-constructed institution without any options and a choice of taking the decision of their own. He also points out the religious dominance which must not force others instead they should be well understand and followed. The poet uses the purity of youth to convey his message. At the final part of the poem, the poet wishes to liberate the children to find the way to heaven. Poet wants the children to find the way to heaven of their own and not by following what others say. The poem does have a positive religious perspective as he imagines the children flying heavenward beyond prejudice and evil.

The main motifs of the poem is innocence, religion, values of people, captivity and nature. The use of metaphor and simile reveals a wonderful visual imagination. The poet metaphorically compares caterpillar to accordion and communion girls to candles. The presence of assonantal patterns such as cotton frock, cotton stockings, pink ribbonedmissals and caterpillars accordion adds beauty to the structure of the poem. It concludes religious diction to reveal religion itself within life of people as symbolic.

Derek Walcott who bears multicultural mixture of identity had reached his peak of success in exploring the gift left by the colonisers in his motherland. To produce his works Walcott amalgamates materials from different cultures, West Indian, African, and European. It is the secret behind the success of his poetry. He just compares and speaks out what they got and what they loosed by the influence of aliens. Walcott himself own a role as a nomad between cultures. His experience as a member of hybrid culture made his complete oeuvre.

The primary aim of Walcott has always be to create a literature truthful to the West Indian life. Through the poems, chosen under the title religion and impact of colonialism, a reader can understand how truthful is he to his aim. He was acutely conscious of his culture and colonial heritage. So, he carefully wrote his poems without blaming his own people at the same time criticizing them in a lawful way. Always he expressed his loyalty towards Caribbean land where he love to live, to English language which he chose to express and to his African origin in which he is always proud of. So, he never crossed or disobeyed his loyalties and proved as its loyal servant for ever. He proved that he is a poet of compassion, love and reverence for life.

As a commonwealth writer, Walcott too is conscious of the common colonial experience of commonwealth countries despite of their different calenders of independence and ethnological, cultural, political as also topographical set-ups. So, from India to Nigeria, Canada to Kenya, Australia to Pakistan have known both the merits and denerits of colonialism. Walcott through his poems is ready to share the shoulder and to extend his hands to cry and laugh with the other humankind whoever they may be. His poetry doesn't possess any limits or selfishness as he consider every human as a human, so that he justifies the good acts of colonisers. Hence, he can be called as or ambassador of poetic humanistic passionate feelings.

Other than the selected themes, landscape and national identity predominates his poetry. The image of his motherland lives vividly in his poetry. Though have a quest of identity he always felt a sense of belonging to his land, say Saint Lucia or Caribbean

islands or Africa. In African society the voice of the poet is the voice of vision in his own time. As a poet of later twentieth and twenty first century, Walcott is the voice of Caribbean land, left by the colonisers. He wrote about what he saw around him, and he truthfully wrote what is ugly, what is beautiful, what is genuine and what is pretending. He employed the native tradition in his creative words. Instead of blindly following the British poets, he paved his own way to walk on but doesn't forget to confess their influence in him. Thus his poetry conceived freshness, originality and potentiality to endear itself to the readers with its process of indigenization and modernization.

Just like other West Indies poets, Walcott is also largely dispossessed of the past of the island. The poet critic John Figuero mentions Derek Walcott, Evans Jones, Edward Brathwaite and Merwym Morris to have used the West Indian language continuum creatively and dreams have been forged into visions. Derek Walcott's poetry shows how a poet is conscious of resolving the conflict of native dialect and the syntactical power of English. Walcott to write always gave priority to English language, for English is the language which he loves and that he can express well. He is well aware of the colonial problem and through his poems made his best effort to transcend and heal it. Moreover, he celebrates the island and the islanders, at the same time express the dilemma of choosing between the native dialect and the English language.

The colonial situation in Caribbean islands has brought not only a new religion, but also a new government both trying to attract and control the natives. Under the influence of Christianity, the poor people thought whatever the whites may do they will be right because for them, they are redeemers of them from the traditional unwanted rude beliefs. Walcott doesn't extend his support to a single group. But he generalizes them and considers the correct views of both sides. According to Walcott everyone is right till the humanistic values are not distracted and destroyed.

Regarding his views on Christianity, in "A Letter From Brooklyn", he considers the religion as a gift that was passed from his ancestors. He completely believes the words of God, the verses written in the Holy Bible. He doesn't question or argue in any angles and he tries to arrange his way of life away from sin and what abomination from Christianity is. He considers heaven as his great destiny that he should reach. As per the Christian belief he doesn't want to waste his time, on worrying about something that has already finished. Thus he proves as a true follower of his religion.

But in the second poem, "Saint Lucia's First Communion", though he follows the path of Christianity, he wants to be a true Christian by questioning the false concepts followed for generations. He even tries to make a change in it. He mourns for the meaningless beliefs, at the same time sticks on to the true religious faith. Considering a chief religious festival celebrated in his island he examines how far is it acceptable from his best knowledge of religion. He proclaims the fact that no beliefs should be pressurized on someone. But make the person understand the basic things and leave the choice of accepting and declining to themselves

On writing the poems on colonial impact, Derek Walcott holds the same view. Though he laments on the loss of chief Caribbean tradition, he shares and shows a ray of hope, at the same time doesn't forget to make a try to have a look on the opposite congregation's positive views. Moreover he invites the presence both righteous and wicked minded explorers in his poetry after having a deep study on them. He gives a suitable title to each one of them without hurting directly but cunningly criticizes and shows

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The primary aim of Walcott has always be to create a literature truthful to the West Indian life. Through the poems, chosen under the title religion and impact of colonialism, a reader can understand how truthful is he to his aim. He was acutely conscious of his culture and colonial heritage. So, he carefully wrote his poems without blaming his own people at the same time criticizing them in a lawful way. Always he expressed his loyalty towards Caribbean land where he love to live, to English language which he chose to express and to his African origin in which he is always proud of. So, he never crossed or disobeyed his loyalties and proved as its loyal servant for ever. He proved that he is a poet of compassion, love and reverence for life.

As a commonwealth writer, Walcott too is conscious of the common colonial experience of commonwealth countries despite of their different calenders of independence and ethnological, cultural, political as also topographical set-ups. So, from India to Nigeria, Canada to Kenya, Australia to Pakistan have known both the merits and denerits of colonialism. Walcott through his poems is ready to share the shoulder and to extend his hands to cry and laugh with the other humankind whoever they may be. His poetry doesn't possess any limits or selfishness as he consider every human as a human, so that he justifies the good acts of colonisers. Hence, he can be called as or ambassador of poetic humanistic passionate feelings.

Other than the selected themes, landscape and national identity predominates his poetry. The image of his motherland lives vividly in his poetry. Though have a quest of identity he always felt a sense of belonging to his land, say Saint Lucia or Caribbean islands or Africa. In African society the voice of the poet is the voice of vision in his own time. As a poet of later twentieth and twenty first century, Walcott is the voice of Caribbean land, left by the colonisers. He wrote about what he saw around him, and he truthfully wrote what is ugly, what is beautiful, what is genuine and what is pretending. He employed the native tradition in his creative words. Instead of blindly following the British poets, he paved his own way to walk on but doesn't forget to confess their influence in him. Thus his poetry conceived freshness, originality and potentiality to endear itself to the readers with its process of indigenization and modernization.

Just like other West Indies poets, Walcott is also largely dispossessed of the past of the island. The poet critic John Figuero mentions Derek Walcott, Evans Jones, Edward Brathwaite and Merwym Morris to have used the West Indian language continuum

creatively and dreams have been forged into visions. Derek Walcott's poetry shows how a poet is conscious of resolving the conflict of native dialect and the syntactical power of English. Walcott to write always gave priority to English language, for English is the language which he loves and that he can express well. He is well aware of the colonial problem and through his poems made his best effort to transcend and heal it. Moreover, he celebrates the island and the islanders, at the same time express the dilemma of choosing between the native dialect and the English language.

The colonial situation in Caribbean islands has brought not only a new religion, but also a new government both trying to attract and control the natives. Under the influence of Christianity, the poor people thought whatever the whites may do they will be right because for them, they are redeemers of them from the traditional unwanted rude beliefs. Walcott doesn't extends his support to a single group. But he generalize them and consider the correct views of both sides. According to Walcott everyone is right till the humanistic values are not distracted and destroyed.

Regarding his views on Christianity, in "A Letter From Brooklyn", he considers the religion as a gift that was passed from his ancestors. He completely believes the words of God, the verses written in the Holy Bible. He doesn't question or argue in any angles and he tries to arrange his way of life away from sin and what abomination from Christianity is. He considers heaven as his great destiny that he should reach. As per the Christian belief he doesn't want to waste his time, on worrying about something that has already finished. Thus he proves as a true follower of his religion.

But in the second poem, "Saint Lucia's First Communion", though he follows the path of Christianity, he wants to be a true Christian by questioning the false concepts followed for generations. He even tries to make a change in it. He mourns for the meaningless beliefs, at the same time sticks on to the true religious faith. Considering a chief religious festival celebrated in his island he examines how far is it acceptable from his best knowledge of religion. He proclaims the fact that no beliefs should be pressurized on someone. But make the person understand the basic things and leave the choice of accepting and declining to themselves

On writing the poems on colonial impact, Derek Walcott holds the same view. Though he laments on the loss of chief Caribbean tradition, he shares and shows a ray of hope, at the same time doesn't forgets to make a try to have a look on the opposite congregation's positive views. Moreover he invites the presence both righteous and wicked minded explorers in his poetry after having a deep study on them. He gives a suitable title to each one of them without hurting directly but cunningly critics and shows his deep emotion on them. Thus examining three poems based on the contribution of invaders in Caribbean islands, the reader can draw out the conclusion that the poet Derek Walcott is the voice of Saint Lucia, an example of mixed legacy, passion of colonised people, mirror of Caribbean Islands, a genuine painter of themes existing in his society and the ambassador of human ethnic values.

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