

COLONIAL LEGACIES AND CULTURAL HEALING: THE ROLE OF DEREK WALCOTT'S IN TODAY'S POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract :

This study explores how Derek Walcott's Caribbean theatre serves at once as a mirror exposing the lingering shadows of colonialism and as a stage where cultural healing and renewal are imaginatively rehearsed. In examining a constellation of his seminal plays—Henry Christophe (1949), Ti-Jean and His Brothers (1958), Pantomime (1978), Beef, No Chicken (1982), and Dream on Monkey Mountain (1967)—I contend that Walcott's dramaturgy enacts a profound dialectic: first, it exposes the political, psychological, and cultural continuities of empire; second, it fashions a creolizing poetics that transforms historical fracture into aesthetic form; and third, it choreographs rituals of healing that are grounded in the performance of myth, the cadence of folklore, and the vernacular speech of the Caribbean archipelago.

In dialogue with postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon—whose piercing account of internalized racism illuminates the psychic wounds of colonization—Homi Bhabha, with his paradigms of mimicry and hybridity, Édouard Glissant's visionary poetics of relation, and Stuart Hall's insistence on the fluidity of diasporic identity, I demonstrate how Walcott's stage becomes not merely a mirror of postcolonial melancholia but a theatre of transformation. His dramatic art mobilizes the textures of Caribbean language, the wit of satire, the spiritual energy of dream-visions, and the communal memory encoded in oral traditions, forcing them into curative cultural technologies.

Introduction :

Derek Walcott (1930–2017), Nobel Prize-winning poet and dramatist, hailed from the verdant shores of St. Luca, endures as one of the most luminous and resonant voices of the postcolonial Caribbean. His theatre does not lie inert as relics upon the shelf of literary history; rather, it breathes, pulses, and argues, staging the very textures of freedom as they are shadowed by the ghostly persistence of empire. Upon his stage, sovereignty trembles against dependency, national pride is haunted by mimicry's hollow echo, and memory—splintered and scattered like shards across the Atlantic—yearns toward an impossible yet necessary wholeness.

For Walcott, theatre is no mere entertainment but a crucible of postcolonial existence: a sacred arena where planter and peasant, hotelier and servant, dreamer and jailer encounter

one another in flesh and spirit, and where audiences are not idle spectators but witnesses rehearsing futures beyond the confines of colonial scripts. His dramaturgy becomes both **ritual and reckoning**, an art of representation that heals even as it wounds, that confronts history while summoning the possibility of renewal.

This inquiry turns to five of his seminal works—*Henri Christophe*, *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*, *Pantomime*, *Beef, No Chicken*, and *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. Though diverse in form—ranging from verse tragedy to satire, allegory to masquerade—they converge upon a shared ethic: to unveil the burdens of colonial inheritance and to chart pathways of struggles of resistance and acts of healing voiced in myth, satire, carnival spirit, and melody. In this vision lies Walcott's enduring gift: the articulation of a "creole healing," an aesthetic-ethical practice that neither denies fracture nor romanticizes rupture, but transfigures them into a mosaic of relation—where hybridity and multiplicity are at once the wound, the scar, and the cure.

Henry Christophe : Sovereignty's Masquerade and the Burden of Mimicry

"Derek Walcott's *Henry Christophe : A Chronicle in Seven Scenes* (1949), his earliest major drama, portrays the irony of liberation entangled in the remnants of empire. By revisiting the figure of Henri Christophe—the Haitian freedom fighter who ascended to monarchy—Walcott shapes a tragedy in the vein of Shakespeare, exposing the frailties and mimicry embedded within postcolonial sovereignty." The play's Elizabethan echoes—choric invocations, elevated rhetoric, the rise and fall of a monarch—reveal the irony that liberation often borrows the colonizer's forms. As Edward Baugh observes, Walcott's early theatre "renders the Caribbean drama of independence in a mirror of European grandeur," exposing inheritance as both burden and commentary.

Christophe's sovereignty is a masquerade : thrones, regalia, and court ritual become "borrowed robes," a theatre of state where power must be ceaselessly performed. Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry—"almost the same, but not quite"—finds vivid dramatization here, as Christophe's borrowed grandeur collapses into parody and cruelty. Walcott crystallizes this futility with bleak concision: "The cycle will never end. Blood grows where blood is uprooted." Echoing Fanon's warning in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Christophe embodies the national bourgeoisie who inherit colonial structures without transforming them, becoming guardians of hollow shells.

The tragedy, then, is not merely personal hubris but the historical burden of mimicry: sovereignty as spectacle, authority undermined by its own borrowed gestures. As Stuart Hall reminds us, identity is forged "in and through representation," and Christophe's kingship exists only as performance, always vulnerable to exposure as imitation.

Yet Walcott's play does not end in despair. Its reparative force lies in lucidity: the recognition that European pageantry cannot furnish the grammar of Caribbean freedom. *Henry Christophe* anticipates Walcott's later turn from palaces to vernacular spaces—the yard, the street corner, the calypso bandstand—where creole creativity, not mimicry, becomes the ground of cultural healing.

Ti-Jean and His Brothers: Folklore as parable, humility as strength.

If *Henry Christophe* probes the burden of sovereignty through mimicry, Derek Walcott's *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (1958) turns instead to folklore as counter-philosophy. Where Christophe is bound in European regalia, Ti-Jean walks barefoot, armed only with cunning and humility. The play unfolds as an archetypal trial in which three brothers face the Devil, who appears in guises of Planter, Old Man, and Master—figures of colonial authority. Gros Jean's brute strength and Mi-Jean's brittle intellect falter before pride, while only Ti-Jean endures, triumphing through humility, patience, and intuitive wisdom. As Walcott cautions:

*"Who with the Devil tries to play fair,
weaves the net of his own despair."*

The Devil here embodies colonial seduction—ever-shifting, never stable. His masquerades echo Fanon's warning that colonialism ensnares not only through force but through the psychological trap of mimicry. In contrast, Ti-Jean's victory emerges not through force but through humility and attentiveness—gifts inherited from the wellspring of folk wisdom.

Even in death, Walcott insists on resilience : *"the cricket is still merry, the bird still plays its flute, every dawn."* Such images affirm that life, community, and ecology endure beyond tyranny. As Glissant's *poetics of relation* suggests, identity in the Caribbean emerges not from purity but from creolization—song, proverb, and improvisation as cultural technologies of survival.

The play's healing vector lies in redefining resistance : not mimicry of colonial might but the cultivation of relational knowledge, where the smallest brother embodies the wisdom of survival. Ti-Jean's victory signals that freedom is found not in thrones or force, but in the quiet resilience of community, proverb, and song.

Pantomime : Reverse-Casting the Canon, Rehearsing Equality

If *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* channels folklore as philosophy, Derek Walcott's *Pantomime* (1978) transforms theatre itself into a crucible for colonial memory. In the setting of a humble Trinidad guesthouse, empire is reenacted through the exchanges between Harry Trewe, a white English actor turned expatriate, and Jackson Phillip, a Black Trinidadian handyman. spar over a holiday "panto" of *Robinson Crusoe*. When Jackson proposes a reversal—himself as Crusoe, Harry as Friday—the stage becomes a microcosm of inversion, a living challenge to the colonial myth of mastery.

This reversal, however, is no comic whimsy. It dramatizes Walcott's conviction that postcolonial societies must re-script the foundational fictions of conquest. Yet the rehearsal exposes scars more than it heals. Harry's anxious injunction—"It's pantomime, Jackson, keep it light"—reveals how "lightness" polices dissent, while his slur "Ape! Mimic!" reopens the colonial wound of imitation. Jackson's retort, Calibanesque in defiance, hurls mimicry back as rebellion, unsettling the hierarchy through the master's own tongue.

Pantomime's genius emerges in its rejection of catharsis. Equality is not achieved but

endlessly rehearsed, haltingly, under the residue of empire. As Bhabha reminds us, such encounters unfold in a “third space” of hybridity—“almost the same, but not quite.” Walcott’s stage does not resolve fracture but insists that decolonization is a practice: provisional, improvisatory, necessary.

Thus, the healing of *Pantomime* lies not in final justice but in rehearsal itself—in the awkward dialogue where wounds are voiced, laughter unsettles pain, and history is re-enacted in miniature.

Beef, No Chicken: Development, Corruption, and the Comedy of Neo-Colonialism

If *Henri Christophe* interrogates monarchy’s mimicry and *Pantomime* rehearses equality, Derek Walcott’s *Beef, No Chicken* (1981) shifts into the satirical key of civic comedy. Set in Couva, a small Trinidadian town jolted by the prospect of a new highway, the play exposes how “progress” arrives as confusion, corruption, and cultural erosion.

The very title—*Beef, No Chicken*—is itself a parable: a restaurant advertising what it lacks becomes a metaphor for neo-colonial development, selling dreams of modernity while failing to provide sustenance. Miss Euphemia’s refrain, “Beef, no chicken! Beef, no chicken!” becomes an ironic chorus of absence, echoing promises unfulfilled.

Here the colonial master wears no crown but returns as the faceless agents of globalization—construction firms, zoning boards, and tourism investors. Mayor Hernando parrots imported rhetoric of modernization—“Highway means jobs, jobs, jobs!”—but his bombast reduces culture to an obstacle, a relic to be paved over.

Against this hollow rhetoric, the ghost of Corporal Lestrade mocks, “Allyuh paving the town, but you paving over people grave!” reminding that progress without memory desecrates rather than dignifies. Through carnival laughter, Walcott exposes the contradictions of modernization : highways that lead to potholes, development that serves absence.

The play’s healing vector lies in satire itself. In Bakhtin’s view, carnival subverts order by reducing the lofty to the level of the common. Walcott’s comedy does not reject aspiration but insists that the Caribbean must script its own rhythms of progress—rooted in calypso, cuisine, and memory—rather than in imported models that promise beef but leave only the absence of chicken.

Dream on Monkey Mountain : A theatrical journey of unlearning internalized oppression.

Derek Walcott’s *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1970) is one of his most visionary plays, staging the psychic wounds of colonialism upon the Black Caribbean self. At its heart is Makak, an old charcoal burner, whose arrest in a rumshop thrusts him into a dream-odyssey of Africa, kingship, visions of purity and corruption, and, finally, a confrontation with the demon of self-hatred.

The mocking refrain—“Cause when I turn round, monkey turn around too”—embodies the inner colonizer, echoing Fanon’s trauma of misrecognition in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Makak’s visions dramatize how colonialism colonizes not just bodies but consciousness,

instilling fear and loathing.

Yet Walcott turns dream into ritual. Masks, coronations, and grotesqueries stage the exorcism of racial inferiority. Makak's cry—"I must kill the White Queen!"—marks the collapse of whiteness as a psychic idol. But Walcott resists an easy resolution in Africa as origin; instead, he offers rebirth in relation. Makak awakens not as emperor but as himself: "I am Makak. Not God. Not king. Just Makak."

Here Walcott resonates with Glissant's "poetics of relation," where identity is rhizomatic, not rooted in a single origin but in community, landscape, and history. The stage becomes a curative dreamscape: wounds are revealed, trauma transformed, and dignity reimaged. Healing lies not in escaping the colonial past but in "dreaming otherwise."

Language, Music, and Mask: Walcott's Creole Aesthetic as Care:

Across Derek Walcott's plays unfolds not only a theatrical method but a curative repertoire, where drama itself becomes a healing art for postcolonial wounds. His stage refuses the hierarchy of empire's idioms, instead blending folk song, Creole banter, carnival mask, and poetic cadence into a theatre that is both fractured and whole. In his Nobel lecture, Walcott observed that a broken vase, pieced back together, embodies a love more enduring than the untested wholeness of its original shape. His dramaturgy is precisely this reassembly—language, rhythm, masks, and laughter suturing broken histories into new cultural wholeness.

Language : The Poetics of Code-Switching.

Walcott's plays oscillate between high verse and Creole patois, dismantling what Fanon called the colonial hierarchy of speech. In *Pantomime*, Friday resists Crusoe's "education" by parodying language itself, proving that "yard talk" can bear philosophy as much as canonical English. This weaving of idioms performs Glissant's *poetics of relation*—a theatre of multiplicity, not purity.

Music and Rhythm: The Sonic Commons.

Song and rhythm pulse through his dramaturgy as collective healing. In *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*, the chorus of crickets and birds weaves into the action, conjuring a precolonial cadence of communal harmony. In *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, the chorus embodies Makak's fractured psyche, turning individual trauma into communal ritual. Music serves as the pulse that reconnects individual, community, and environment.

Masks and Role-Reversal : A Third Space.

Walcott's use of masquerade enacts Bhabha's "third space," transforming the stage into a site of fluid identity formation. In *Pantomime*, the Crusoe-Friday inversion unsettles colonial binaries, while in *Monkey Mountain*, Makak's grotesque visions force him to face both shame and possibility. The mask reveals, transforms, and births new selves denied by empire.

Humor and Satire : Laughter as Survival.

Walcott also insists that healing requires laughter. In *Beef, No Chicken*, satire skewers

corruption, showing humor as both critique and catharsis. As Mervyn Morris observes, Walcott's wit "cuts with the same sharpness as his lament." Laughter here is no escape—it is resistance, an immune response that keeps joy alive amid trauma.

In sum, Walcott's theatre is a ritual of reparation: language, rhythm, masks, and laughter converge as technologies of survival, enabling Caribbean selves to dream, laugh, and reassemble their fragmented identities into relation and renewal.

Convergences with Postcolonial Theory :

To read Derek Walcott's plays is not to treat them as appendices to theory, but to see theory itself dramatized in his theatre. He is no "footnote" to Fanon, Bhabha, Glissant, or Hall; rather, his stage-worlds are where their abstractions find body, voice, and contradiction. As Walcott reminds us, "Theatre is ceremony, its purpose not entertainment alone but exorcism." His dramaturgy is thus both intellectual and ritual, a space where the psychic wounds of Empire's effects are performed as much as they are scrutinized, offering a path toward restoration. Fanon's clinic becomes Walcott's stage. Fanon's critique of the divided self finds embodiment in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* as a participatory act of healing. Makak's dream unfolds not as a private case study but as a collective rite of release, with the stage transformed into Fanon's consulting room enlarged for a public audience. Bhabha's mimicry and hybridity flicker in *Henry Christophe* and *Pantomime*. Christophe's imitation of European monarchy both asserts sovereignty and exposes its emptiness, while Jackson and Harry's comic reversals stage hybridity in a rehearsal room—Bhabha's "third space" rendered flesh and laughter.

Glissant's poetics of relation resound in Walcott's archipelagic form. His plays refuse origins in favor of crossings—myth, song, satire, ritual. In *Beef, No Chicken*, the farce of modernization critiques false progress while affirming the rhythms of creolized community.

Hall's politics of representation are performed in every line of dialogue. *Pantomime* unmask the colonial residues in "light entertainment," showing that no stage is ever neutral. As Hall writes, identity is both "being" and "becoming," and Walcott dramatizes that struggle in real time.

The relevance endures. If colonial uniforms have vanished, empire returns in subtler guises—tourism, debt, and globalization. *Pantomime* satirizes the masquerade of service economies, where deference itself becomes a mask. *Beef, No Chicken* lampoons corruption and development schemes, exposing re-colonization through contracts rather than muskets.

Walcott's theatre matters today because postcolonial life remains an unfinished drama. His plays teach us that healing is not erasure but transformation—fracture turned into mosaic, satire into survival, performance into possibility.

Cultural nationalism and its dangerous seductions :

In *Henry Christophe: A Chronicle in Seven Scenes*, Walcott charts the Haitian monarch's rise and collapse as a parable of nationalism turned tyranny. Christophe, once liberator, crowns himself king, repeating the violence he sought to overthrow. His cry—"I am king! The black king of this kingdom!"—rings with pride yet shadows with despotism. Walcott

warns that repainting colonial forms in native colours cannot cleanse their brutality; nationhood must purge violence, not parade it.

Dream on Monkey Mountain offers Walcott's deepest meditation on racial self-recognition. Makak's dream enacts the perilous process of seeing oneself beyond the colonizer's gaze. The dream's white goddess, executed in symbolism, represents the theater of liberating Blackness from the shadow of the white gaze. The stage becomes a mirror—dangerous yet necessary—where identity is painfully, ritually reconstituted.

Walcott's **Ti-Jean and His Brothers** casts survival as a trickster's wisdom. Ti-Jean, the least powerful sibling, triumphs over the Devil through patience, cleverness, and compassion, showing that resistance is as much about sustaining human dignity as it is about open revolt. In a world where domination often arrives through contracts or stereotypes, Ti-Jean's lesson remains vital.

Walcott's theatre endures because it is never antiquarian. The plays speak in the tense idiom of the present, confronting the rise of authoritarian rule, the battle for racial dignity, the commodification of culture in tourist economies, and the deceptive promises of progress. They remind us that decolonization is unfinished work, and that art itself may be, in Walcott's phrase, "a healing ceremony, a feast of reconciliation."

Close Readings: Five Scenes of Critique and Care

Colonial Legacies and Cultural Healing in Walcott's Theatre

- **The Coronation in *Henry Christophe* :**

Walcott stages Christophe's coronation as both grandeur and parody: crowns, uniforms, and rhetoric proclaim sovereignty, yet beneath the glitter lies mimicry. Echoing Homi Bhabha's "almost the same, but not quite," Christophe's performance of kingship reveals power as theatre, where sovereignty rehearsed becomes tyranny.

- **Mother's Wisdom in *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* :**

Against masculine ambition, the Mother offers an ethic of humility and survival. Her parables—of crickets, dawn, and birdsong—teach resilience beyond conquest. "No man can measure himself against the Devil with pride," she warns; Ti-Jean triumphs not through force but through refusal of arrogance, embodying healing through maternal wisdom.

- **"Keep it Light" in *Pantomime* :**

Harry's command to Jackson—"keep it light"—encapsulates colonial ideology: subjects may improvise only within limits of entertainment. Yet Jackson overturns the script, reversing roles of Crusoe and Friday. When Harry erupts—"Ape! Mimic!"—liberal tolerance collapses, exposing the violence beneath colonial comedy. In his vision, identity is not fixed essence but a battlefield of roles—constantly rehearsed, resisted, and reimagined.

The Menu in *Beef, No Chicken* :

A restaurant sign advertising “Beef, No Chicken” becomes satire on modernization: promise without provision, progress without substance. Laughter here is medicine—“a civic body” laughing at its own corruption, where development projects mask dependency. Walcott’s comedy diagnoses society even as it entertains.

- **Makak’s Awakening in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* :**

Makak’s visionary passage confronts mimicry’s torment—“when I turn round, monkey turn round too.” What begins as coronation ends as renunciation; the dream of empire dissolves into the deeper truth of communal belonging. Healing lies not in singular essence but in Édouard Glissant’s “poetics of relation,” where multiplicity replaces mimicry.

- **Walcott’s Ethics: Theatre as Repair :**

Walcott’s art is ambivalent yet reparative. “Within me flows Dutch, African, and English heritage; thus, I am either nothing or a nation,” he proclaims, embracing fracture as central to Caribbean identity. His stage transforms mimicry into creole innovation, comedy into critique, wounds into beginnings. Like Stuart Hall’s notion of identity as “a process of becoming,” Walcott’s characters—Makak, Ti-Jean, Jackson—seek wholeness through relation, not purity. His theatre becomes a “rehearsal of freedom”: stern yet tender, exposing tyranny while nurturing futures beyond empire.

Conclusion:

A Repertoire for the Present Across his plays, Derek Walcott fashions a repertoire for life after empire. *Henry Christophe* cautions that revolution without renewal sinks into ritual tyranny; *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* enshrines the trickster’s humility as survival’s ethic; *Pantomime* insists that equality must be enacted, not merely declared; *Beef, No Chicken* satirizes the hollow promise of “development” while defending the civic spirit; and *Dream on Monkey Mountain* stages the dreamwork of shedding internalized racism and reimagining relation. These dramas endure because the wounds they address—neo-colonial economics, racial masquerades, the lure of mimicry—persist today. Walcott offers not only critique but practice: laughter against corruption, rehearsal as freedom, and the dream of dignity restored.

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