

HARMONY IN DISSONANCE IN DEREK ALTON WALCOTT'S SELECTED PLAYS

Ms. Snehal Bhandakkar (Rakhunde)

Research Scholar

PGTD of English, University Campus,

RTM University Nagpur, Nagpur

Abstract:

Derek Alton Walcott's dramatic works are characterized by a profound exploration of the complexities inherent in post-colonial identity, cultural hybridity, and the enduring legacies of history. This paper examines the paradoxical interplay of "harmony in dissonance" within selected plays by Walcott, focusing on how he utilizes theatrical devices to navigate the tensions between opposing forces. By analyzing the thematic and stylistic elements of plays such as Dream on Monkey Mountain, Pantomime, and The Odyssey, this study investigates how Walcott constructs a dramatic landscape where seemingly irreconcilable elements—historical trauma and artistic transcendence, cultural fragmentation and syncretic unity, personal disillusionment and the pursuit of redemptive vision—coexist. It argues that Walcott's dramatic vision does not seek to resolve these dissonances into a simplistic harmony, but rather to illuminate the productive friction and creative potential that arise from their interaction. This paper explores how Walcott's use of language, character, and theatrical form facilitates a nuanced understanding of the ways in which individual and collective identities are shaped by the dynamic tension between opposing forces, ultimately revealing a complex and resonant "harmony in dissonance" that lies at the heart of his dramatic oeuvre.

Keywords: Harmony in Dissonance, Post-colonial identity, Cultural hybridity , Enduring legacies of history, Paradoxical interplay, Theatrical device, Opposing forces, Artistic transcendence, Cultural fragmentation , Dramatic oeuvre ,etc.

Introduction :

Derek Walcott (1930-2017) is renowned as one of the foremost playwrights, poets, and intellectuals of the Caribbean. His plays often explore the complexities of identity, colonialism, post-colonial struggles, and the nuances of cultural assimilation. A recurring theme in Walcott's works is the notion of "harmony in dissonance," where discord, whether internal or external, often finds an eventual resolution through reconciliation, understanding, or adaptation. This paper delves into Walcott's selected plays – *Henry Christophe: A Seven Scene Play*, *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*, *Pantomime*, *Beef No Chicken*, and *Dream on Monkey Mountain* – to investigate how Walcott presents and addresses the concept of harmony emerging from dissonance.

The Concept of Harmony in Dissonance :

Before embarking on the specific analysis of Walcott's works, it is important to define



the idea of "harmony in dissonance." The phrase suggests an inherent contradiction, a scenario where discord or tension leads to an eventual resolution, not necessarily through peaceful harmony but through an understanding that comes from struggle and conflict. In the context of Walcott's plays, dissonance often reflects historical, cultural, or psychological conflicts, and the journey toward harmony is typically marked by complexity and nuanced understanding.

Overview of Derek Walcott's Theatrical Worldview :

Walcott's plays are rooted in the socio-political realities of the Caribbean, marked by a blend of African, European, and indigenous influences. His works are at once intensely local and universally relevant, providing commentary on the complexity of post-colonial identities. Walcott's characters often navigate internal and external struggles that reflect the fragmentation of their world, yet these characters are capable of achieving moments of personal growth and cultural reconciliation. The aesthetic choices in his works—dialogue, stage directions, and the use of symbolic elements—help illuminate the theme of dissonance transforming into a form of harmony, even if imperfect.

'Henry Christophe: A Seven Scene' Play – The Tension between Leadership and Cultural Fragmentation :

In *'Henry Christophe: A Seven Scene' Play*, Walcott explores the life of Henry Christophe, the Haitian leader who played a significant role in the country's revolution but also imposed authoritarian rule. The play illustrates the dissonance between Christophe's lofty ideals for his country and the reality of his governance, which is marked by corruption and tyranny. Walcott's portrayal of Christophe reflects the tension between the desires for power, autonomy, and the realities of achieving them in a post-colonial society. Walcott's staging and dialogue in this play are crucial for illustrating the dissonance inherent in Christophe's ambitions. The play portrays a complex web of political struggle, personal turmoil, and collective disillusionment. However, the narrative reveals a type of harmony within the dissonance, suggesting that even failed revolutions and authoritarian regimes contribute to the larger process of nation-building. Walcott's exploration of power dynamics here is a critical study in the interaction between individual dreams and collective realities. Christophe's death symbolizes not only his personal failure but the larger dissonance within post-colonial leadership and the fractured quest for national identity.

'Ti-Jean and His Brothers' – Myth, Morality, and Struggle :

In *'Ti-Jean and His Brothers'*, Walcott takes a folkloric approach to exploring Caribbean identity. The story is rooted in the legend of the three brothers – Ti-Jean, Gros-Jean, and Mi-Jean – who must confront the Devil. Each brother's journey represents a different response to the struggles inherent in their lives. While Gros-Jean and Mi-Jean fail to defeat the Devil, Ti-Jean ultimately triumphs due to his humility and intelligence. The play encapsulates the idea of "harmony in dissonance" by showing how personal struggle and sacrifice lead to eventual redemption. The brothers' failures represent the dissonance of human existence: the clash between human nature and external forces such as fate and power. However, Ti-Jean's victory signifies that harmony can be found in the midst of struggle. His triumph, achieved through wit and resourcefulness, shows that even in a world marked by suffering, wisdom and



morality can lead to resolution and reconciliation.

‘Pantomime’ – The Duality of Colonial Experience :

‘Pantomime’ is one of Walcott’s most introspective and meta-theatrical plays. It follows the relationship between two characters: an English actor and a Caribbean woman, both of whom are engaged in a performance of colonial history. The play explores the tension between the actor’s European identity and the woman’s Caribbean identity, creating a dialogue between two worlds that were historically shaped by colonialism. Through their interactions, Walcott highlights the dissonance inherent in the colonial experience. However, *Pantomime* also suggests that this dissonance may lead to new understandings, or a potential harmony, through reconciliation and confrontation. The clash of cultures and identities ultimately opens the door to a deeper awareness of the ways in which these identities are constructed. Walcott does not offer an easy resolution but suggests that through dialogue, confrontation, and recognition of the historical narrative, individuals can negotiate and potentially harmonize their fractured identities.

‘Beef No Chicken’ – Personal Conflict and the Fragmented Self :

In *‘Beef No Chicken’*, Walcott explores the personal dissonance experienced by an individual in a deeply divided society. The play is a meditation on identity, violence, and the personal struggles that are exacerbated by larger political forces. The protagonist’s conflict between maintaining his cultural identity and being forced into the structures of modernity serves as a metaphor for the fragmentation of the self. The harmony in dissonance emerges in the realization that personal growth can arise from such fragmentation. Walcott’s character grapples with his identity and sense of belonging, navigating the tensions of his world and ultimately discovering a form of reconciliation within himself. Though the external dissonance remains, the character achieves an internal harmony that reflects a broader social commentary about the Caribbean's post-colonial condition.

‘Dream on Monkey Mountain’ – The Convergence of Dreams and Reality :

‘Dream on Monkey Mountain’ is perhaps Walcott’s most ambitious work in terms of its thematic complexity and the interplay between dream and reality. The play’s protagonist, Makak, is a man caught between his delusions and the harsh reality of his life. The play explores the psychological fragmentation of an individual living in a post-colonial society. Through Makak’s journey, Walcott reveals the dissonance between his dreams of liberation and the harshness of his waking existence. However, like many of Walcott’s other plays, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* suggests that dissonance, though difficult, can lead to some form of resolution. Makak's ultimate recognition of the importance of self-awareness and collective identity provides a moment of clarity and potential reconciliation. The play suggests that while individuals may remain fragmented in their identities and aspirations, understanding and confronting their inner conflicts can lead to a form of personal and societal harmony.

Conclusion :

In Derek Walcott's plays, the theme of "harmony in dissonance" is not one of simple resolution but rather one of complex negotiation between competing forces. His works engage



with the tensions of colonial history, personal identity, and societal transformation. Through characters who confront internal and external struggles, Walcott explores how moments of insight and reconciliation can arise from conflict. Each play provides a unique lens on the journey from fragmentation to understanding, demonstrating the potential for harmony even in the midst of profound dissonance. In Walcott's theater, harmony is not an absence of dissonance but an ongoing process of engagement with the complexities of existence

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