



2015 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES
ARTS, HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCES & EDUCATION
JANUARY 03 - 06, 2015
ALA MOANA HOTEL, HONOLULU, HAWAII

RESTORATION OF CARIBBEAN IDENTITY IN DEREK WALCOTT'S "A BRANCH OF THE BLUE NILE"

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Synopsis:

This paper discusses Derek Walcott's play, *A Branch of the Blue Nile*, as a postcolonial reinterpretation of Shakespeare. In the play, Walcott portrays the given realities of Caribbean theater to stage one of Western's most canonical play "Antony and Cleopatra", wherein the playwright is bound to face the dilemma between his dreams and the illegitimacy of his race whose language is the colonizer's legacy.

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Set in a local theater in Trinidad, *A Branch of the Blue Nile* opens with a scene where a white director named Harvey St. Just addresses the company's amateur actors one by one to check whether they are ready for the rehearsal. Not only he is the one who has the authority to order "Begin" but his directing reflects the perspective of the colonizer as he keeps repeating the famous scene of Cleopatra grieving for the loss of Antony. Here on Harvey's stage ancient Egypt that has forever lost the Roman ruler reminds me of Trinidad, which obtained independence from the British Empire in 1962. In other words, Harvey's choice of the scene where the Egyptian queen mourns for the Roman hero's death follows the traditionally romanticized illusion of the colonizers about the colonized land: the loyal, devoted natives lamenting for the end of the Western domination with "immortal longing". His directing also places heavy emphasis on Cleopatra's sexuality as an "exotic colored woman", a traditionally colonial interpretation dubbed on her character by the white mainstream. At the same time, what is most important to Harvey is not even the quality of the performance. His concerns are simply how the original tragedy can be fully delivered. In a scene where Sheila, the leading actress, does a powerful performance as Cleopatra, his first reaction is to point out that she did not follow the original line. "The Odds....is gone...? Singular" (219). Thus, his attempt to interpret Shakespeare as the inviolable western cannon not only washes off Sheila's own color but is "waste of time" as implied through the mad Phil's voice outside the theater.

However, the play twists such attempts of putting Shakespeare on the stage in the colonial context. At the beginning of the play when Sheila fails to perform the company resumes the rehearsal with male actors taking her role. Gavin asks where "the lord" has gone, to which Chris, the leading actor, improvises a line in his thick Trinidadian accent, "Your lord? No. He gone out" (214). Now the absence of the white ruler becomes the subject of mockery, and the

weight of solemn grief that the tragedy should have delivered is rather diluted with “laughter” from other actors. Furthermore, instead of leadership or professionalism Harvey merely displays irresponsibility as he repeats “Whatever. Whoever. Wherever” through the production of the tragedy. It is only his British education that automatically makes him the authority in the black stage. A role play between Harvey as a white master and Gavin as slave hints that the history of slavery still repeats itself in a post-colonial period. Although in the play it is presented as a comical moment, behind the satire the role play suggests one fact that remains: the white master, Harvey, is still a master of the real stage; and Gavin has to follow Harvey’s order to get “up” after all. In spite of that colonial rule has officially ended in Trinidad, it is the legacy of the colonizer’s culture which is considered to be the original that justifies the white superiority over the colonized.

The play further explores the vestiges of colonialism lingering in the lives of Trinidad people within and outside the theater. Chris confesses that despite of his high education, the rows of “books” in his study which implies that he possesses as much knowledge as any white in the theater, he will never reach a place beyond “Ass”, that is “Assistant master” (246). The only position allowed for him in the land where “the trees are half-dead with dust” is to support the white, the “real master”. He speaks and performs the very inheritance of the colonizer. For a Trinidadian actor trying to speak Shakespeare, hence the awareness of his cultural illegitimacy accompanies self-recognition as a black man. Chris is painfully aware of that he cannot be “the best Hamlet”; he jokingly observes the reason why he cannot speak Shakespeare is “thick lips” and “no brain”, addressing the negative stereotype imposed on his race. Chris thus seeks the future of Trinidad Theater in extreme nationalism. In a script that he is writing to stage, he severely mocks colonialism with the imagery of “mosquito”. Here the colonizer, swarming vermin with an ability of hatching thousands of eggs in a second, is described to be hiding in the bush, waiting for the opportunity to infect the third-world with the psychological contagiousness of colonialism. Also, Chris twists the cultural authority of western cannon using the very language of the colonizer. Reading a line from Chris’ script, Gavin jokingly performs the caricature of Richard the third from Shakespeare’s “Richard the Third”, in which the pronunciation is distorted into “Richard the turd” with his Trinidadian accent. However, the play does not propose Chris’ extreme nationalism that might cause the efficacy of reproducing another black stereotype as an alternative for Harvey. As Marilyn

points out after she performs both plays, Chris' script whose characters "talk Shakespeare like 'rangatang people'" is after all their "split personality" (244).

The play further tracks such dilemma of "split personality" in black actors trying to find their ground in theater business, of which colonialism takes hold in the name of capitalism. The factor defining Gavin as an actor in New York is not his talent or character; it is merely the color of his skin. Theater is nothing but one of the businesses governed by the white mainstream, in which a black actor is only expected to be "the alleged Afro-American avant-garde". To survive such business he has few choices: to die "in the conviction that there was no justice" or to melt into a stereotype forced on him.

GAVIN

I saw me; then the mirror changed on me, the way you hate your passport picture. I saw a number under it like a prison picture, a mug shot in a post office, and I began to believe what I saw in the mirror because that's how they wanted me to look. (225)

In Gavin's confession about "the changing mirror" reflects the process of his self-recognition becoming distorted; of how one brands himself to be the "secondary", not from a perspective of his own but of the outer world. When one looks at the mirror, it reflects the idealized "I" from the individual's most private view whereas a picture rather shows the otherized "I", a mere object caught in the perspective of the camera and the person behind it. Gavin is also sharply aware of that he will never be allowed to have the citizenship of the paradise; he is only a temporary resident with "visa". The mirror at last leads him to accept and assimilate himself to the colonial dichotomy in which the white is the authority and the black is the subordinate. The motif of the mirror imposing such distorted self-recognition on the black race again can be found in Sheila's episode. In spite of that she has a talent to perform powerful Cleopatra she accepts a plain, silent black woman without any makeup in the mirror because "this is what this world expects of" her (285). When she chooses to flee to the religion, she is no longer Cleopatra, nor even Sheila Harris. As "the bride of Christ", her name, character, her own voice lose color and become silenced in the shades of other believers. Instead of the queen of the stage, she finds herself in the position of a subject of the colony who is to obey the master, this time her master the religion.

However, church cannot be the eventual refuge for Sheila. Her individuality is only diluted

by the sunlight of the day that shines on every believer, whereas in the dark of the theater she could see her true self through acting and love¹. Brother John, who represents the church, is more worldly-minded rather than helping those who are in needs. He not only repeatedly uses words related with capitalism, such as “asset” and “business” but shows childish violence towards Chris, attempting to hit him with an umbrella. The play ironically seeks the true helping hand of God in Phil, a derelict wandering outside the theater. Unlike Brother John whose profession symbolizes wisdom and salvation, Phil is the walking madness and breathing irrationality. Nevertheless, Phil is the only person in the play who actually reaches a hand to help the Trinidadian actors. When he offers to “help all you move the sceneries”, he might be offering a feeble, but practical attempt to reform the present of Trinidad Theater suffering the aftermath of colonization. Also, whereas Brother John always carries “an umbrella” that keeps him from rain, to Phil rain is an opportunity to cool his head so that he can regain rationality for a moment. In his speech I also find interesting that he repeatedly use words reminding of an imagery of rain such as “sprinkle” or “drizzle”. Hence the true help of God that Brother John fails to give is ironically voiced through Phil as he states “if it was in my power to sprinkle benediction on your kind, to ask heaven to drizzle the light of grace on the work you trying to do here” to the actors (300).

The play seeks at last a possibility of restoring Caribbean root long severed in Chris’ second script that he wrote in Barbadian. As its title “A Branch of the Blue Nile” says, he accepts that Caribbean identity is the mixture, the mosaic of the colonizer and the colonized so that it cannot ever be the main stream of the river. Nonetheless, it no longer enrages him. Previous extreme nationalism in his first work now subsides; Chris only writes down about those who live and share the present of Trinidad. His second script also shows how Shakespeare’s tragedy can be indigenized, recreated through the relationship of Chris and Sheila. In other words, the play suggests that Caribbean identity is not only the victim of

¹ The motif of darkness repetitively appears in portraying Sheila’s character. Her outfits are black top and black skirts; in the darkened theater Chris tells her that she is changed; in “the small, dark room with dark curtains” a dark woman reads Sheila’s palm. Considering the traditional imagery of darkness accompanies a negative nuisance as the otherized presence against the light presented as a symbol of goodness, here in the play the color of darkness is deliberately converted. Now the color of black represents the primitive energy to drive her to change for the moment of recreation of new black identity.

colonization but the descendant of such colonization at the same time. Chris thus states that his second script will be perpetually imperfect, for it is a record of the lives of people who are destined to live in the land that shows the white scar of colonialism.

Although *A Branch of the Blue Nile* does not draw a definite conclusion, the play leaves a vague ray of hope in the darkness of the theater where Sheila comes back after the company splits. Everyone is gone but the theater is not a mere space of emptiness. It is a darkness in which Sheila can face her change; it is where old Phil, a survivor from the previous generation of Trinidad Theater still remains. When she returns to the stage, she begins practicing without Harvey's order to begin or Brother John's approval. With her tired voice reverberating through the "lung of the theater", the play hints a wish to glue the fragmented Caribbean identity as a whole through the way of performance.

Works Cited

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