

# Folkalization, orality and syncretizing in derek walcott



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Orality, folkalization and syncretising in Derek Walcott's *Ti-Jean and his Brothers* Walcott's dramatic art is an artistic reservoir, reflecting the new intellectual trends of the twentieth century Caribbean world. The time when Walcott was writing marked a period of political and creative activity. Walcott himself pointed out the need for bringing together the different creative elements from African, European and West Indian art traditions. The most powerful among the indigenous cultural elements is orality that Walcott combined with Western dialogical form in his famous play, *Ti-Jean and his Brothers*.

He himself termed it ' My most West Indian play'. Christopher Balm in *Decolonizing the stage*, points out how the play combines African orality and local rituals, accepting obvious influences of Lorca, Brecht, and Noh theatre. Walcott himself acknowledges the folk tale and local festivals working their way into this drama: ' Other Saint Lucian rituals came out too , branching from the simple roots of the folk tale such as our Christmas black mass dances of Papa Diable and his imps, the Bolom, or Foetus, and the melodies which they used. (Derek Walcott quoted by Sharon Ciccarelli, 1979: 303).

The second half of the twentieth century, particularly the decade from 1950-1960 saw a feverish political struggle in the Caribbean islands reinforced by an equally powerful impulse to develop a new assimilated theatre. Turning away from the westernized logocentric form of literature, the indigenous writers searched within to discover the strength of rhythms and styles culturally familiar to them.

Balme observes how, during this period " the various plays and programmes aimed at demonstrating and producing an indigenous West Indian theatre all

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sought to quarry the rich mine of the expressive 'folk' culture: the musical, dance, storytelling, and processional traditions which contained a pronounced performative content" (Balme 1999: 44) When dealing with a play like *Ti-Jean and his Brothers*, it is important to consider how inextricably connected it is to the popular culture, religious rituals and folkloric techniques of presentation.

Walcott does not draw from these sources simply to adorn his artefact; they form the very being of what he says. Talking about the rise of the indigenous Caribbean Theatre, Errol Hill stresses the significance of the practice of assimilation and the native dramatist's urge 'to seek inspiration from the indigenous theatre of the folk, not as curiosities but as the fibre from which a national drama is fashioned: the carnival and calypso, John Canoe and dead-wake ceremonies, shango and Pocomania, Tea Meetings, La Rose and vieux criose festivals, the Hosien and other Indian customs, native music and rhythms, dialect as a serious medium of expression.' (Hill 1974: 34). There is however, one problem to be solved before the indigenous drama can begin its journey and that is how to bring together two different, apparently opposite impulses that govern the genealogy of the African carnival and the western theatre.

The Western theatre operates by creating and maintaining a distance between the actor and the audience, the principal of the Carnival is all inclusive; if the first insists on the restoration and preservation of order, the other advocates a reversal of order. Hill believes that there are some adaptable features of the carnival that can be incorporated within the drama to shape the Caribbean national theatre; these include rhythm, dance/ song/  
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music, verbal delivery, performative skills as opposed to western theatrical gestures, indigenized language and masks and masquerades.

Walcott ' s play exhibits a masterful blending of the recommended elements to attain aesthetic and moral targets aimed at. That *Ti Jean and his Brothers* is a story derived from the folkloric tradition, is a statement marking just the tip of the iceberg, because the enormous act of a playwright borrowing from fairytales, folklore or other oral heritage involves all kinds of psychological, literary and anthropological considerations. There is a vitality and energetic thrust of narrative action in *Ti Jean and his Brothers* that owes itself to the folkloric source.

In this play Walcott capitalizes on the traditional art of storytelling. During one of her interviews, while stressing the status of oral narration as an artistic mode, Ama Ata Aidoo (playwright and short story writer) asserted: ' dynamism of orality is what Africa can give to the world. '( Aidoo 1972: 23) In his play, Walcott has captured this very element - orality. As a postcolonial writer, Walcott is strongly aware of the fact that many precolonial African cultures predominantly oral, lost ancient literary oral traditions rendered invisible by racism and a western belief in the superiority of written language and literature.

The practice resulted in a devastating denial of culture and identity. In combining the European dramatic form and the stylistics of the Africa story telling, the play *Ti Jean* welds the two halves of the twentieth century postcolonial Caribbean consciousness. The prologue is a fine blend of oral narration and dramatic presentation, for the dramatic form with heard

voices' dialogue and audience participation links most closely to orality. It also creates more space for the thematic exploration of sociocultural, metaphysical and political issues facing postcolonial Caribbean society.

The fairytale world of creatural narrators, invoked in the Prologue is firmly fused with the contemporary political world of colonial planter's exploitative strategies and the plight of the blacks labouring under the white masters. The presence of the creatural narrators on the stage underlines the link between human and creatural worlds on one hand, but on the other, the Frog, the Cricket, the Firefly and the Bird also suggest the four elemental forces - Water, Earth, Fire and Air.

The story therefore is not localized - this simplistic device lends it universal impetus so that it becomes an allegory depicting the age-old quest for truth, the perennial struggle between the human and the diabolic. Similarly the invocation of 'Greek - creak' the connection with the folkloric heritage and with the African oral tradition also suggests a formative continuity and universality. There are no rigid boundaries in oral traditions which flow optimally from prose into poetry, into narrative, into dramatic interlude, into song.

Ti Jean as a play faithfully sticks to these features of tale telling as it swiftly moves through formal and conscious narration of the story by the Frog, to enactment of scenes interspersed with Brecht-like self-conscious singing. The story is viewed through different frames of consciousness: the first being the narrative, the fairytale with Frog acting as the story teller, the second being the stage holding these creatures - the narrator and the listeners all,

the third perspective of consciousness is embodied in 'the moon' - a metaphor for story/stage, which ...always there even fighting the rain the moon always there. And Ti Jean in the moon just like the story. ( 85) The fourth and the final perspective breaks through the set, traditional boundaries of story telling: as the three brothers enter the stage, the narration of the story is absorbed into dramatic enactment of the events thereby forging the 'oral textuality' of the play. Narration and dramatization in Ti Jean are metadramatic and self consciously applied techniques as is suggested by the stylized gestures and movements, melodramatic action and the use of mime.

Walcott uses music as an effective artistic medium: in fact at times the background music becomes almost an actor on the stage, presenting the dramatic action all by itself. 'The sad music on flute' (p. 87) following the Bird's question 'How poor their mother was?' is a self sufficient comment but more effective than this is the 'crash of cymbals, shrieks, thunder' (p. 89) accompanying the entrance and the somersaulting dance of the Devils, fiends, werewolf, the Bolom, the Diabliesse.

The explosion, blackout and the last bleat from the goat at the end of Scene Two are remarkable examples of dramaturgical economy and creative dramatizing. The devils' chorus heard off-stage keeps the audience aware of the presence of the world of potential evil and diabolic powers. Models of supernatural malaise - werewolf and Diabliesse - are deliberately kept away from the main stream of action, at a distance from where they can be glimpsed but not contacted.

Bolom's genealogy establishes him as a bridge between the human and the diabolic powers. Here is the evil shaped and produced by Man himself This is the Shriek Of a child which was strangled, Who never saw the earth light Through the hinge of the womb Strangled by a woman Who hated (my) birth Twisted out of shape, Deformed past recognition... (p. 97) Stylistically it is only appropriate that this human-diabolic creature should be the Devil's messenger to Ti Jean and his brothers, serving as a line of communication between the two worlds.

The manner and made of the stage-presentation chalked out for the members of the Devil's group is also, therefore, an inarticulate comment on the constituency and composition of EVIL. Nature is presented as a world of benign healing, while Man is seen as possessive of potential promise and power of resilience. Gros Jean is advised by his mother to ask direction Of the bird, and the insects, imitate them But be careful of the hidden nets of the devil. (p. 103) She herself is repeatedly compared to a weather-roughened tree. The song of the Frog ' All around you, nature

Still singing' Is a lesson in courage to the grief-stricken Ti-Jean. These benevolent impulses from the natural and human world are linguistically differentiated from the malevolent instincts of the devils. Artaud is exasperated why the western theatre cannot conceive of theatre under any other aspect than dialogic form (Artaud1970: 27) and it is precisely this realization of the inadequacy of the dialogue that propels Walcott to search for alternative modes of presentation. The use of masks, though vastly practised on the Greek stage, is decolonized in Ti- Jean and his Brothers.

The Devil manifests his evil potential by wearing three masks. The first, Devil's, has a universal recognition, the second- Old Man's, has its origin in the Caribbean superstitions as well as invoking the memory of Christmas black mass of Papa Diable and his imps. If on one hand the Old Man mask suggests human kindness, on the other it also exposes the false reality of the Father figure. Unlike the Mother in the story, the Old Man is not a true father though addressed as one by the young ones. By being linked with the Planter's mask it comes to symbolize the patriarchal shallowness embodied in the colonial planter's person.

The mask in Walcott then, is not only a dramatic device of presentation but also a political statement commenting on the relationship between the colonial master and his black subjects. For a dramatist breaking new ground in the postcolonial theatre, the handling of language is a political as well as literary question. It is through the manoeuvring of Standard English and French Patois that the writer lays out the moral division between the good and the bad. The devils' chorus is always in Caribbean French - a language culturally associated with the alien, colonial master.

The Devil speaks formal, Standard English, breaking into Pidgin English towards the end of the play when he is well on his way to being humanized. Mi-Jean imitates the stilted, bookish accents of a foreign language in his exchange with the Devil, while Ti-Jean and the Jungle creatures stick to the familiar Pidgin English. Thus linguistically too, the play highlights the moral standing of the characters. The tri-partite plot is another feature borrowed from the universal folkloric/ fairy tale reservoir as observed by Balme, ( Balme 1999: 158).

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The play's neat division into three scenes of equal duration maintains the impression of the whole being a quest journey with similar choices/alternatives being placed before each adventurer. Each scene deals with an individual's life cycle, achievements, failures and ultimate destiny - each is independent of, yet linked with the other scenes. The repetition of temporal and spatial setting, and the sameness of moral and social dilemma captures the constant flow of life with individual choices ineffectually trying to change its course, like ephemeral bubbles.

The play owes something to the technique and structure of the Akan Dilemma Tale which usually addresses itself to difficult questions of moral significance. The Dilemma tales are prose narratives that leave the listeners with a choice among the alternatives, the choices are difficult ones and usually involve discrimination ethical, moral or legal ground. Balme observes the social context in which the presentation of these stories takes place: ... very frequently such tales are told during funeral ceremonies such as Nine night rituals to entertain the dead.

Thus the recurrent theme of life and death is mirrored in the performance context. (Balme 1999: 160) By dramatizing the contents of the Dilemma Tale, Walcott has certainly created more space for himself to explore the metaphysical and social, moral and geopolitical questions in the postcolonial Caribbean context. There is speculation about God and his relationship with Man, with widely different attitudes towards God immaculately expressed in one-liners " Mother: Wait and God will send us something. Gros Jean: God forgot where he put us.

Mi Jean: God too irresponsible. " There is an equally serious analysis of the power of Evil, with Walcott delving into philosophic and rational explanations of Evil that have been offered by the thinkers over the centuries. The application of metadramatic devices and typically African orality enables the dramatist to involve the listeners in the philosophic debates. The listeners of the Frog - the Jungle creatures - directly comment on the story while the audience which forms the second circle of the listeners, is also addressed from time to time.

The Old Man of the Forest - one of his many masks of the Devil suggesting the complex and multi-tiered nature of Evil - points the contemporary situation in disguised words for the audience to reflect upon: ' Ah, well, there's wood to cut, fires to light, smoke to wrinkle an old man's eyes, and a shrivelling skin to keep warm. There went the spirit of war: an iron arm and a clear explanation, and might is still right, thank God for God is the stronger. But get old father forest from the path of the fable, for there is not wood to cut, a nest of twittering beaks to feed with wood-eating worms. Oh, oh, oh' (p. 08) The demand upon the audience is to reflect on a given situation is in one hand a Brechtian technique, while on the other hand it is a transmuted characteristic of African orality that has conversing with the listeners, audience participation, communal voices as chorus, dramatic dialogue and respective questions as its chief features. The act of contemporizing folkloric story is important in the sense that the transformation of one genre into another releases enormous quantum of literary energy. This energy has to be controlled, guided and carefully put to use and only a master artist can do that.

In presenting the trials and travails of Ti Jean and his brothers, Walcott deftly deals with the question of colonization and the Black man's failure to resist the white, exploitative forces. The success of the youngest brother suggests that it is the youngest generation with its ability to talk to the Devil in his own language and to dish him out the same measures that promises success. At the end, the play returns to the folkloric setting with only the creatures huddled together around the Frog, thereby maintaining the aura of fantasy and imaginative delight but with a thought provoking parting shot from Frog - the narrator.

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