

## “The City May be Just, / and Humankind be Kind”: Departures and Homecomings in Derek Walcott’s Poetry

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### **Abstract:**

Critics have frequently addressed the theme of betrayal that runs throughout Derek Walcott’s poetry due to leaving St. Lucia, the island where he was born. Walcott’s poetry presents confused characters, divided between their desire for returning home and the temperament for travelling and adventure. This study questions the role of the socio-political conditions of the post-independence Caribbean in motivating artists to live abroad. The Caribbean gained independence in the beginning of the 1960s, and confronted serious trials to become a nation throughout the 1970s. The critique examines Walcott’s direct attack on the Caribbean culture in some of his most important poems, where the persona is either visiting or leaving his native island. He is a quester who mirrors the poet’s anger at the people’s difficulties, political corruption, social climbing, and discrimination based on class and colour.

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism, Caribbean, politics, corruption, art .

## "قد تكون المدينة عادلة والبشرية هي الطيبة"

### المغادرون والعائدون في شعر ديريك والكوت

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### **المخلص:**

ناقش النقاد في كثير من الأحيان موضوع الخيانة التي تمتد عبر شعر ديريك والكوت بسبب مغادرة سانت لوسيا، الجزيرة التي ولد فيها. وشخصيات الشاعر والكوت، تنقسم بين رغبتهم في العودة إلى الوطن ومزاج السفر والمغامرة. ويشكك هؤلاء في دور الظروف الاجتماعية-السياسية في منطقة ما بعد الاستقلال في تحفيز الفنانين على العيش في الخارج. وقد حصلت منطقة البحر الكاريبي على استقلالها في بداية الستينيات، وتصادف أن تصبح دولة في السبعينات. يحلل هذا النقد هجوم "الكوت" المباشر على الثقافة الكاريبية التي تمثل أهم قصائده، حيث يزورها الشخص أو يغادر جزيرته الأصلية. وهو سعي شجع الشاعر على مواجهة صعوبات الشعب والفساد السياسي والتسلق الاجتماعي التمييز على أساس الطبقة واللون.

الكلمات المفتاحية: منطقة البحر الكاريبي، السياسة، الفساد، الفن.

The study addresses Derek Walcott's sense of despair and bitterness at the corrupt politics in the Caribbean. The region's economic problems and the internal racial and ethnic divisions prevented the flourishing of art and culture and urged Walcott to pursue his creative work abroad. Walcott elaborates on the dilemma of the Caribbean artist in an interview with Edward Hirsch: "I pay my taxes. I'm a citizen. I don't have a museum. I don't have a good library. I don't have a place where I can perform. I don't have a place where I can dance" ("The Art of Poetry" 113). Walcott, a poet in never-ending move between countries and harbours, believes that "Islands can only exist / If we have loved them" (*CP* 52). He "has been outspoken in his criticism of the shallow, philistine attitude of the neo-colonial black bourgeoisie who have, as far as he is concerned, perverted the promise of a new order which the end of colonial rule promised" (De Lima 179). The lines concern Walcott's anger at the short lived Caribbean Federation that banned the people of the less developed islands from immigrating to the more developed ones. This barrier, Walcott believes, "literally and metaphorically restricted love, interface, exchange, sharing, [and] intercourse between people of the archipelago" (Rohlehr 23). This influenced the peoples' recognition of the islands as a unified geographical, historical, and cultural space. "The collapse of the power-space that was the first West Indian Federation deprived its artists of a common spiritual purpose. It also made the individual artist more pathetically isolated, although more important to his 'nation'" (Walcott, "Spiritual Purpose Lacking" 3). Walcott is also against the government support of tourism, believing that it should sponsor projects that promote art and culture. He condemned the middle class for being corrupt and self-serving, presenting a faint praise to poets and artists. Walcott accordingly refers to the hopelessness and anguish of Caribbean artists: "I keep looking at younger writers, and I begin to see the same kind of despair forming and the same wish to say the hell with it, I'm getting out of here" (Hirsch, "The Art of Poetry" 112). Artists fled the islands that they loved because of the government's occupations, agendas, and objectives that neglected the cultivation of deeply rooted Caribbean art and culture.

Figures alienated from their origins like Adam, Odysseus, Prospero, and Crusoe would frequently appear in Walcott's oeuvre. These archetypes disappear in some of Walcott's poetry, where a traveller visits the Caribbean and speaks for the people of the islands. He is "a trapped hero for Walcott, who, as artist, has kept the sacred urge 'to record the anguish of the race'" (Wyke 223). Walcott along with his friend, the painter Dustan St. Omer, pledged to dedicate their lives and artistry to St. Lucia. Walcott documents this moment in his autobiographical poem "Another Life": "drunkenly, or secretly, we swore, /... / that we would never leave the island / until we had put down, in paint, in words" the entire natural landscape of the island

(CP194). Yet in mid-life, Walcott left the Caribbean to live in the United States. In “What the Twilight Says, an Overture”, Walcott writes that “the inevitable problem for all island artists” is “the choice of home or exile, self-realization or spiritual betrayal of one’s country. Travelling widens this breach” (35). St. Lucia, though, remains present in Walcott’s poetry which coheres with his “determination to make sure [that he] was valid in the place where [he] was born” (Hirsch, “An Interview with Derek Walcott” 52). The persona of some of Walcott’s important poems probe the cultural landscape of the Caribbean and question the role of the government in improving the social conditions of the people after independence.

The persona-observer in “Laventille” is viewing from a hill on the east side of Port of Spain a poor and cheerless neighbourhood of black residents – steep and crowded streets, filthy shacks, lawlessness and ferocity: “we climbed where lank electric / lines and tension cables linked its raw brick / hovels like a complex feud” (CP 86). The plight of the Caribbean condition recalls the heritage of the middle passage: “look[ing] back / with widening memory / on the hot, corrugated-iron sea” (CP 86). The observer contemplates that hardly anything has improved in the circumstances of ‘the inheritors of the middle passage’, who are “stewed, / five to a room, still clamped below their hatch, / breeding like felonies, / whose lives revolve round prison, graveyard, church” (CP 86). The observer being detached from the poor district could be related to the system of British colonial education that created class distinction in the Caribbean community. Significantly, in this regard, Walcott explains the dilemma of his divided self to Sharon Ciccarelli:

Language and the experience of illiteracy among the poor is a profound problem that divides the West Indian writer. The more sophisticated he becomes, the more alienated is his mental state. It is not his business to lower his standards to insult the poor. When one is confused with his problem of language, two situations occur: wanting to reach one’s people; and realizing the harsh realities of the society, the depression and the economic exploitation. At the same time that one’s intellect becomes refined, and one learns more about the society, there is a movement away from that society. (39-40)

The distance between Walcott and his community was not just geographical but also emotional and intellectual. However, Fred D’ Aguiar believes that,

The figure of the isolated artist – alienated and alienating himself from his society – transmutes into a psychological condition, necessary at that juncture in the growth of the poet if

he was to arrive at certain key premises. If the artist was not really alienated from his community by any will on the latter's part then he, the artist, was going to invent his own alienation – or dramatise it as a condition – in order to highlight his status as an artist. (158)

Finally, in the Caribbean, colour and class are associated together and they constitute part of the communal trouble. The feeling of unhappiness, the anger and the craving could be traced throughout Walcott's poetry, associated with his criticism of and revulsion against the masses who do not aspire to improve the conditions of their lives.

The deterioration of the Caribbean cultural landscape is addressed in "Homecoming: Anse La Raye", where the setting is a beautiful but neglected fishing beach in St. Lucia. The poet-speaker returns to Anse La Raye after being abroad for many years, but he finds 'no home' on his native island. In an interview with Nancy Schoenberger, Walcott refers to "the Wordsworthian sense that you don't return to what you once were, so even if you are home, you are not back to what you were. [...] it's just that you have grown up, or the land grown up differently, so you don't really connect" (87). The people do not recognize the speaker as a poet and he is aware of the lack of glory that characterises such occasions. He is upset and wishes to tell the people that "it would mean something to declare / today, I am your poet, yours" (CP 128). But poetry is useless where children are hungry beggars "swarm [ing] like flies / round [. . . the poet's] heart's sore" (CP 128). These children would gather around him because his "clothes' / [...] posture / seem a tourist" (CP 127-128). He also regrets that his poetry has failed to stimulate cultural and political awareness in the lives of his people: "a drifting petal fallen in a cup / with nothing but its image, / you sway, reflecting nothing" (CP 128). In an interview with Hirsch, however, Walcott affirms his role as a Saint Lucian poet:

Even if I get very bitter and despondent about the politics, the changes in the Caribbean—the fact that there has been a profound political betrayal of a people—I always go back. I try to return not with a sense of desolation, but with a sense of participating in something collective. The only possible realization in the West Indies is art. I see no possibility of the country becoming unified and having its own strengths except in its art. Art is lasting. It will outlast these things. (Hirsch, "An Interview with Derek Walcott" 55)

Walcott puts an emphasis on the social role of the Caribbean artist who believes in both mankind regardless of ethnic origins and the islands as an

improved place. He believes that an accomplished artist should record in his oeuvre the collective memory and experience of his society even if his people are not prepared to comprehend his role in their lives. The poem criticises the politicians' support of gaudy tourism at the expense of refining and supporting culture and art, and that natives are poorly paid serving tourists. Tourism influences the enlightening and self-image of the Caribbean nation because it engraves neocolonialism by local politicians. Walcott writes in "What the Twilight Says, an Overture" that "when twenty years ago we imagined cities devoted neither to power nor to money but to art, one had the true vision" (35). The poet-speaker is especially indignant at the fishermen playing "draughts in shade / crossing, eating their island" (*CP* 128). He disapproves of the ethical limitations of the Caribbean people. He believes that they do not attempt to speak for themselves and accept their own responsibility to uplift their lives. The wide disparity between the poet and the common people of the island is a repeated theme in Walcott's poetry. The poet cannot suppress his annoyance with those who fail to meet his norms.

The non-success and mismanagement that have characterised the path of the Caribbean nation since its independence is addressed in "The Schooner Flight". The poem is a dramatic monologue delivered by Shabine who sets off at dawn in a voyage out of Trinidad. Shabine describes himself as "just a red nigger who love the sea". 'I have', Shabine mentions, "Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation" (*CP* 346). The lines are applicable to Walcott who is of European and African descent: both his grandfathers were of European lineage, while his grandmothers were of African ancestry. This reflects the complicated ethos of the Caribbean ethnically diverse community. Shabine escapes the bitterness and double-dealing of his region for the sea:

out of corruption my soul takes wings,  
 But they had started to poison my soul  
 with their big house, big car, big-time bohbohl,  
 coolie, nigger, Syrian, and French Creole,  
 so I leave it for them and their carnival—

I taking a sea-bath, I gone down the road. (*CP* 346)

Shabine's departure is an act of despair that a real change may take place and uproot the corrupted political system. Shabine had himself engaged in the corruption, to a much lesser degree, by helping to smuggle Scotch to Trinidad for "O'Hara, big government man" (*CP* 347). Shabine is part of

the widespread corruption that extends from the persons in charge of the oil-boom Trinidad to the ordinary people. Shabine, further, states that he “no longer believe[s] in the revolution” (*CP* 351). The reference is to the Black Power Revolution of Trinidad, 1970 Revolution, which ideology is as regressive and racially prejudiced as that of the white colonists. Walcott “has been particularly opposed to the Negritude attempts to locate a Caribbean ‘identity’ in exclusively African roots, a position much in vogue during his early career as a poet” (Figueroa 156). Shabine, however, renders a pathetic description of the uprising men, their clash with the police, and ultimate death:

Young men without flags  
 using shirts, their chests waiting for holes.  
 They kept marching into the mountains, and  
 their noises ceased as foam sinks into sand.  
 They sank in the bright hills like rain, every one  
 with his own nimbus, leaving shirts in the street,  
 and the echo of power at the end of the street. (*CP* 351)

The revolutionists were trying to liberate their people from a rigid culture of rooted communal corruption that impairs the vitality of its citizens and victimises all sectors of the society. The poem ends with Shabine stating his “vain search for one island that heals with its harbour / and a guiltless horizon, where the almond’s shadow / doesn’t injure the sand” (*CP* 361). John Thieme writes: “the longing for a healing harbour, where almond trees, as always in Walcott an image of the Caribbean capacity for endurance, will make emancipation from a cycle of guilt and displacement possible, is equally intense” (164). Walcott’s poetry proposes redemption of the colonial history through art, not politics. However, the implicit desire to choose exile would materialise in Walcott’s life and poetry. His poetry, nevertheless, becomes his tool to fight the indifferent and brutalizing control of authoritarian governments.

Walcott continues criticising political corruption and social injustice following two decades of Independence in “The Spoiler’s Return”. The poem opens with the speaker, the ghost of Spoiler, depicted after the Mighty Spoiler (Theophilus Philip), a Trinidadian calypsonian of the 1940s – 1950s, coming back to Laventille from the dead. The calypsonians are members of the lower class and their monologues are directed against the over indulgent upper class and the politicians who have neglected the underprivileged

families of Trinidad's poor community. The ghost of Spoiler sits on the railings of a bridge and surveys the city from above. "By placing his poet-of-the-people at a vantage point in Laventille, Walcott suggests that the under-class has a commanding view of the society and of the foibles and sins of those more highly placed" (Baugh 162). Idlers passing by recognise Spoiler and salute him with the question "Ay, Spoiler, boy! When did you come back?" (CP 432). He replies, "Satan send me to check out this town" (CP 432). This is the beginning of Spoiler's satirical monologue, where he envisages his reincarnation as a bedbug so he can bite the overnourished women of the upperclass: "I going to bite them young ladies, partner, / like a hot dog or hamburger" (CP 432). He asks the thin and poor women of the workingclass not to worry of the possibility of him biting them: "and if you thin, don't be in a fright / is only big fat women I going to bite (CP 433). His bite is also kept for "all Power [which] has / made the sky shit and maggots of the stars" (CP 435). The chaos and meaninglessness that Spoiler perceives to characterise the Caribbean society is subtly described:

The shark, racing the shadow of the shark  
 across clear coral rocks, does make them dark—  
 that is my premonition of the scene  
 of what passing over this Caribbean.  
 Is crab climbing crab-back, in crab-quarrel,  
 And going round and round in the same barrel . . . (CP 433)

Walcott, by referring to The Mighty Spoiler's "Bedbug", wants to purge the society from the disease that have begun to contaminate its life. He believes that the Caribbean society has repeated precisely what they used to consider was colonial by its inflexibility, ignorance, and insensitivity. Walcott maintains that art provides the proper medium for redemption as a result of the failure of politics.

Walcott is a nomad but with a sense of belonging to the Caribbean culture and people. He is a postcolonial poet addressing the Caribbean challenges and problems after independence. Walcott believes that the Caribbean indulgence in money-oriented projects at the expense of art makes it difficult for artists to survive and their creative work to provide cultural identity out of colonial heritage. Walcott's poetry juxtaposes the Caribbean poverty-stricken people and a persona who is either visiting his native place or fleeing the unfortunate islands. This persona is indignant at the lack of social and economic development, and the poor educational quality. In this

regard, Walcott believes that the Caribs should choose the transformative influence of art to secure a true and solid change instead of governmental channels. The poetry highlights the recurrence of the former system of victim and victimiser in post-independence Caribbean. This reflects the fact that the colonial experience is still part of the people's collective memory, mainly in the governmental and commercial domains.

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