
UNIT 3 DEREK WALCOTT: “A FAR CRY FROM AFRICA”, “NAMES”

Structure

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we shall discuss the poetry by Derek Walcott. After reading the Unit carefully, you will be able to:

- recall names of some prominent Caribbean Writers;
- give a brief outline the life and works of Derek Walcott;
- critically comment on the poem “A Far Cry from Africa”;
- critically comment on the poem 'Names'.

3.1 BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

The title 'Caribbean Literature' is derived from the Caribbean Sea that surrounds the West Indies. The sea is named after Caribs, one of the many Amerindian indigenous ethnic groups of this region. Considering the linguistic diversity, heterogeneity and the cultural plurality of the region, critics consider presenting a general overview of Caribbean literature a difficult task. What makes it challenging is the fact that, as argued by some critics, geographically the Caribbean zone must consider not only the group of islands that extends from Cuba to Trinidad, but also Suriname, Guyana, French Guiana, and the coastal areas of Venezuela and Colombia that are at the continental edges of South America and Central America. It also includes Panama, Costa Rica, Belize, and the Mosquito Coast of Nicaragua that border the Caribbean Sea. Moreover, the presence and chaotic proliferation of five European languages namely: Spanish, English, French, Dutch and Portuguese (a result of a chequered history of imperial rivalries for the conquest of this contested region from the 15th to the 19th century) as well as the growth of other local languages like Haitian Creole and Papiamentu due to creolization, makes charting the literary history of this region a herculean task. Further, the Caribbean culture is a culture transplanted and transposed, riven with a sense of dislocation, a historical void, lack of a common indigenous roots and clarity of tradition. It is because demographically the region is inhabited

by people of mixed racial background –of European, Asian and African origin who are the descendents of European planters, the African slaves and the indentured labourers from India and China.

The Caribs, an indigenous Amerindian tribe that was one of the dominant groups in the Caribbean (besides Arawaks) that inhabited the islands before the arrival of Columbus in 1492 has been reduced to very small population mostly concentrated in the northern part of Dominica. It is because the consequent wave of European invaders that came after Columbus brought with them infectious diseases, such as smallpox to which these people had no immunity, caused large scale deaths. Later the warfare, enslavement and annexation of their territory by the imperial powers caused much displacement and destruction of this ethnic community. During the 16th till the 19th century, with the proliferation of the Atlantic Slave Trade, ship loads of slaves were brought from West Africa to work on the island plantations of coffee, tobacco, cocoa, sugar and cotton, established by the European colonizers. These slaves were subjected to dehumanizing practices and were bought and sold like objects. They belonged to different tribes and lacked common language or tradition. When slavery was abolished in most British colonies by the Emancipation Act of 1833, a new system replaced it. Under this indentured labourers were transported from India and China to work in these plantations, thereby further complicating the notion of a unified Caribbean identity. Further in the 20th century after the disintegration of the West Indian Federation, each of the islands projected identity of independent nation-states.

In order to overcome these challenges, some literary critics discuss the distinct literatures emerging from this region by using linguistic blocs as a parameter for categorization which is as follows: Spanish-speaking Caribbean, the French-speaking Caribbean, the Dutch speaking Caribbean and the English-speaking Caribbean. A few critics also argue that despite the bewildering cultural disparity, the experience of colonialism, the consequent persecution and enslavement of people because of the establishment of the plantation economy and the resultant creolization serve as common context to synthesize the literary output of the Caribbean. This literature is also studied as expressing predominantly diasporic thematic concerns of displacement, sense of exile, a search for roots and a yearning for returning to the homeland. Many expatriates and intellectuals also take the traditional Black culture expressed in myths, folk lore, music, speech rhythms and dialects as a reference point to chart distinct Caribbean aesthetics.

Before we proceed further let us briefly discuss some important terms in the context of Caribbean culture.

- a) **Creolization:** It is the process of cross-fertilization, intermixture and aggregation of cultural elements through which Amerindian, European and African; customs, traditions and languages, have blended to yield new cultures in the Caribbean. It takes a long period of time to unfold. A Creole, in terms of ethnicity, refers to a person of mixed African and European race, who lives in the West Indies and speaks a Creole language. The heavily accented language of the underprivileged, poor black peasants and labourers are also called Creoles. These languages developed overtime from pidgin (mixing of various languages) by the slaves due to the exigencies of finding a medium to communicate in the absence of common native tongues. Appropriated later by indentured labour they eventually became the main

languages in these parts. However, English, French, and Spanish the language of the upper crust of society, of the expatriate plantocracy and the middle class, have been the language of education and officialdom. This has created in the region the problematic of the 'agony over language', spoken of by Edward Baugh. From the 1960s to the contemporary times, this phenomenon has been important in Caribbean writing. It indicates that language use in the Caribbean corresponds to racial power equations, hierarchy and class stratification. Despite strong nationalist movements in the 1940s the entrenched racial attitudes towards languages persist.

- b) **Négritude Movement:** A literary and ideological movement aimed at cultivating 'Black Consciousness' across Africa and its diaspora, it emerged in Paris around the 1930s and 1940s led by French-speaking African and Caribbean writers, artists, politicians and intellectuals. The term was coined by Aimé Césaire, in his epic poem, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939), translated as *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* or *Journal of a Homecoming*. He later emerged as a prominent Caribbean Surrealist writer. The other prominent proponents of the movement were Léon Damas and Léopold Sédar Senghor who shaped the idea of Négritude with their poetry. They were inspired by Harlem Renaissance (the intellectual, social and artistic, New Negro movement of 1920s that flourished in New York) and the works of Claude McKay and Langston Hughes who laid the groundwork for black expression. The Négritude writers rejected the French colonial hegemony evident in the policy of assimilation and voiced dissent against physical/psychological violence perpetrated by colonialism. Etymologically, the term is constructed from the French word *nègre* that meant 'a black man' and had a derogatory meaning. By redefining the word in positive terms these writers claimed dignity of their identity. They instilled in it a sense of pride by establishing cultural, racial and historical ties to the African continent. The movement also emphasized the shared black heritage of the African diaspora.
- c) **Rastafarian Movement:** It was a spiritual movement that emerged in Jamaica in 1930s following the coronation of Emperor Ras Tafari in Ethiopia (Africa), who took the name of Haile Selassie. The movement was built on the notion held by African slaves about soul's return to Africa from exile in the Caribbean. At the core of the movement was the idea of faith in Selassie's divinity (who was placed in the legendary line of King Solomon) and his agency in the literal repatriation of Jamaican people to their African homeland. The genesis of the movement is complex. It was initially a spiritual movement of the underclass but soon spread across the Caribbean to sections of the middle class and intellectuals. It later gained global attention through the music and lyrics of Bob Marley who was a devoted Rastafarian. In fiction, the movement took shape in the works Roger Mais (1905-55) who talks of the experience of dislocation and estrangement. It was later elaborated in the dramas of Walcott as well.
- d) **Créolité:** It is a literary movement that developed around 1980s by writers Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé and Raphaël Confiant who hailed from Martinique. It was a response to the inadequacies of the Négritude movement that projected a monolithic perception of black identity. It is based on Edward Glissant's views that heterogeneous Caribbean identity cannot be formulated exclusively in terms of African descent as it negates the influences of the

indigenous Caribbeans, the European colonialists, and the indentured servants from India and China. The movement also rejects French dominance in literature, culture and academic context by promoting French-based Creole language called Antillean Creole that has elements of Carib, English, and African languages in its vocabulary and grammar. It is spoken primarily in the group of islands in the Caribbean called the Lesser Antilles.

Now, let us read briefly about some prominent writers from the Caribbean writing in English.

George Lamming's novel *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) is an important text. Its publication had a huge impact in creating a distinct identity of Caribbean literature. Set in a hamlet, in following the experiences of the protagonist, the novel examines the legacy of colonialism, slavery, feudalism and racism in the Caribbean village society. George Lamming was born in 1927 in a Carrington a small village in Barbados. He is regarded as one of the most significant writers in the Caribbean Anglophone literature. Other than him there have been many notable fiction writers from the Caribbean such as Roger Mais, Edgar Austin Mittelholzer, V.S. Reid, Samuel Selvon, Wilson Harris, Michael Anthony, Garth St. Omer, Jean Rhys and V. S. Naipaul, who dealt with the themes of colonialism, the dilemmas of the West Indian diaspora and the sense of alienation felt by black people in a society with white values and traditions as norms. For instance the novel *A Brighter Sun* (1952) by Selvon, set in the World War II era, depicts the life of East Indians and Creoles in the racially split Trinidad. Similarly *A Morning at the Office* (1950) a novel by noted Guyanese writer Edgar Mittelholzer depicts the 'contradiction of being white in mind and black in body' as phrased by Derek Walcott. It is done through a sympathetic portrayal of characters from the middle and lower-middle-class in Trinidad. The novel *New Day* (1949) by V.S. Reid is hailed as a landmark in West Indian literature. Reid was a major exponent of the Jamaican heritage and anti-colonial ideas. In this novel, he depicts the political history of Jamaica by using a dialect as the language of narration. *Wide Sargasso Sea* published in 1966 gave an indomitable reputation to Dominica born author Jean Rhys. A prequel to *Jane Eyre*, the novel depicts the suffering, the racial/sexual exploitation of the Creole heroine Antoinette and the complexities of being white minority in the Caribbean. The character is a feminist as well as anti-colonial re-imagining of Bertha Mason (Rochester's mad wife locked up in the attic in *Jane Eyre*). Among other notable women writers, Jamaica Kincaid from Antigua is considered the best novelists of autobiographical fiction for texts like *At the Bottom of the River* (1983). This discussion cannot be completed without mentioning V.S. Naipaul who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2001. He was of Indian descent and hailed from Trinidad but spent most of his life domiciled in England. Known for writing with a sense of disappointment, discontent and pessimism about the postcolonial conditions in the Third World, his much acclaimed *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) is set in Trinidad and centers on the main character's attempt to assert his personal identity and establish his independence symbolized by owning a house. His other novels *The Mimic Men* (1967) and *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) are also considered key texts in postcolonial literature.

A search for distinctively authentic Caribbean voice has been a prominent concern implicit in the broadness of the range of West Indian theatre which includes the conventional drama of social realism, the yard theatre, roots theatre, pantomime, Jamaica's Gun Court theatre, church theatre, carnival theatre, calypso theatre,

theatre of ritual, folk theatre and such other. Some leading playwrights from the Caribbean have been Errol John, Douglas Archibald, Dennis Scott, Trevor Rhone, David Edgecombe, Michael Gilkes and most certainly Derek Walcott.

The names of Derek Walcott and Edward Kamau Brathwaite have almost become synonymous with Caribbean poetry. However, there are many other significant poets like Lorna Goodson from Jamaica, Wayne Brown from Trinidad and Tobago, Dennis Scott from Jamaica, David Dabydeen from Guyana, Cyril Dabyden, Claire Harris, Dionne Brand, etc who have contributed to the growth of Caribbean poetry. The collection titled *Rites of Passage* (1930) by Edward Brathwaite is popularly regarded as the starting point of West Indian literary studies. Acutely attuned to the experience of dispossession and exploitation wrought by slavery, his poetry expresses deep empathy for the West Indian slaves and examines African and indigenous roots of Caribbean culture. He was the winner of the Sixth Annual Griffin Poetry Prize in 2006 for *Slow Horses* (2005). Brathwaite as a poet and historian was the exponent of social consciousness wrought through creolization in literature of the Caribbean. He vigorously advocated and promoted the Creole as a national language in his critical and theoretical essays. He also cofounded the Caribbean Artists Movement. Some other works by him include *Masks* (1968), *Islands* (1969), *Our Ancestral Heritage: A Bibliography of the Roots of Culture in the English-speaking Caribbean* (1976) and *Barbados Poetry: A Checklist: Slavery to the Present* (1979), *Black + Blues* (1976), *Middle Passages* (1992) and *Ancestors* (2001). In contrast to Brathwaite's Afro-centric approach, Derek Walcott has given importance to the cross-cultural aspect of the Caribbean region but with focus on the postcolonial era. Patricia Ismond has aptly summarized the difference in "Walcott vs. Brathwaite" by calling Brathwaite's approach as vernacular-oriented "nation poetry" whereas in contrast Walcott's aesthetic orientation exhibits metropolitan sophistication. Walcott's contribution to the Anglophone Caribbean poetry and drama is discussed in detail in the next section.

Check Your Progress 1

- 4) Why do critics consider presenting a comprehensive history of the Caribbean a herculean task?

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- 5) What do you understand by the term Negritude?

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- 6) What is the significance of creolization in the Caribbean context?

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3.2 INTRODUCTION TO DEREK WALCOTT

Derek Walcott and his twin brother Roderick Walcott were born on January 23, 1930 in Castries, St. Lucia. His father Warwick Walcott was a civil servant, a poet and a visual artist. His mother Alix Walcott was a school teacher. Major supporters of art, both the parents encouraged him to learn painting and get involved in the local theater activities in his childhood. Originally trained as a painter, Walcott later switched to poetry as a medium of creative expression. Under the influence of his mother who inculcated in him a love for poetry Walcott began writing poetry at an early age. His first poem was published at the age of 14. Then by the age of 19 he had managed to self-publish two poetry collections titled: *25 Poems* and *Epitaphs for the Young: XII Cantos*. After studying at St. Mary's College in Castries initially and at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, Walcott moved to Trinidad in 1953. Here he has worked as theatre and art critic. In 1959, the Trinidad Theatre Workshop was cofounded by him with his brother. It produced many of his early plays. However, it was with the publication of *In a Green Night* (1962) that he achieved a literary breakthrough. The book celebrates the Caribbean landscape, its history and interrogates the ramifications of colonialism. The poems deal with the themes of language, power and place. These become leitmotifs in later collections as well. The poems published in *Selected Poems* (1964), *The Castaway* (1965), and *The Gulf* (1969) render his dilemma of being caught between European cultural orientation and native Caribbean black folk cultures. Some other works by him are; a book-length autobiographical poem *Another Life* (1973), poetry collections where he explores the theme of linguistic, cultural and racial divisions in the Caribbean, *Sea Grapes* (1976), *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979), *The Fortune Traveller* (1981) and *Midsummer* (1984) where he explores the theme of his estrangement from the Caribbean and his precarious situation as a black writer in America. *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000), *The Prodigal* (2004), *Selected Poems* (2007), *White Egrets* (2010) and *Morning Paramin* (2016) are his later collections. Walcott's impressive oeuvre comprises of both poetry and drama. His plays draw upon various genres such as fable, allegory, folk and morality. They also deal with the socio-political and epistemological effects of post-colonialism as reflected in West Indian experience. He has earned a lot of awards and honors. The notable ones include; the British Knighthood, MacArthur Foundation 'genius' award and the Obie Award for his play *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. But most importantly he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992 for *Omeros* (1990). While maintaining a steady stream of poetry and drama throughout his life Walcott also taught at various universities across the world including, Boston University, Columbia University, Yale University, Rutgers University, and Essex University in England.

Among Walcott's critics some key areas of debates that also constitute the interpretative framework for his literary corpus have been; his quest for Caribbean poetics, his troublesome relationship with the western canon, his ideological engagement with the idea of Caribbeanness, his exploration of the interface in divide between Europe and Africa, his stance on the complex linguistic dynamics of the Caribbean with respect to Standard English vs. Creole of the Anglophone Caribbean and most prominently his 'quarrel with history'. Walcott's early education in British colonial education system made him well versed with western canon. In poetry, he is deeply influenced by the study of Virgil, Dante, Eliot, Pound, Dylan Thomas etc. Critics argue that western models also inform the

frames of many of his plays, such as influence of the Irish playwright J M Synge is visible in *The Sea at Dauphin*; Bertolt Brecht's influence and oriental techniques can be seen in *Drums*. The atmosphere in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* is reminiscent of August Strindberg and Shakespeare's influence is discernible in *A Branch of Blue Nile*. Despite being heavily influenced by British and American literature, a dominant trait in the body of work created by Walcott is the juxtaposition and cross fertilization of both colonial and folk cultures which mirrors the cultural hybridity of the Caribbean region. Critical of Afro-centric or Eurocentric purism, his poetry and drama espouse the discourse of cross-cultural aesthetics. For instance he evinces a mastery of the Standard English, has knowledge of French, experiments extensively with the dialects of the Caribbean and often amalgamates them all in his work. In theatre too, he employs hybrid practices by seamlessly interweaving wide-ranging modern theatrical conventions with popular Caribbean performance modes. Be it form or content, Walcott shows sustained engagement with the idea of 'Hybridity', which is a key concept in postcolonial theory and is profoundly entrenched with the ideas of identity and multiculturalism. In literature it is often used to challenge the essentialist racist mindset, as historically speaking European Colonizers had used the argument of their racial supremacy to justify colonialism and slave trade. For the preservation of this supremacist racial discourse, undiluted pure culture was considered a necessity; hence they considered racial intermixing was considered denigrating influence and a threat. Hybridity in Walcott's work is a fundamental ideology in general and symptomatic of creolization (discussed in section (2.1). A prominent trope in Walcott's writing is grappling with the past- prehistoric and historic. Walcott perceives history as an ideological construct in the colonial discourse. He rejects it to advocate myth as an alternative. This has been discussed in detail in section 2.4 with reference 'Names'. Another recurrent motif in his plays and poetry is 'poet persona's quest for self which is ridden with contradictions, conflict as well as continuities and metamorphoses'. Often the metaphor of 'migration' literal or figurative is employed to flesh out this theme. This is also played out evidently in both the poems 'A Far Cry from Africa' and 'Names'. For detailed analysis read the sections 3.3 and 3.4.

Check Your Progress 2

7) Make a critical appraisal of Derek Walcott as a poet and a dramatist.

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8) Why is hybridity as a concept fundamental to Walcott's body of work?

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3.3 A FAR CRY FROM AFRICA- TEXT WITH ANNOTATIONS

A Far Cry From Africa

From In A Green Night [1962]

A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt
 Of Africa, Kikuyu, quick as flies,
 Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt
 Corpses are scattered through a paradise.
 Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries:
 "Waste no compassion on these separate dead!"
 Statistics justify and scholars seize
 The salients of colonial policy.
 What is that to the white child hacked in bed?
 To savages, expendables as Jews?

Threshed out by beaters, the long rushes break
 In a white dust of ibises whose cries
 Have wheeled since civilization's dawn
 From the parched river or beast-teeming plain.
 The violence of beast on beast is read
 As natural law, but upright man
 seeks his divinity by inflicting pain.
 Delirious as these worried beasts, his wars
 Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum,
 While he calls courage still that native dread
 Of the white peace contracted by the dead.

Again brutish necessity wipes its hands
 Upon the napkin of a dirty cause, again
 A waste of our compassion, as with Spain,
 The gorilla wrestles with the superman.
 I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
 Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
 I who have cursed
 The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
 Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?

Betray them both, or give back what they give?

How can I face such slaughter and be cool?

How can I turn from Africa and I

ANNOTATIONS

tawny pelt: tan coloured undressed skin of an animal

Kikuyu: ethnic tribe of Kenya . In 1963 Kenya gained independence from the British but only after a prolonged violent campaign by Kikuyu African anti-colonial organisation called Mau Mau.

veldt: uncultivated or open country that is not forested

carrion: rotting flesh of dead animals

compassion: pity

savages: uncivilized people The natives inhabitants of the colonies were considered sub-human animals by the colonisers who justify colonisation as a 'civilizing mission'.

Jews: The Bible provides various incidents of persecution of Jews. It could also be a reference to the holocaust perpetrated by Hitler during the World War II when millions of Jews were killed in the concentration camps.

rushes: tapering plants that grow at the edge of water

ibises: birds that wade in shallow waters

natural law: the food chain according to which animals kill to feed on other animals in order to survive but not out of greed. It could also indicate Darwin's Theory of Evolution.

as with Spain: Spanish conquistadors made settlements in the Caribbean Islands after Christopher Colombus chanced upon West Indies while trying to discover alternative sea route to India. Eventually, slaves from West Africa were brought to the Caribbean Islands to work in the plantations set up by the settlers.

gorilla: symbolic representation of African people as monkey like because of their dark skin and apparent lack of civilization

superman: symbolic representation of the white race indicative of their apparent technological progress

betray: not to be loyal, refuse to accept

ANALYSIS

The poem is taken from the collection titled *In a Green Night* published in 1962 that brought Walcott to limelight. Search for identity is the overarching theme of the collection and *A Far Cry from Africa* is considered the most representative poem. The title of the poem is ambiguous as well as ironic and doesn't convey clearly the main theme of the poem. The theme of the poem is Walcott's conflicted feelings arising due to his mixed racial lineage. The theme is explored through a recollection of Mau-Mau uprising in Kenya during the rise of African nationalism against the British and its violent consequences. The phrase 'a far cry' in the title literally means something that is different from what is expected. Figuratively

the word 'far' also conveys a sense of 'long distance' from the African continent. Wes Davis observes that "far cry is both a distant cry and dissimilarity... a great distance separating places". Thus, the title is ambiguous and is indicative of Walcott's dilemma about yearning for a lost culture as well as a distancing from it. However, the conflicted feelings are transmuted into a poetic creation.

The opening stanza of the poem recalls Africa ravaged by the conflict between the British colonizers and rebels of the Kikuyu Tribe. Here African land is pictured as a tan animal skin being touselled by wind of violence and racial prejudice. The word 'flies' is a metaphor for the Kikuyu rebels that are growing fat by gorging on the bloodstream of the African grasslands, a veritable Eden now strewn with corpses. Similarly, among the colonizers a high ranking officer is the 'worm' crying out to show no pity to the misfortunes of those massacred from both the opposing sides. This violence is explained even by academics and scholars who cite statistics to justify the salient features of colonial policy. But placing this in critical light the poet rhetorically questions the efficacy of these facts and figures that are of no use to the innocent victims treated inhumanly as savages and persecuted like Jews. Poet's own liminal position makes him perceive both the colonizers and the colonized as murderers.

The second stanza presents a vivid account of topography of a pre-colonial Africa as an ancient civilization teeming with flora and fauna that has now become ridden with strife due to colonization. Since the beginning of civilization, this land with sun-baked rivers as well as verdant plains teeming with beasts, has been inhabited by people who threshed out the grains, making the reed that grows along the marshes break and rise above like the birds of swamp called ibises. However, the colonizer who thinks of himself as an 'upright man' ironically tries to obtain godliness by tormenting these indigenous natives. The coloniser feels madly ecstatic because of being victorious in the wars perpetuated by him for the purpose of colonial conquest. In his euphoria he calls it bravery. However, the native out their fear of the widespread massacre dread the 'white peace' (which is a metaphor for apparently beneficial aspects of the colonial rule). In this stanza the anti-colonial critique becomes more evident as, in comparison to the animals who live by the laws of nature, Walcott presents the civilized white man as more monstrous for wreaking havoc on this land and celebrating his war victories by sadistically oppressing the natives.

The final stanza then brings out Walcott's own dilemma about his mixed racial identity. He begins by reiterating his remorse at the cruel and violent ways of men deemed necessary in the instances of racial conflict. This necessity is 'personified'. It is called 'brutish' who acts guiltlessly and wipes its hands clean of any remorse 'upon the napkin of a dirty cause'. Though vaguely, Walcott makes a reference to the Spanish conquest of the Caribbean Islands to emphasize the misuse of compassion on such violent upheavals where 'gorillas' come in conflict with 'the superman'. Having articulated the outward manifestations of racial conflict Walcott then directs the focus to his own emotional turmoil. Divided by his dual heritage as both black and white blood flows through his veins, he feels troubled by his biological mixed ancestry. His hatred for imperialism comes in contradiction with his love for the English language. He realises that imprecating the colonial officer does not diminish his love for the English language. The poem ends with rhetorical questions that iterate not only his dual heritage but also his dilemma; should he refuse either of the heritages? But neither

can he reject English nor dismiss the slaughter of the African natives.

Carolyn Cooper in a "Language Beyond Mimicry: Language as Metaphor and Meaning in Derek Walcott's Oeuvre", states that Walcott's poetry captures the aesthetic problem peculiar to the Caribbean Literature due to the linguistic heterogeneity of the region. "His early work reveals a seminal thematic preoccupation- a conflict of cultural values which is rooted in language. The two languages of his native St. Lucia, the West African/ French based Creole and Received Standard English, symbolizes for Walcott two radically opposed modes of perception: Creole articulates the dynamic spontaneity of folk culture, English expresses the rigorous intellectual discipline of the letters"(159). Mervyn Alleyne has also explained that in St. Lucia there exists a 'fundamental schism' with encoded 'master servant polarity' between Creole and English. This is a remainder of slavery in the Caribbean. Creole language as a medium is also a repository of the folklore, popular customs, ceremonies, rituals spoken by a huge section of population. It is spontaneous medium of expression. It also reverberates with the private mores of the people. On the contrary, English is the medium for formal and official communication. It is very conservative, and is spoken mostly by people who have received it through schooling or literary exposure. Thus, the two languages are very different in nature and function. They are indicative of the cultural dualism which creates a sort of conflict of values in the Afro-Caribbean psyche. Expressing this effect in his poem *Codicil* Walcott calls himself a "schizophrenic, wrenched by two styles" and *A Far Cry from Africa* extends this theme. Cooper argues, "The ambiguity of the poem's title demonstrates Walcott's ambivalence: The Mau-Mau revolution against British colonial policy is a powerful cry, whose intensity distance can not diminish. The shared experience of British colonialism which the Blacks in Caribbean and Kenya have survived, establishes a bond of empathy. But despite that commonality of experience Walcott recognizes that his own experience is distinct, is a far cry from Kenyan. He abhors the savagery of British culture which has provided him the language he must use to indict it"(160). However, in an essay titled "Meaning" published in 1970 Walcott proposes that a creative synthesis of this cultural dichotomy is a the positive inheritance of colonialism in the Caribbean. He also delineates three distinct stages in his own artistic development. A withdrawal into the world of English literature is the first stage. The second stage is of movement outward towards the folk rhythms expressed in Creole. Finally, the third stage of attempts to combine the two cultures in a synthesis. These stages are enumerated in "What the Twilight Says: An Overture", a collection of literary essays.

Check Your Progress 3

Read the following questions and answer in the space that follows:

- 4) Comment on the ambivalence of the title, *A Far Cry from Africa*.

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5) Discuss the significance of animal imagery in the poem.

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6) Explain the theme of racial/cultural conflict in the poem.

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3.4 NAMES –TEXT WITH ANNOTATIONS

I

Names

From Sea Grapes [1976]

My race began as the sea began,
with no nouns, and with no horizon,
with pebbles under my tongue,
with a different fix on the stars.

But now my race is here,
in the sad oil of Levantine eyes,
in the flags of the Indian fields.

I began with no memory
I began with no future,
but I looked for that moment
when the mind was halved by a horizon.

I have never found that moment
when the mind was halved by a horizon-
for the goldsmith from Benares,
the stonecutter from Canton,
as a fishline sinks, the horizon
sinks in the memory.

Have we melted into a mirror,
leaving our souls behind?
The goldsmith from Benaras,

the stonecutters from Canton,
the bronzesmith from Benin.
A sea-eagle screams from the rock,
and my race began like the osprey
with that cry
that terrible vowel,
that I!

Behind us all the sky folded,
as history folds over a fishline,
and the foam foreclosed
with nothing in our hands

but this stick
to trace our names on the sand
which the sea erased again, to our indifference.

II

And when they named these bays
bays,
was it nostalgia or irony?

In the uncombed forest,
in the uncultivated grass
where was there elegance
except in their mockery?

Where were the courts of Castille?
Versailles' colonnades
supplanted by cabbage palms
with Corinthian crests,
belittling diminutives,
then, little Versailles
meant plans for a pigsty,
names for the sour apples
and green grapes of their exile.

Their memory turned acid
but the names held;

ignou
THE PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY

Valencia glows
with the lanterns of oranges,
Mayaro's
charred candelabra of cocoa.
Bing men, they could not live
except they first presumed
the right of every thing to be a noun.
The African acquiesced,
repeated and changed them.

Listen , my children say:
Moubain: the hogplum,
cerise: the wild cherry
baie-la: the bay,
with the fresh green voices
they were once themselves
in the way the wind bends
our natural inflections.

These palms are greater than Versailles,
for no man made them,
their fallen columns greater than Castille,
no man unmade them
except the worm, who has no helmet,
but was always the emperor,
and children, look at these stars
over Valencia's forest!

Not Orion,
not Betelgeuse,
tell me, what do they look like?
Answer, you damned little Arabs!
Sir, fireflies caught in molasses.

ANNOTATIONS

name: a noun, a word used to address a person, indicator of one's identity

fix: position, predicament

pebbles under my tongue: It is said that the Greek orator Demosthenes treated his speech impediment by talking with pebbles in his mouth.

sad oil: sad here means nostalgia for homelands left behind, oil means the extracts from the olive fruit that grows abundantly in the Mediterranean lands

Indians: It refers to both the American Indian indigenous people of Caribbean as well as the Indians transported to the Caribbean as indentured labours

Benaras: A holy city on the banks of River Ganga

Canton: A highly populated city of south China.

fishline: a line attached to hook used for fishing

Benin: Earlier called Dahomey is a North African Country

Osprey: a large broad-winged fish-eating bird

foreclosed: rule out, prevent, preclude

indifference: complacency, disinterestedness

bays: basin, cove

nostalgia: a sentimental longing for past

irony: state of affair contrary to what is expected

uncombed: unkempt, wild

mockery: parody, jeering, derision, contempt

Castille: A historical region in Spain. It was a large powerful kingdom in the Middle Ages.

Versailles' colonnades: Versailles is a city in France. It is famous for The Palace of Versailles that was the principal royal residence of France between the 17th and 18th century until the start of French Revolution. The palace is a historical monument and UNESCO World Heritage Site.

supplanted: substituted, replaced

belittling: denigrate, deride, underestimate, insult

diminutives: miniature

Valencia: The third largest city in Spain known for its heritage in Arts and Science

Mayaro: A Beach at the east coast of island of the Trinidad and Tobago.

Candelabra: a candlestick holder with many branches

green voices: symbolic meaning of green here is growth and learning

inflections: the rise and fall of voice while talking.

columns: pillars

Orion: a prominent constellation also called a hunter in Greek mythology.

Betelgeuse: A distinctly reddish and the second brightest star in the constellation of Orion. The name is a corruption of the Arabic Name "yad-al-jauza" which means the hand of al-jauza. Al-jauza was a character in Arab mythology.

Molasses: the remaining thick brown syrup left after sugar is crystallized

ANALYSIS

Published in the collection titled *Sea Grapes* the poem 'Names' articulates Walcott's preoccupation with the themes of history, identity and language. The focus of the poem is on the idea of West Indian crisis of consciousness due to a sense of historical void. Divided in two parts the poem conveys the diasporic anxieties of Caribbean Islanders. It describes the perspectives of descendents of migrant slaves brought from Africa, India and other parts of the world as well as

the colonizers from Europe. The title is indicative of the role played by language as a carrier of cultural identity and as a medium to record history. It also indicates how language gets wielded as an instrument of control by colonizers to impose Eurocentric norms and history upon the colonized subjects. However, as natives interpellate these norms through mimicry they ironically also subvert them.

In the first part, the poet attempts a journey into his racial and subjective consciousness to trace the origin of his 'race'. The word is a pun implying the meaning of 'running' as a verb, and also 'ethnicity' as a noun. Although, the existence of his people is as old as the sea yet he is unable to find any 'nouns' to represent the same, indicating an erasure of his people's history. His search for accounts of his origin seems difficult like trying to speak clearly with pebbles under the tongue. It is perhaps because he speaks in English which is the coloniser's language. The difficulty is compounded by his predicament of having a different perspective on stars/constellations in the sky that have been used as nautical signposts for navigation in the sea from antiquity. The line 'no noun, no horizon' registers a pessimistic tone. It evokes the exasperation that comes with the realization of loss of memories, loss of connections with one's ancestral land, and lack of a cohesive identity due to forced migration. All this compounds to make the search of a past previous to colonial history appear futile. This idea is developed in the next stanza where the poet acknowledges that the journey of his people despite beginning in antiquity thousands of years ago and thousands of miles away has now brought them here in the West Indies, where his people worked in plantations as slaves like the indentured labourers from India and China. Consequently, the poet who is of mixed racial descent, a successor of these exploited immigrants forcefully transported and brought to the Caribbean, the poet's quest for cultural identity begins with a void with no memory of the past or the future. This makes him probe for the exact moment when discriminatory colour consciousness seeped into human mind dividing the world as black and white with racial prejudice. The phrase 'I have never found that moment' emphasises the fruitlessness of his search. This is due to the socio-linguistic complexity of the Caribbean milieu. This flux of influence is further reflected in the interactions between people of different ethnicities such as "the goldsmith from Benaras" and "the stonecutters from Canton". For these people who were brought to the Caribbean generations ago, from faraway places (Benaras – a city of India at the banks of River Ganga and Canton- a populous city of South China) the search for cohesive identity sinks in the memory like a fish line sinks in the sea water without any trace. In the next few lines, the poet laments the loss of distinct ethnic roots of these people by posing a rhetorical question, "Have we melted into a mirror, leaving our souls behind?". This fleshes out his concern about the distortion of reality and loss of memories of past as the glorious cities of Benaras, Canton or Benin that once held sway are now have lost their glory with the passage of time. This sense of historical void results in an agonising process when it comes to articulation of identity in the multi-ethnic Caribbean territories. The assertive cry of 'I', the first person singular pronoun that contains the sense of self of an individual is to be made against the racial prejudice. It is to be carved out in spite of persistent dehumanization wrought upon the people of the Caribbean by a long history of colonial oppression. Phonetically, this shrill and agonising cry sounds like the terrible scream of the sea-eagle. Despite these earnest efforts the poet is tormented by the lack of a definite identity due to the lost, collapsed, devalued historical past of the Caribbean people. He compares the condition of his people with that of children trying to write on sand. For

Walcott the attempt "to trace our names on sand" yields no results as the sea erases them waves after waves. The word indifference here indicates the ethnic conflict and divisions that have been endemic to the Caribbean. In these lines there is also a note of resignation to the fate of the oppressed.

In the second section the poem depicts a different perspective. It shifted from poets own conflicted state of mind (embodied in the first section) to the condition of the colonizers who were also dislocated in the process of colonization. However, their migration was voluntary. They had left their homelands and come to the Caribbean in search of a better life. Displaced far away from the countries of their origin these people also suffer from nostalgia. It is evident in their attempts to recreate their homelands on these distant shores by naming places as Castille, Versailles and Valencia. They gave European names to bays, unexplored forest and uncultivated land. This is also indicative of their efforts to continue their famed histories and relive their past glories. Walcott problematizes this sentimental yearning as ironical through rhetorical questions such as, "was it nostalgia or irony?" This replication on the part of the colonisers that lacks the refinement of manners and elegance of the original homelands appears as "mockery" due to the absurdity of the comparison between the ornate architecture of pillars of Versailles with the columns of cabbage palms which is a common vegetable. The ridiculousness of these attempts is highlighted when the plans for dirty filthy settlements like pigsty are named little Versailles, after famed European cities. The word 'little' used with Versailles is indicative of the habit of the colonisers to add "little" or "grand" to names imported from their native country. However these efforts to fashion these newly conquered lands after European models often prominently leads to much pretence in their state of self-imposed banishment. Walcott calls this "the sour apples/ and green grapes of their exile". One can read here an allusion to the popular Aesop's fable of the fox and the grapes. Despite the errors of memory that fades over time and "turns acid", these names remain. Therefore, Valencia originally a province of south of Spain, in the Caribbean glows with oranges instead of lanterns and Mayaro a beach town in the south-eastern Atlantic coast of the republic of Trinidad and Tobago, instead of scorched candle holders of the royal gatherings, blooms with foliage of cocoa the tropical African tree that resemble the shape of the candelabra. These lines are an implicit criticism of the civilizing mission of the colonizers. Blind to the beauty of the Caribbean landscape before them and they denigrated it by taking Eurocentric frame of comparison. Then they assiduously enforced their own limited worldview on the 'slaves'. Also, presuming themselves to be the representative of the category of 'man', they take for granted the right to name things. Though, the Africans gave in to the enforcement of European language and culture, yet in their attempts to imitate they also reinterpreted and modified the norms. This aspect is brought out in the next stanza where the poet refers to the subversive potential of mimicry. The colonizers enforce foreign names on the natives yet even in their innocent imitation and calling the hogplum, the wild cherry and the bay by their French names, *moubain*, *cerise* and *baiel-la* respectively, the natives effect a change in the pronunciation due to inflections caused by linguistic interference of their Creole languages. The word "inflection" comes from the Latin *inflectere*. It means "to bend". Further the colonizer as master instructs the natives, who are infantilized and treated patronizingly. Ironically, they are taught about their own geography but couched in European terms. He calls the palm greater than Versailles and the fallen trees greater than the pillars of Castilles because they grew and fell naturally without human

intervention. Then pointing to the sky he asks the children to name the constellation known Orion with the star Betelgeuse. Walcott then presents the persona of the master/teacher who demands “tell me, what do they look like?/ Answer, you damned little Arabs!” Caught helplessly in the coloniser’s ideological grip and habit to dictate names, the native respond, “Sir, fireflies caught in molasses.” The last line of the poem metaphorically conveys the condition of the natives. They are trapped in the sweet sticky mess of forcefully imposed yet difficult to resist identity of the colonized subject, like fireflies stuck in molasses. Yet, despite their plight they glow. In Rei Terada’s words “It is because paradoxically forcing the children to speak English only makes the ironies of their situation more obvious, as their innocent pronunciations deflect their textbook version of political geography. Even though they don’t realize it, their mispronunciation amount to reinterpretation”(222). Terada in “*The Pain of History Words Contain*”: Walcott and Creole Poetics”, interprets the metaphor in the last line of the poem in the following words “children poignantly suggest that stars are as small, live, and vulnerable as fireflies in the matrix of the universe”. She also points out that fireflies are a recurrent motif in Walcott’s poetry. Focusing on the logic of linguistic mimicry in the poem, Terada then compares it with another poem “Saint Lucie”, also published in *Sea Grapes*. She states that Walcott makes association between words and fireflies in the phrase “text of fireflies” in “Saint Lucie”. In this context, the ephemeral luminosity that these creatures conjure is related with the short-lived magic of the Creole words spoken by the children in the process of naming. Therefore, the last image is connected to the title. In her opinion the two parts of the poem “Names” recount the linguistic complexities of the society. The use of Roman numeral I indicating part one of the poem is also a visual pun implying the meaning of personal pronoun I. However, Walcott’s concerns are not limited to his own anxiety alone, but are reflective of his community which is clearly articulated in the line “my race began like the osprey/ with that cry,/ that terrible vowel, / that I!”(223). This line suggests that history, be it of an individual or a community, is an important aspect for construction of one’s identity.

Interrogating Eurocentric History has been key concern in postcolonial literature. This entails examining the appropriation of history by the colonial master which included interfering with local traditions/customs, rejecting native beliefs as superstitions, imposing their own language as a medium of education and infantilizing the native. It also includes attempts to retrieve and re-write alternate histories from subaltern perspectives by the natives, which invariably involves dredging through horrific memories of racial discrimination, dehumanization and subjugation. Like many writers from the West Indies, Walcott has also tried to address these postcolonial concerns through his poetry, plays and essays. To substantiate this let us consider a few instances. In *The Gulf* (1969) Walcott states that “his fear/or history was its lack “(26). In *Sea Grapes* (1976), he writes “History/ is natural- famine, genocide”(31). In *a Green Night* (1962), he mentions, “And I, with a black/Heart, and my back/healing from history”(24). Walcott’s work is replete with such engagement with history as an ideological construct. Robert Elliot Fox in his essay, “Derek Walcott: History As Dis-ease” highlights this by making an assessment of Walcott’s attitude towards history through a study of his work. According to Fox, “Walcott’s attitude towards history is scarcely one of respect or admiration”(241). As cited by him, in the essay titled “The Muse of History”, the epigraph that is, “History is a nightmare from which I am trying to recover”, is a quotation from Joyce. Further Walcott calls it “Medusa of

the New World", "amnesia"; then eventually declares that there is, "No history, but flux, and only sustenance, myth..."(241). Reflecting on the West Indian crisis of consciousness, Fox argues that Caribbean islands have been a "pepper pot of languages, races and cultures, because of their geographic location. Not only are they scattered in the sea between two halves of the Americas, but they have also acted as the contact point between the New World and the Old, furthermore, these Islands are peopled by the posterity of Europeans, Africans, Indians, Chinese and people of mixed racial descent. Consequently, a history of this region only emerges, "each distinct, yet inseparable from the rest"(237). Faced with such complexity, for compilation of historical account imagination can prove more effective than academic ordering of facts. He further explains:

One of the problems with history is that it becomes inevitably entwined with politics, harried by ideologies. History is not true collective memory; it is selective and hierarchical for the most part. Ancestral memory is enshrined archetypal in myth, which has always proved more valuable to art than the most acute historical sense- and individual memory can hope to link up with origins only when it consciously eschews the weight of history. As for modern mass memory, it is, when not amnesia, mostly nostalgia, which is one of history's agonising offspring. (237)

History as an academic discipline is popularly understood as the study of significant events of the past recorded in written documents. V. S. Naipaul in *The Middle Passage* (1962) a book of travel essays had cynically remarked, "that history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told . . . "as "History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in West Indies"(29). What he implies is that the people of West Indies do not have glorious or outstanding achievements that typically constitute a teleological historical account, rather their sense of past is ensconced in the humiliating experiences of invasions, slavery and racism. However, what critics have found problematic with Naipaul's pessimistic vision is the condemnation of future possibilities in his claim that under the overwhelming influence of the past, "these small islands . . . will never create"(25). In comparison, though Walcott also rejects the idea of History as time but instead of a distrustful and disparaging outlook about future possibilities, he posits the idea of myth as an alternative to transcend history. He also highlights the significance of 'imagination' as a means to overcome the sense of a lack of history. As recorded by Edward Baugh, Walcott states, "In the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not created, or because it was sordid; but because it never mattered. What has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention"(2006, 10). For Walcott myth, because it does not negate the imaginative mechanizations of memory as invalid, is preferable to history that as a narrative in absolute terms depends primarily on the unimaginative accumulation of details. This is evident in his poem "The Sea is History", a poem which is a retort to the proposition that Caribbean is ahistorical. Figuratively speaking, it projects the idea that the sea has been an archive as well as a chronicler of the Caribbean. In the poem Walcott recalls significant events of colonial history but overwrites them by entwining several biblical myths, episodes and incidents to present the idea that for the Caribbean islanders, the Sea has not only been a significant factor shaping their lives but has also been a source of their history.

Check Your Progress 4

Read the following questions and answer in the space that follows:

- 1) Comment on the structure of the poem *Names*. How does the structure mirror the thematic concerns of the poem ?

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- 2) Discuss the use of journey as a motif in *Names*.

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- 3) What are your observations about Walcott's attitude towards history?

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3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit the following ideas have been discussed:

The Caribbean is considered a politically, culturally, and linguistically fragmented region. Geographically it is not limited to the islands in the Caribbean Sea but also includes some mainland regions of the North and South American continents surrounding the sea.

Between the 15th and the 19th century the area was colonized by the Spanish, English, French, Dutch and Portuguese which has led to a chaotic proliferation of languages. Creolization has added to the linguistic diversity of this region. Because of the historical experience of slavery Caribbean literature is acutely concerned with issues of racial prejudice, creolization, nation building, cross-cultural identity and hybridity. Walcott who has emerged as one of the representative poets from the Caribbean also voices these concerns in his poetry and drama. His poem *A Far Cry from Africa*, noted for its striking animal imagery, deals with the theme of conflict of cultural values which is rooted in language that causes the anxiety of split identity in the poet persona because of his mixed racial heritage. His other poem *Names* highlights the fact that during the era of imperialism, domination was compounded by the processing of naming landscape, landmarks and settlements in the New World with Eurocentric names. The poem raises questions about politics of naming; such as who has the power to name

whom? What is the language used for naming? The poem also fleshes out Walcott's leitmotif, the theme of 'quarrel with history' through a challenging and futile metaphorical quest for past. It is because other than name, past is also a significant prerequisite for construction/assertion of one's identity.

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3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

These are only suggested as additional reading and are in no way compulsory.

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3.8 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

For all answers refer to 3.1.

Check Your Progress 2

For your answers refer to 3.2.

Check Your Progress 3

For answers refer to 3.3

Check Your Progress 4

For answers refer to 3.4