Caribbean post-colonial drama

Caribbean Post-Colonial Drama, namely the two plays studied for this analysis, Ti-Jean and His Brothers by Derek Walcott and Couvade by Michael Gilkes, are brimful with techniques used to cleverly critique Caribbean society and its history. These plays, seen mostly in Ti-Jean, can be seen or read on different levels. For example, the plays Ti-Jean and Couvade can both be read literally; as simply entertaining, metaphysically; as a tale of good vs. evil, or as allegories. It is my view that both of these playwrights have managed to merge and combine all of these elements into one, whereby the audience is left entertained, but also with something to think about. Also to be noted, is the fact that both plays possess strong political allegory, dealt with by their writers in their own ways.

Evident in both of these plays, is the dependence or focus on folk culture. Walcott seems to use as his archetype, Ananse stories – tales known to blend entertainment with morality. According to Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins in Post-Colonial Drama, Ananse tends to attempt to achieve his goals by trickery rather than by hard work. They note that: Transported and indigenized according to the contingencies of a Caribbean culture historically rooted in slavery, such stories tended to de-emphasize moral lessons and to play up the inherent subversiveness of Ananse as trickster.

Derek Walcott explores this figure of the trickster in theatrical contexts, especially in Ti-Jean and His Brothers (Post-Colonial Drama, 133). Notably, these authors point out that Walcott explains that this kind of folktale may be used as “ a form of ‘ guerilla resistance’ against cultural hegemony” as it is “ firmly grounded in the mythos of the local community,” and “ deliberately eschews the values of the imperial centre” (133). According to

Gilbert and Tompkins, Walcott states that what others may see as " provincial, primitive [and] childish" (134), is in reality a " radical innocence" (134). The ' charm' of Walcott's play is its simplicity, utilizing St. Lucian folklore to give a Caribbean flavour to an old myth. Ti-Jean is based on Christmas black mass dances of Papa Diable, his ' jabs' and the Bolom.

Walcott's use of Greek archetype must also be noted, as it seems that his narrators, Frog and Cricket, possess a similar role to the chorus in classical Greek drama. Allusion to Aristophanes' The Frogs in Ti-Jean, is blatant in Walcott's use of sound by these creatures. ' Greek-croak' and the Frog's sneeze " Aeschylus me! " are clever hints of Walcott's integration of classical archetype, which is fused with Creolized narrative modes. It is suggested by John Thieme in Derek Walcott, that the Cricket's phrase changing to " Creek-crak" betrays a Caribbean storyteller's style, as this is " normally used in a call-and-response context to establish a dialogue between narrator and audience" (Derek Walcott, 62). In his use of another St.

Lucian folk character, Papa Bois, Walcott proves that it is not easy to distinguish good from evil, as evil may disguise itself as good. Ti-Jean is an allegory of the contest between good and evil. Identifying Papa Bois, who according to Thieme, is " representative of folk wisdom" as the devil, implies " the relativism of moral judgments and the fact that no culture has a monopoly of virtue" (Thieme, 60). Walcott paints a picture of a necessary inter-relation between good an evil, God and the Devil. Indeed, in order for an ' absolute good' to be known, one must first be knowledgeable of an ' absolute evil', proven in Mi-Jean's statement: I believe in the Devil, yes, Or so

my mother make me, And is either that, papa, Or not believe in God (Walcott, 121).

This is echoed by Ti-Jean after he convinces the Devil to show his true face, after which he states “ this is like looking/ At the blinding gaze of God” [reference], to which t devil replies “ It is hard to distinguish us” (Walcott, 143). Ti-Jean is also viewed, perhaps moreso, as a political allegory. Mervyn Morris in Derek Walcott argues that it is a “ political-historical allegory” (West Indian Literature, 157), whereby the “ black man contends with the white oppressor” (157). Walcott portrays the Devil as a white planter, thus the three brothers must represent black men and their “ response to white power” (157). The strong, brutish Gros Jean represents ignorance and base energy – significant of the rebellious slave.

Here, Walcott is satirical as Gros Jean’s bravado is linked with his stupidity – cleverly punctuated by Walcott with the planter’s misnaming of him. A greater example of this satire used by Walcott is Mi-Jean – the writer’s representative of educated Caribbean middle class. The book and net held by Mi-Jean on page 87, and his act of flinging the net while reading, may be indicative of Politicians use of language to capture or net the people. However, it may be more apt to say that Mi-Jean ends up ensnared in the net of white man’s ‘ book knowledge’, representing the “ acculturation and psychological brainwashing of Eurocentric Caribbean intellectuals” (Thieme, 60). Mi-Jean becomes ‘ consumed’ due to his ‘ baggage’ of books and book learning.

It is Ti-Jean’s “ embodi[ment] … of ..

. ommon sense folk values which have not been compromised by colonial domination" that helps him to triumph over the white planter Devil and "[free] the Bolom of the black or Caribbean future from thralldom to the white oppressor" (West Indian Literature, 157). Thus, as Thieme suggests, a " new Caribbean artistic consciousness which grasps the value of …

folk heritage [is given birth]" (Thieme, 62). The Bolom in Ti-Jean is an important metaphor, one that ties Walcott's play with Gilkes' Couvade. Thieme suggests that the Bolom is in fact " suggestive of multiple allegorical possibilities" (Thieme, 62). The Bolom is the deformed foetus of a first born child, stolen right before birth. It is implied that it may have been the white planter Devil who snatches Bolom away from being born and possessing him as his slave. This is indicative of the colonial attempt to steal away and corrupt Caribbean culture before it can be born.

Bolom attempts to "… [crawl] up [Ti-Jean's mother's] skirt" (Walcott, 95) suggesting its efforts to go back into the womb and be born to " live a life marked by pain and suffering as well as joy and contentment," indicative of " Caribbean artistic consciousness ..

. rasp[ing] the value of … folk heritage [which is both painful and joyful]" (Thieme, 62).

This concept of giving birth to a Caribbean people freed from Colonial oppression embodied by Bolom in Ti-Jean is seen also in Couvade. The term Couvade itself refers to the undertaking of a trial by the father-to-be while his wife is in labour, a tradition purposed to create a bond between the unborn child and father, meant to ensure a successful birth. Gilkes' Couvade

according to Gilbert and Tompkins: ses the ritual to chart the psychological and spiritual ‘ rebirth’ of the protagonist, Lionel, who along with his new-born child, becomes emblematic of the nation (Post-Colonial Drama, 218). This choice of ritual, as Gilbert and Tompkins argue, is “ apt for Gilkes’ political vision [as] it shifts the focus of the birth from the woman (and the child) to the man and the community” (Post-Colonial Drama, 218).

Giving birth in this play which concerns independence from colonial rule is thus greatly metaphorical, as “ the birth of the child mirrors the birth of the new nation” (Post-Colonial Drama, 218). Gilkes uses this trope to “[invoke] an Amerindian birthing ritual to articulate the play’s complex dream-vision of a unified post-independent Guyana” (Post-Colonial Drama, 218). Couvade attempts to invert imperialism’s patriarchal attempts to reduce women to functions of gender and fertility (Post-Colonial Drama, 218). The metaphor of Lionel’s unborn child in Couvade, is also linked to the dreams he has of an independent Guyana – dreams which confuse him, and cannot be understood by the other characters, in fact this dream that consumes Lionel causes these other characters to believe he’s slipping into insanity. This is significant of possible responses to the concept of a Colonialism-free Guyana, responses that may be credited as, even though Guyana – or any Caribbean territory for that matter, becomes Independent, independence from Colonialism is never fully achieved.

Inversion of Colonialist Manichean principles seem to be inverted in Couvade. Gilkes overturns the view of white/light representing good and black/dark – evil. Evidence of this is seen by his protagonist Lionel’s habit of wearing shades indoors as the ‘ light’ hurts his eyes. Other characters such as his

wife cannot seem to grasp this practice, and believe that it is unhealthy and lead to blindness.

However, it may be more the case that it is the Manichean principle that blinds Lionel, a principle seemingly accepted by other characters/members of society. Gilkes may be using this metaphor to point out that it is indeed these other members that are blinded by society's acceptance of Colonialist ' values' and are thus not able to see the ' light' of freedom. This blindness is seen also in the character of Arthur, whose ' politics' and views are tainted by Colonial-influenced segregation, where people of Guyana display racial prejudice and contempt amongst each other. Lionel on the other hand argues that Carib or African, all are one people as a Guyanese and should come together like the historical Black-Caribs did.

The last symbol to be discussed is that of the Robe, which seems somewhat unclear. Perhaps Gilkes is arguing that this robe – an image of which Lionel paints, is one of freedom, of unity. Maybe it is Gilkes' view that we as a Caribbean people must all adorn this dark robe to blanket out Colonialism's false ' light' in order to be free and independent. In this manner it is symbolic that Gilkes portrays Lionel as a teacher and an artist – one to educate and portray.

Putting on this robe consumes Lionel as his dreams and reality become unintelligible, and the pressures of past and future overwhelm him – past in the form of history, of his ancestors and future in the unborn and yet absent child that is Independence. It is suggesting of a tension between community and individualism, thus, according to Wilson Harris: Lionel's collapse

therefore would appear to be inevitable as it highlights the core of barren resistance to profoundest creativity in his civilisation at large. (Couvade, xii) Thus, one may conclude that these two Caribbean plays are linked in their use of technique (symbolism, allegory, to mention a few) in their efforts to not only entertain, but make their audience aware of the Post-Colonial concerns which they rightfully address – hopefully after which said audience will feel educated and empowered.