A WARBLE OF POSTCOLONIAL VOICES

An Anthology of Short Stories and Poems

Volume II: Poems

Edited by
SOMESHWAR SATI

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Names*

[for Edward Brathwaite]

I

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[10] 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.

* From *Sea Grapes* (1976)

Have we melted into a mirror,
leaving our souls behind?
The goldsmith from Benares,
the stonecutter 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 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;
Valencia glows
with the lanterns of oranges,
Mayaro's
charred candelabra of cocoa.
Being 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.

Notes

Dedication : Edward Kamuau Braithwaite (1930) is one of the renowned poets from the Caribbean. His poetic work engages with black identity, cultural history of the Caribbean population and the aftermath of slavery. Braithwaite's poetry is characterised by his use of language and typographic innovations. His more acclaimed books of poetry are *Roots* (1993), *Trenchtown Rock* (1993), *Black + Blues* (1995), *Words Need Love Too* (2000), *Ancestors* (New Directions, 2001), *Born to Slow Horses* (2005), *Elegguas* (2010). Braithwaite was one of the founding members of the Caribbean Artist Movement in 1966. He is also a distinguished academic and currently a Professor of Comparative Literature at New York University. Braithwaite's academic work extensively explores the cultural underpinning of African identity. His acclaimed works are *Folk Culture of the Slaves in Jamaica* (1970), *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica,1770-1820* (1971), *Contradictory Omens* (1974), *Our Ancestral Heritage: A Bibliography of the Roots of Culture in the English-speaking Caribbean* (1976), *Barbados Poetry: A Checklist: Slavery to the Present* (1979), *Afternoon of the Status Crow* (1982) and *History of the Voice* (1984). Braithwaite's postcolonial standpoint and innovations with "national language" gave inspiration to writers emerging from the Caribbean in the 1970s.

1 *race*: The poet is punning on the word 'race'. It simultaneously alludes to racial identity as well as his own personal trajectory.

sea: The sea is an integral part of island life and figures strongly in Walcott's

as well as other Caribbean poetry. The discovery of the new world and the advent of colonisation also happened via the sea. Water is also seen as the genesis of life. Therefore, the sea is a metaphor for genealogy, beginnings, arrival and history.

2 *no nouns*: Noun accords a particular place, object, entity or organism an identity. To name a thing is to have access to it, to know it and oftentimes to possess it. Naming then is not only a linguistic act but is rooted in a matrix of power.

no horizon: Walcott uses the horizon to state his inability to figure out the beginning and the end of language.

3 *pebbles ... tongue*: Alludes to methods adopted to learn pronunciation. The poem outlines Walcott's own concerns and preoccupations with language.

4 *stars*: Early seafarers as well as the colonisers navigated their way into the new world with the help of stars.

5 Walcott positions himself in the Caribbean.

6 The poet is referring to olive oil; the Levantine is the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea where olive oil is produced in plenty. The poet is depicting the sense of loss for the early Europeans in leaving their own country. The word "sad" invokes a sense of nostalgia for the homelands left behind to explore and colonise the new world.

7 *Indian*: The poet is making a two-fold reference to the Native Americans who were the indigenous population of the Caribbean and to the indentured labourers from India who were brought to work on the islands by the British.

9 Walcott is making a reference to the need to escape the chains of history. He is alluding to the collective amnesia of a pre-colonial past among the natives as well as the inability to foresee a future that is not caught in the throes of an identity struggle. The lack of future is also affirmative since it implies the movement of the colonised subject outside the narrow trajectory of a Eurocentric progressive view of history.

11 *halved by the horizon*: The poet is referring to the pull that the colonised subject feels for both the native culture alongside that of the coloniser.

13 Refers to the inability to locate the beginnings of postcolonial identity. The poem makes continuous references to the inability to trace a beginning and the lack of an ending. Walcott implies a poststructural view that moves away from linear progression and is focused on the situation or event in itself.

14 *Benares, Canton*: Benares is a holy city in India and Canton is one of the largest cities in south China. India and China were both conquered by the British and as such indigenous goods from these countries were exported and

traded in other British colonies alongside the metropole.

16 Note Walcott's frequent use of the word. The horizon is either a meeting point or a divisive line. The poet refers to the ever-present line that is either the meeting point or the dividing point between two cultures. As with the movement away from a linear progression from beginnings to ends, Walcott also desists from looking at the dual heritage of the two cultures as either separation or amalgamation.

18 *melted into a mirror*: The poet implies the assimilation of one's actual self with the image. The allusion is the inability to locate an authentic self.

19 *leaving ... behind*: Colonisation has left the colonised subject as empty husks without any mooring.

22 *Benin*: Benin is a country in West Africa. Walcott addresses the divisive identity of all postcolonial subjects through these lines.

23 *A sea-eagle ... osprey*: Walcott provides us with visual images of the sea as a stimulus to imagine it as the source of beginnings.

27 *that I!:* connotes subjectivity of the colonised individual. The preceding line suggests that the phonetic sound of the vowel "I" (a long drawn aaieee) is a cry. Walcott's choice of the adjective "terrible" indicates that an individual's coming into identity is a painful process mired in divisive affiliations.

31 *with ... hands:* Walcott's seems to see history as nothingness. Walcott's understanding of history is clearly outlined in his essay "The Muse of History" where he looks at "amnesia as the true history of the New World". It is only when the new world fights the need to respond to the traditions of Europe and treats history as nothing that it emerges out of the conundrum of a colonial past.

34 *which ... indifference:* The naming of the New World by the early colonisers romantically posits the white man as Adam in paradise who christens everything. Walcott has argued elsewhere that the privilege of naming the New World eliminates an ethnic past. It is this erasure that Walcott alludes to in these lines. Naming and renaming are acts that should be regarded with indifference since they are driven by varied socio-political agendas that could be detrimental to individual subjectivity.

37 *was ... irony?*: The poet rhetorically asks if the naming of the New World by the coloniser is driven by nostalgia for a European past or else is it an irony that affirms the stark difference between Europe and the New World.

41 *where ... mockery*: Walcott seems to affirm that it is irony rather than nostalgia that influences the naming of the New World. The untamed terrain of the new world bears no resemblance to the sophisticated elegance of

Europe.

42 *Castille*: During the Middle Ages, Castille was a powerful state in the Iberian Peninsula.

43 *Versailles' colonnades:* Refers to the architectural splendour of the Palace of Versailles located in the suburb of Versailles outside Paris in the Île-de-France region. Versailles was the centre of political power from 1682 until the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789; as such it is seen as a symbol representing absolute monarchy. It is in this context that Walcott appears to use the palace as a symbol of the grand and glorious past of the coloniser.

44 *cabbage palms:* The mundane cabbage palm offers a striking contrast to the grandeur and splendour of Castille and Versailles.

47 *then little Versailles:* Walcott uses irony to address the varied ways in which the coloniser addresses his alienation from Europe; whether by transplanting architectural patterns, shortening names associated with the Old World into diminutives or by recreating versions of monuments and architectural marvels and adding the prefix "little".

48 The poet makes a sardonic reference to the fact that the grandeur of the Old World cannot be reinvented in the new.

50 In spite of the coloniser's attempts to acclimatise himself with the New World through naming the New World after the Old, all efforts at doing so are the futile machinations of an exile.

52 *names held*: The memory of the lost past makes one bitter. However, the names christened on the New World in remembrance of this past remain.

54 *Valencia*: Valencia is a port city on the Iberian Peninsula in Spain and is renowned for its oranges. The city was founded after Roman soldiers settled there in the second century BCE and as such has a long history.

55 *Mayaro*: Mayaro is a town on the island of Trinidad.

56 *candelabra*: A branched candleholder.

cocoa: The cocoa tree appears like a candelabra.

59 Walcott refers to the Eurocentric need for order, structure and classification.

61 The poet alludes to the introduction of the white man's language to the African native. The African received these foreign languages and names and in speaking the foreign language with the native tongue altered and appropriated that very language as his own.

62 *Listen my children:* The poet seems to indicate the derogatory and patronising way in which the coloniser would speak to the African natives presuming that the natives were without intelligence. It could also seemingly allude to a colonial classroom where the native children are taught European languages.

Since the Caribbean islands have been colonised by the French and English, both these languages have percolated into the Caribbean sensibility. It is interesting to note that the French words in this depiction are being translated into English and not any indigenous language.

66 *green voices*: Refers to the untutored speech of the native trying to learn a foreign tongue.

67 Walcott is referring to the indigenous culture and identity of the native before the introduction of the coloniser's own language and culture.

69 *natural inflections:* The indigenous language of the native is inherent to his identity.

71 Rather than comparing architectural marvels of Europe with those of the Caribbean, Walcott draws attention to the natural beauty and vegetation of the islands which have no replica in Europe.

73 Refers to the fact that the coming and going of various regimes results in the destruction of significant architectural sites by the men in power. In the Caribbean, the growth and destruction of the verdant topography is organic.

75 the measly worm consumes vegetative matter; however, it has no superficial markers of power or authority like the helmet of an emperor in the civilised world.

78 *Orion, Betelgeuse*: The Orion is a constellation that appears like a hunter with a sword and belt and the Betelgeuse is a bright star.

80 *damned little Arabs!:* The poet depicts the racist predilections of the colonisers and their pejorative use of racial identity as insults and slurs.

81 *molasses*: The appeal of the coloniser's language, history and culture for the native is compared to a firefly's attraction to molasses. However, like the firefly that is trapped in molasses, the native finds himself trapped within his regard for the invader's culture that is a threat to his own indigenous cultural identity.

power balance. The risk of Othello and Desdemona's union is that it operates within conventional social norms and as such is validated by the institutional structure of marriage.

There is a parallel argument that Walcott also addresses in the context of the black resistance in America when he talks of Othello's "...racial, panther-black revenge". As Patricia Ismond argues:

> The predicament of Othello and Desdemona in Shakespeare's play is used as a metaphor to comment on the cause of black resistance during the rise of racial violence in the United States during the Civil Rights era (the mid-1960s) ... Othello's tragedy is invoked as the tragedy of the betrayal of an ultimate faith, the absolute embodied in Desdemona. The focus completely subordinates the matter of Othello's tragic error, given Desdemona's fidelity and innocence. Empathizing with Othello's sense of betrayal, Walcott defends the cause of the black man in revolt. It is not racial revenge that motivates this revolt, but rather the collapse of the belief system purveyed and corrupted by the white world itself. This betrayal leaves the black man in the Western world without a humanity to believe in... (53)

Walcott's engagement is therefore correspondingly located in looking at the breaking down of a system. The sexual dynamics which is the overall theme of the poem is also haunted by a pervasive intelligence that is aware of a rupture within the system, a concomitant malaise that in allowing the sexual union of Othello and Desdemona and preventing a happy ending for their marriage — sanctifying lust and disallowing love — is invalidating the potential for identity within racial structure. In short, Othello's murder of Desdemona is not the working out of "racial revenge" but is the course of action dictated by a system that does not permit aberrations like the marriage of a black moor to a noble maiden. The Civil Rights era in the United States similarly is directed by a need for assertion against the limitations to identity and subjectivity for a black man in a white world.

Names

The dominant concerns of Walcott's poem "Names" taken from his 1976 anthology *Sea Grapes* are language and its alliance to race. Walcott begins the poem with a pun on the word "race" as significant of both racial identity and his own particular trajectory. The poem,

like most in Walcott's oeuvre, is caught up in the racial halving that his own specific racial identity has contributed towards: "but I looked for that moment / when the mind was halved by a horizon". Walcott's education was within the English system. He was introduced to the English language, its varied linguistic peculiarities and glories while at school in Castries and during his later education in Jamaica. In this poem, Walcott addresses the nuances and the very fact of language in the construction of racial identity: "with no nouns, and with no horizon, / with pebbles under my tongue". The meeting point of Walcott's racial identity as well as the dynamics of interaction between the white colonisers and the colonised races is like the illusory horizon that only appears to be the meeting point of the earth and the sky but is in actuality a separating line between the two. Language and the act of naming is what accords distinctive identity to the racial subject. To be named, to have a name, to name implies existence but each has a different connotation in the execution of power. To be named is to be a passive recipient of an accorded identity; to have a name is to be potentially capable of exercising identity and subversively interrogate the act of naming; to name is to have the authority over identity and identification.

Walcott imposes images of the colonised world: "the goldsmith from Benares", "stonecutter from Canton", "Bronzesmith from Benin" with "the courts of Castille" and "Versailles colonnades". The evocative potential of these images makes the isolated beauty of the two worlds visual for the reader. There is the underlying nostalgic sentimentality in the images from the colonised world and the powerful thrust of the great and glorious past in the images of European grandeur. In juxtaposing the two, Walcott uses the medium of language to express the underlying fracture of his identity: an identical orientation towards both the west and the colonised world. It is language that allows him the avenue to address the horizon, or separating line, that is his identity.

The act of naming has to be looked on as the act of christening within the colonial framework. The colonised world loses its own history and becomes subsumed in the broader narrative of Eurocentricism through being linguistically appropriated by the

western world. As Walcott so woefully claims in the poem: "Being men, they could not live/ except when they first presumed / the right of everything to be a noun. / The African acquiesced, / repeated, and changed them." There is also a sense of trepidation in Walcott when he asks, "And when they named these bays/ bays, / was it nostalgia or irony?" he looks at the act of naming as one which for the coloniser is also imbued with loss. The "cabbage palms" and the "pigsty" cannot be the recipients of names that evoke Castille, Versailles or the Corinthian and yet these undeserving attributes of the colonies are elevated through their linguistic association with symbols of aesthetic and cultural splendour in the western world. As Elleke Boehmer argues in her book *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*:

> From the European point of view, therefore, colonialism was a metaphoric and cartographic — as well as a legalistic — undertaking. A country was 'mapped' or spacially conceived using figures which harked back to home ground.... Classifications and codes imported from Europe were matched to peoples, cultures, and topographies that were entirely un-European... New places, named after regions and towns left behind, recreated in some part the symbolic experience of the old world. But at the same time they marked out a new region, where a new life could begin to unfold. Naming set up a synchronous timeframe for the colonies: though not Europe, they were declared to be contiguous to Europe, and subject to it. (17)

It is in this sense of the new world being subject to Europe that Walcott engages with the politics of naming and its precarious relationship with memory. The act of renaming is also an act of letting go or disremembering. Naming also involves "the amnesia of the races" that makes "imagination as necessity". The precolonised past has to be forgotten for a colonised future to exist. As Walcott states in the poem: "I began with no memory, / I began with no future". The loss of memory is simultaneously a wound that cannot be healed and also the site for subjectivity in the colonised self. Nonetheless, the lack of a future invalidates the past and in doing so offers an arena of (re)claiming identity for the racial subject. In short, imagination and by association language allows the colonised subject to create his identity. It is this double movement into contrary designs and functions that characterises Walcott's poetry, especially the poems

from the Caribbean phase that strongly illustrate his postcolonial moorings. In as much as this is concerned, Walcott's poetry "is a rechristening that sees the New World as a palimpsest[3] and poetry as the adamic task of turning away from the allure of fading names, histories, and meanings in order to keep language fresh and alive to the demands of the natural present.' (Handley, 292) To view Walcott's poem as a palimpsest is to understand the nuanced arguments that go into the making of postcolonial identity. The trauma and loss associated with colonisation is undercut by a simultaneous regard for the coloniser's culture and history to which the racial amnesia of an African past acts as a counterfoil. The "…terrible vowel, / that I!" emerges out of this nexus — a sense of history that is opposed by this emerging historylessness. Language is the solution that Walcott offers to bring together these two opposing tendencies. The native tongue is trained to speak an alien language that in the act of speech no longer remains alien. As stated earlier, Caliban appropriates Prospero's language and uses it to forge his identity.

Walcott's use of the coloniser's language to retrace a racial ancestry through a linguistic trajectory becomes the dominant preoccupation of the poem. While the poems under discussion do not depict the *patois* or the *creolised* language that emerges out of cultural mingling of the Caribbean and European races, Walcott plays with language and uses the hybrid *patois* in some of his works, especially *Omeros* and his play *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1967). The ideational discourse on language in the current poem finds an illustration in others. Walcott's "Names" can therefore be seen as the poet's outlining of some of his linguistic concerns in his works.

In the final lines of the poem, however, Walcott makes apparent that the acquisition of language has not been without violence. The viciousness of a possibly missionary classroom is depicted alongside the racism that drives colonial educational setups: "tell me, what do they look like? / Answer, you damned little Arabs!" The response to the same is an embittered ironical self-reflexive "Sir, fireflies caught in molasses." The allure of the coloniser's history and culture is a strong one that is more often than not detrimental to the colonised subject.