

## “CAN YOU GENUINELY CLAIM THESE?": QUESTIONING MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN DEREK WALCOTT'S *THE BOUNTY*

Aparna Prem

PhD Scholar

Indian and World Literature Department  
The English and Foreign Languages University,  
Hyderabad

The title of Derek Walcott's book of poems *The Bounty* (1997) reveals the histories of colonization, plantation systems and of the ship HMS *Bounty* that carried breadfruit plants from Tahiti to Jamaica. Walcott goes back to the roots of slave history and multiculturalism through the story of Munity on the *Bounty*, between "white God" Captain William Bligh and "mutinous [Fletcher] Christian" (9). When this incident in the history of colonization is placed as the "earliest lesson, how the Christ-Son / questions the Father" (10), Walcott foregrounds the relevance of questioning the given past and faded memories. By disobeying the haunting emptiness, which enables the postcolonial self to create and recreate, Walcott claims for "an acre of sunlight and salt wind . . . with [his] own version / of the world beyond" (34). "A steadiness without seasons", "boredom interrupted by war" (35), the "white-hot emptiness", and other symbols of a withered history are questioned and transcended through imagination and creativity: "It is nothingness that makes it great" (36). Describing the bounty of nature in his own island, with its "waxen blue- / green of the breadfruit leaves" and other symbols of in-between identities, he reassures himself: "Yes, they reclaim you in a way you need not understand" (26). The 'love of both' identities, languages and histories, which places the multicultural self in the conflict between faith and betrayal, is examined in this paper to discover Walcott's 'vision' of claiming and reclaiming identity of his self and his land.

The abundance of allusions and references in the first part of "The Bounty", which is dedicated to his mother Alix Walcott, reveals the complicated ways of engaging with the notion of national identity. A vision of his island as 'desert', which exists between the commercialized version of the land and the reality of paradise, is depicted when he refers to Verse 1 of chapter 35 from the Biblical book of Isaiah. Prophecy of Isaiah, the words of God, are referred to as Walcott's muse to begin his own visualization of the land: "Between the vision of the Tourist Board and the true / Paradise lies the desert where Isaiah's elations / force a rose from the sand" (3). The 'bounty' of the desert comes alive and "blossom[s] as the rose" when "the wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them" (*KJV* Isaiah 35:1). When "the rose of my life", which buried in the "dark well" with "a pool of fresh tears, tolled by the golden bell / of allamanda, thorns of the bougainvillea" is revealed to be Walcott's mother, 'bounty' context acquires another meaning, bounty of the dead. The pain held in the colonial past and global present is over-imposed with bounty of the dead, making the poem an elegy, "There is grief, there will always be" (5). The absence is reconstituted as presence that claims an identity. Walcott notes, "their veins grow // with the wild mammy-apple, the open-handed breadfruit, / their heart in the open pomegranate, in the sliced avocado; . . . // their absence in all that we eat" (14). The unaffected bounty of nature, even in the pain and grief of humans, reclaims the land's

identity, “earth rejoices / in the middle of our agony” (14). Moreover, the place and its bounty is perceived as a godly presence that has the ability to help man in crisis and strife. “[T]he running stream’s bliss”, Walcott writes in reverence, “contradicts the self-importance of despair / by these glittering simplicities, water, leaves, and air, / that elate dissolution which goes beyond happiness” (27). The ‘beyondness’ held in the bounty facilitates Walcott and the Caribbean community to shake off the “centuries of servitude” to recreate a new vision and “history of emotion” (“WTS” 5). Though the place reminds the people about the slave history and multiple roots, Walcott elevates the land beyond time and history, as “memory is less / than the place which it cherishes” (27). The ‘history of emotion’ is re-emphasized with an emotional episode of remembering Walcott’s childhood and the “faraway rain” (28). While claiming the rains of Santa Cruz, the memory flows “through the trees [of] Choiseul, St. Lucia and sea gulls flying through the valleys of Port of Spain, Trinidad. The symbols of rain, trees and sea gulls reflects movement, travelling and interconnectivity that becomes the identity of the Caribbean replacing the historylessness. As he mourns the death of his mother, Walcott recalls the colonial, religious guidance his mother provided in “the clear language”. Biblical verse “[A]s the hart panteth for the water-brooks” (Psalms 42:1) is recounted in *The Bounty* to muse over the language of colonialism and religious imposition. However, the same tongue has turned into “the language in which [Walcott] mourn her now” (8). The acceptance of the colonial language to reclaim the amnesiac past makes Walcott noble as “[t]he noblest are those who are trapped, who have accepted the twilight” (“WTS” 5).

The later references to breadfruit that reminds colonial and slave histories, British pastoral poet John Clare and Shakespearean character “wandering Tom”, blended with this biblical vision of St. Lucia, are to locate and engage with the complex meaning of his land’s bounty. As emphasized in the first few lines of the poem itself, the assimilation of amnesiac history and postcolonial and multicultural present are the factors that facilitate the people and land to forge an identity. As Walcott explains in “What the Twilight Says”, his generation of writers was “natural assimilators” who “knew the literature of empires, Greek, Roman, British, through their essential classics; and both the patois of the street and the language of the classroom hid the elation of discovery” (4). When Walcott mentions the breadfruit for the first time, explaining it as “tree of bread” and “slave food”, he deliberately brings up St. Lucian name of the plant “*bois-pain*” to emphasize both assimilation and in-betweenness (3). The sense of ‘homelessness’ from an exile’s point of view is re-emphasized with reference to John Clare who considered himself as a “displaced person” (Haughton and Phillips 1). In “Introduction: Relocating John Clare”, Hugh Haughton and Adam Phillips explains Clare’s notion of his own land and its identity in relation to his self:

Returned ‘home’, he is still driven by a sense of estrangement and marginality that renders him ‘homeless’ within his familiar world. If the poets of the Romantic period can be distinguished according to their respective nostalgias, John Clare is the poet of nostalgia peculiarly difficult to define but which is bound up with a thwarted project of identification with place – or rather a place – a geographical place of course, but as urgently a place in language, literary tradition and culture in the widest sense. (1)

Through the character of ‘wandering Tom’, when Walcott identifies and names the nature around, he overtly endeavours to connect with John Clare and other pastoral poets of colonial past and classic literature in search of his own ‘place’. Though “iron streams fetter his ankles”

Tom and Walcott meanders through the nature, “stoat-stroker in his county / of reeds and stalk-cricketts, fiddling the dank air, / lacing his boots with vines, steering glazed beetles. . .” (3). Shakespearean, British, colonial character of Tom is reconfigured into a St. Lucian poet and compared to a “Baptist lifting his branches to bless / cathedrals and snails” (3). The light is revered as bounty of God and blessings and when Walcott rethinks about his “business and duty” to utter the ‘wild cry’ of his land and its identity, he remembers his mother’s lesson “to write of the light’s bounty on familiar things / that stand on the verge of translating themselves into news” (16). The twilight, defined as a “metaphor for the withdrawal of empire and the beginning of our doubt”, takes the form of “a childhood signal to come home” (WTS 3-4). The nature and religion are combined together in the ‘light’ of the blessings of the St. Lucian mad man. The “light’s parallelogram laid on the kitchen floor” reminds Walcott of bounty of God and praises “the bells of Saint Clement’s in the marigolds on the altar” and “the imperial lilac and the feathery palms that nodded at the entry / into Jerusalem” (8).

Narrating the story and identities of the land and its culture, blended with those of John Clare, Tom, Fletcher and Captain Bligh, as an elegy for his mother, is a “wild cry” as “we have no solace but utterance” (*Bounty* 9). In an Adamic spirit, Walcott proclaims that “[t]he first sound should be like the last, the cry” (5). The appropriations and rebuilding relations with colonial history itself is Walcott’s technique of ‘uttering’ the Caribbean multiple identities. In “What the Twilight Says”, Walcott explains the importance of accepting the darkness to travel in search of origins. He says, “Every actor should make this journey to articulate his origins, but for these who have been called not men but mimics, darkness must be total . . . its noises should be elemental, the roar of the rain, ocean, wind, and fire” (5). In *The Bounty*, the rich opulent nature are made visible from an Adamic point of view, finding “awe in the ordinary”: “[i]n the bells of tree-frogs with their steady clamour / in the indigo dark before dawn, the fading morse / of fireflies and crickets” and “in the ant’s waking fury, // in the snail’s chapel stirring under wild yams” (7). Throughout the oeuvre of Walcott’s works, he overtly presents naming the nature as a process of reclaiming, “[w]e would walk, like new Adams, in a nourishing ignorance which would name plants and people with a child’s belief that the world is its own age” (“WTS” 6). The contradiction and the complexity of reclaiming and forging an identity lay in the fact that the Adamic figure is continuously haunted by the necessity to question the history. While he expresses the wonder about his mother’s unaltered “faith in the bounty which is His Word”, Walcott believes in challenging the received haunting past. He proclaims, “all these predictable passages that we first disobey // before we become what we challenged” (10). Though the nature around takes one back to the memory of absence, Walcott realizes that “we break and chew in the a wedge of cassava” their faith (14). By engaging with one of the most important incident in the colonial history of the Caribbean, the Mutiny on HMS *Bounty* 1789, in which Fletcher Christian mutinied against the Captain Lieutenant William Bligh, Walcott highlights the relevance of “question[ing] the Father” (10). While seeking the possibilities of “faith [that] grows mutinous” (9), which would provide meaning and existence for the self, Walcott realizes that mutiny does not indicate freedom from a haunting past. Though Fletcher Christian escaped from the ‘white-God’, “to settle on another island”, he is still “haunted by Him” (10). On one hand, as Walcott constructs the idea of the island as Eden and the poet as Adam, on the other hand the constant realization that everything reflects an amnesiac past continuously complicates the notion of identity. Fear of death and “no change” looms over Walcott’s vision of St. Lucia, “our viridian Eden // is that of the primal garden that engendered decay . . . // no climate, no calendar except for this bountiful day” (15). Though the need to capture time through art

contradicts with the fear of ‘no change’, his verses and paintings should be perceived as portraying memories that would enable him to recreate his own self. However, in recalling a forgotten city that he had inhabited and painted once, Walcott realizes that “the only art left is the preparation of grace” at the “seaside city of graves” (19). As he prepares his own epitaph, “Here lies / D. W. This place is good to die in” (19), bounty of death foregrounds itself in the layers of meaning of the word reflected in this book of poems.

“No soul was ever invented”, Walcott writes, “yet every presence is transparent” (11). The oscillating identities between the ‘original’ and the ‘mimicry’ problematize the significance of ‘inventions’ if there are any. The bounty of nature earlier discovered and named as an Adam, later is rediscovered as reflections of Roman and Latin cultures. “All of these waves crepitate from the culture of Ovid, / its sibilants and consonants; a universal metre / piles up these signatures like inscriptions of seaweed” (11). The question is whether he should call his mother, and thus the island, “shadow . . . of a pattern invented by Graeco-Roman design, columns of shadows / cast by the Forum, Augustan perspectives—” (11). The Greek, Roman and Latin appropriations can be seen as elevating the Caribbean postcolonial present to a ‘classic’ past. However, Walcott is anxious about the sense of Caribbean shrinking into the supposed originality of classical culture. Walcott asks apprehensively, “the in-and-out light of almonds / made from original Latin, no leaf but the olive’s?” (11). Like the grief of history, fear of death and uncertainty about originality, questions always recur and haunt in the self and in the nature, “[T]he smoke burns / into a larger question, one that forms and unforms, / then loses itself in a cloud, till the question returns” (13).

In the fifth part of the book titled “Parang”, Walcott evidently highlights the multicultural Trinidadian identity with reference to the Spanish origins of Christmas folk music Parang. According to Aisha Khan, Parang “figures as one of the principal symbols of Trinidadian national identity, evidence of the ‘callaloo’ composition of the society”. She explains,

Although it is performed by persons from variety of ethnic backgrounds in addition to those who are ‘Spanish’, *parang* implicitly and explicitly draws a focus on the Spanish presence in Trinidad, evoking notions of local *history*, ‘Spanish’ *culture* as part of the ‘cosmopolitan’ nature and ‘plural’ heritage of Trinidad, and the image of the ambiguous ‘Spanish’ *phenotype* that can blur the boundaries of (and among) such socio-politically distinct ethnic categories as ‘African’, ‘Chinese’, and ‘East Indian’. (68)

It is no wonder that on the “Christmas Eve” Walcott asks himself and to the Caribbean community in general whether we can “genuinely claim these” (26). The constant strife to reach an idea of ‘homeland’ is continuously hindered by the realization of multiple identities and blurred histories. Rather than constructing the process of naming and claiming as a unidirectional practice, Walcott realizes the evident reclaiming that multicultural amnesiac roots do to the community, “they reclaim you / from your possible margin of disdain, of occasional escape” (26). Though Walcott identifies the landscape, the “small river”, the space around, “the crammed shop / and the men outside it”, the sky and the stars (26), in order to identify the self with the nation, he questions whether he can own them in real, whether these belongs to imperial powers outside their possession, beyond their memory. While remembering the “faraway rain” that “descends into Santa Cruz”, he recalls “the way rain hazes the chapel / of La Divina Pastora” (28). Here, he refers to the Capuchin pilgrimage church, La Divina Pastora, “which contains a Black Virgin statue surrounded by votive offerings. This statue of the Virgin Mary is venerated

by Roman Catholics as well as by Hindus, who see her as a manifestation of the goddess Kali and call the statue Siparee Mai (Mother of Siparia)” (n. pag.). While both Roman Catholics and Hindus worship same statue by forging different meanings in an endeavour to own it, they reclaim and question the Spanish colonial history the statue holds<sup>1</sup>. Walcott here destabilizes the notions of owning and claiming for identity by raising the question, “are they utterly your own / as surely as your shadow is a thing of the sun’s?” (26). For the community whose beliefs of owning and identifying with the nation had been shattered, Walcott suggests a solace by saying that “they reclaim you in a way you need not understand: / candles that never gutter and go out in the breeze, / or tears that glint on night’s face for every island” (26).

The confusions regarding reclaiming a blurred history and divided present find its answers in the celebration of ‘in-betweenness’. Walcott honors the St. Lucian singer Dame Marie Selipha Descartes (1914-2010), best known as Sesenne, as a celebration of traditional music and musical instruments and notes how she “remember[s] the words of a dying language” (31). The ideas of in-betweenness, betrayal and loyalty to one roots, history or language is contested in the section titled “Homecoming”, where Walcott repeats, “I have tried to serve both”. The multiple histories and cultures here take the form of trees, who accuse him of betrayal as he chose to ‘serve both’. Walcott discloses the commonality and a shared meaning that he finds in the names, languages and identities: “I said I was sure / that all the trees of the world shared a common elation / of tongues, gommier with linden, *bois-campeche* with the elm” (32). Though this surety about identifying with both English and St. Lucian languages and cultures are questioned again, Walcott repeats, “since road and sun were English words, both of them endured in their silence the dividing wind” (32). The pain of being at the border of two histories, in an endeavour to recreate an Adamic vision of the island, does not stop Walcott from re-emphasizing his love for both languages, English and Creole:

the sun and the rain contend for the same place  
like 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 wide as the Atlantic is large. (33)

Even though Walcott introspects about his dual identities, the assurance of loving ‘both’ can be perceived as crossing the borders of dichotomies rather than framing the perceptions into a single narrowed down identity. As Walcott notes, “Those who look from their darkness into the tribal fire must be bold enough to cross it” (“WTS” 6) and *The Bounty* examines the broken histories and faded memories to cross them towards a bounty of multiple identities.

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<sup>1</sup> In an article titled “The Antique Saints of Trinidad”, Spanish colonial history of Siparia’s La Divina Pastora is explained in detail. Sister Marie Therese is quoted in the article, “Siparia was one of the missions of the Spanish Capuchins who came from the Santa Maria province of Aragon in 1756-1758. Devotion to the divine shepherdess is centuries old, originating in Spain. It is said that in 1703 Our Lady appeared to a Capuchin known as the ‘Our Lady, Mother of the Good Shepherd’. This devotion was introduced in Venezuela in 1715 and the first church was built in her honour in an Amerindian mission”. Though there is no record of the beginning of worshipping her in Trinidad, the statue of La Divina Pastora’s statue was brought from Venezuela to Siparia by Spanish priest, “who said that the statue had saved his life” in a record that dates from 1871 (n. pag.)

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