Strategies of Signification and Subversion in Post-Colonial Writing: A Reading of Derek Walcott's *Pantomime*

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Abstract

*This article delves into the complex criticality of signifying strategies utilized by Derek Walcott in his play **Pantomime**, analysing how these techniques enrich the text's narrative and thematic resonance. Through an in-depth scrutiny of the play, the article investigates Walcott's masterful use of intertextuality and the ways it creates a multi-layered narrative that transcends the immediate context of the play and engages with larger themes of identity, colonialism, and cultural hybridity. Drawing on key concepts from postcolonial theory and Semiotics, the article explores how Walcott infuses the play with nuanced meaning that challenges traditional power structures and reflects the complexities of postcolonial identity. Central to this analysis is the titular parrot, a potent symbol of Caribbean identity and voice, which serves as a poignant reminder of the colonial legacy of cultural mimicry and erasure. Through this critical lens, the article illuminates Walcott's strategic use of signification and challenges readers to reconsider colonial narratives that reflect on the dynamic interplay between cultural heritage and the pursuit of self-determination.*

Key Words: Signification, Subversion, Post-Colonial Writing, Pantomime

INTRODUCTION

Readings of "writings" that originate from the imperialist canon, even long after the denigrating histories of slavery and colonialism, demand that postcolonial writers and critics re-read and respond to these texts in increasingly nuanced ways, as they are deeply influenced by imperialist ideologies embedded in colonial literature.

Despite the official end of slavery and colonialism, their legacies and impacts continue to endure. This historical legacy imposes a responsibility on postcolonial writers and critics to engage with these texts critically. Consequently, postcolonial thinkers are compelled to revisit imperialist

writings to challenge, reinterpret, and respond to their problematic nature, reframing them from postcolonial and de-colonial perspectives.

This is evident because writing, as a means of recording and representing both real and imagined experiences, was one of the most powerful strategies colonial powers employed to establish and maintain their hegemony. Through writing, they legitimized their privilege and positioned themselves as superior in the hierarchy of humanity. Historically, such writings functioned to justify and validate the enslavement, oppression, and exploitation of pre-colonial and colonial subjects.

For instance, a close and critical reading of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* reveals the European man's mindset, where imaginative and creative instincts are consciously directed to fabricate a myth of the "other"—the non-European world and existence. This narrative is deliberately crafted to emphasize and justify the political, economic, racial, and cultural paradigms of colonialism. Similar patterns are evident in the imaginative representations of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and the preconceived philosophical and racial positions of thinkers such as Hegel, Hume, and Kant.

Necessarily, it is as a result of such attitudes, dispositions and representations, that the post-colonial writers and critics have, with obsessive frequency, engaged in re-readings, reworking and reversing of such imperialist canonical texts with a clear mission of reversing the negative representations of the colonial subject, who for a long time has been relegated to the subaltern rank, ever silent; mute. As such the imaginative and creative instincts of the post-colonial which counteract and challenge texts such as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, are largely inspired by the desire for self-formation, objectification as well as quest for definition and identify. George Lamming, who is more anxious in his literary texts to redefine the Caliban- Prospero[1] relations, succinctly explains the requisites of the colonial artist when he aptly reckons that:

> the mystery of the colonial is this: While he remains alive, his instinct always and forever creative, must choose a way to change the meaning and perspective of this ancient tyranny (Lamming, 1984, p.299).

For Lamming, this ancient tyranny refers to the entire colonial structure of awareness—the self-perception and identity of the colonial subject shaped not only by the long history of slavery and colonialism but also by the (mis)representations found in works of art and other writings produced by

[1] A detailed presentation of Caliban Prospero relationship is well dramatized in Shakespeare's *The Tempest.*

imperialists. Lamming's sentiments are not unique; they are magnified and echoed by Dash (1987, p.17) in his interpretations of postcolonial discourse when he succinctly observes that:

> In a region made ominously intelligible because of systems of domination, in which origins are observed or degenerate into self-serving fictions, traumatized by dependency, the quest for self-formation is the only valid imaginative response. The task of consciousness becomes necessary in a world that is the product of the other's dreams, where systems of Knowledge and signification are enforced in order to produce docility, constraint and helplessness.

One needs not belabor the fact that the colonial/post-colonial writer has no alternative but to dismantle the systems of knowledge and signification that inculcates and perpetuates conditions of docility, inferiority and helplessness in characters in colonial situations, if his/her creative instincts have to be meaningful and relevant in the post-colonial era.

From the foregoing discussion, Derek Walcott's play *Pantomime* is critically read as a typical example of a post-colonial text that reads and reverses an imperialist canonical text - Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* with the explicit aim of deconstructing and dismantling the systems of knowledge and significations ascribed to the non-Europeans in imperial writings and thinking.

However, this is only possible when the imperialist canonical text is seen as a signifier and the material content within it taken as the signified. In that case, Jacque Derrida's assertion of the relationship between signifier and signified becomes very pertinent in our relational reading of *Pantomime* and *Robinson Crusoe*. According to Derrida, the relational meanings that do not exist between the signifier and the signified are never fixed as they are always in a state of circularity, in the sense that the sign is unstable, capable of being fixed, unfixed or re-fixed by different users and communities of users of language. As such, it would be quite correct to imply the same when reading Imperialist Canonical texts. That is to say, the meanings that the texts ascribe to the non-Europeans, that is, slave, subaltern, servant, cannibal, savage can all be unfixed and re-fixed as a master, general, boss, noble. This has been suggested, though, implicitly by Ashcroft et al. (1983, p.33) when they say of the same as follows:

> A Characteristic of dominated literatures is an inevitable tendency towards subversion, and a study of subversive strategies employed by post-colonial writers would reveal both the configurations of dominations and the imaginative and creative responses to this condition: Directly and indirectly in Salman Rushdie's phrase, the 'Empire writes back to the Centre, not only through rationalistic assertion, proclaiming itself central and self-determining, but even more radically by questioning the bases of European

> and British metaphysics, Challenging the world-view that can polarize centre and periphery in the first place. In this way, concepts of polarity, of 'governor' and 'governed' ruler and ruled' are challenged as essential way of ordering reality.

WALCOTT'S *PANTOMIME AS A (DE)CONSTRUCTIVE (COUNTER)DISCOURSE*

In Walcott's re-ordering and re-arranging of colonial structures, relations and reality, he appropriately utilizes the possibilities offered by intertextuality as a signifying strategy; a strategy of both subversion and deconstruction. However, before engaging into the nuances with which Walcott has utilized this signify strategy, it is of profound importance to define what intertextuality as a signifying strategy encompasses. The term intertextuality as a strategy has been defined variously. Julia Kristeva as read in Harland (1987, p.168) defines it in the following terms: "Intertextuality depends upon the notion that in the space of a given text, several utterances taken from other texts intersect and neutralize one another". For Ulrich Broich and Manfred Pfister as referred to by Anyinefa (1993, p.6):

> Intertextuality occurs when an author not only realizes that he is using other texts; but also expects his readers to recognize the relationship between his text and other texts as intentional and as important for the understanding of his text.

Whilst according to the African-American Black literary theorist, Henry Louis Gates Jr. intertextuality transcends the awareness of usage of other texts and utterances; It becomes itself a mode of signification; a process and strategy for signifying, a trope of revision, of repetition, of reversal and difference. It refers to a text that echoes, mirrors, repeats, reverses, or responds to other texts in various structural and formal ways. Thus for him, inter-textuality becomes a trope of the talking Book" or "the voice in the text". Therefore, his theoretical position on the concept of intertextuality more than the others offers a better framework and perspective for reading Walcott's *Pantomime* as a (de)constructive counter-discourse and a contestation, confronting the signifying position of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe,* especially when he asserts categorically that intertextuality as a signifying process is:

> A unique black rhetorical concept, entirely textual or linguistic, by which a second statement or figure repeats or tropes, or reverses the first. Indeed, the very concept of signify(ing) can only exist in the realm of the intertextual relation (Gates Jr., 1987, p.49).

Walcott's *Pantomime* therefore, admittedly, is itself a signifying structure, a structure of intertextual revision and reversal, because it revises and reverses tropes and rhetorical strategies from a precursory text that is Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. As such, for Walcott the act of signifying is a strong trigger for

liberation from enslavement, oppression and, colonialism with all its attendant consequences, and in addition a process of self-knowledge, conscientization and assertiveness.

Derek Walcott's *Pantomime* is performed by two actors over two acts and opens with Harry Trewe, a retired English actor in his forties running Castaways Guest House in Tobago, reciting lines from a pantomime adaptation of *Robinson Crusoe* he once coauthored. His employee, Jackson Phillip, a retired Trinidadian calypso singer, serves him breakfast and reminds Harry that the hotel's renovations should take priority over rehearsals, as the facilities are in disrepair.

Harry reveals his obsession with entertaining guests as promised in his advertisements, while Jackson insists he has left performance behind to seek peace in Tobago. Jackson refuses to play the role of Friday, the servant in *Robinson Crusoe*, but Harry suggests reversing the roles: Jackson as Crusoe and Harry as a white version of Friday. Harry strips down to play the part, prompting Jackson to remind him to maintain propriety.

Jackson eventually engages in the improvisational, race-reversed pantomime, using it to critique imperialism. He portrays Crusoe as violent, imposing his beliefs on Friday, played by Harry. He mocks the fear the British now have of immigrants from the colonies. When Jackson sings a calypso song, Harry sees potential and tries to capture it on tape, but Jackson seizes the moment to assert his ideas, making Harry play a humiliating role as a seagull. Jackson draws a direct comparison between their play and imperial history, highlighting the British treatment of Caribbean people and Harry's domineering nature. By Act One's end, Jackson expresses frustration over Harry's lack of respect and returns to his work.

Act two opens with Jackson making loud noise while fixing the sundeck, irritating Harry, who apologizes for upsetting him earlier. Harry admits that loneliness and the heat are to blame for his behavior and reveals he came to Tobago to forget his wife and son. Jackson hints at Harry's unresolved grief over his son's death and directs him to recite a somber monologue from Crusoe's perspective. Harry's emotional interpretation reveals his loneliness, but Jackson points out that Crusoe's practical survival would have come before his thoughts on grief.

When Jackson requests a bathroom break, Harry offers his private bathroom to avoid the unsanitary staff toilet. Jackson declines, symbolizing the lack of true equality between them and comparing their dynamic to the British hastily granting independence to colonies, leaving them in turmoil.

Harry, frustrated and drinking Scotch, hides under the table with an icepick. Jackson senses danger, retreats, and returns with the parrot, which he has killed. He throws it to Harry, and the tension subsides as they share a drink. Harry toasts to his ex-wife Ellen, an act that Jackson finds inappropriate. Jackson uses a photo of Ellen as a mask to force Harry to confront his past, revealing that Ellen was responsible for their son's death in a drunk-driving accident. Harry admits that playing Crusoe in blackface with Ellen was his initial experience.

Harry breaks down in tears, but soon dismisses his grief, prompting Jackson to call out his denial. The play concludes with Jackson offering to perform again but with the condition of a raise, singing his calypso about *Robinson Crusoe*, signifying both resistance and potential reconciliation.

In Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Friday is not simply the "domesticated antitype" as John Richett refers to him. He is more than that: he is also the colonial subject par-excellence. He learns and appropriates his master's duties and chores obediently, faithfully and diligently; exuberantly vows loyalty, believes in the superiority of the master; and acceptingly acts the clown to amuse his Master. Indeed, it is this image of Friday, represented in *Robinson Crusoe*, that Walcott seems to be consciously engaged in deconstructing in his representation of the character Jackson in *Pantomime*. As Kochman, as interpreted by Gates Jr., aptly observes, an idea particularly relevant to our reading of *Pantomime*, "Signifying depends upon the signifier repeating what someone else has said ... in order to reverse or undermine the status of relationship heretofore harmonious" (Gates 1989:240). In this context, signifying refers to a complex rhetorical and cultural practice often found in African and African diasporic traditions, where meaning is conveyed indirectly, often through playful or subversive repetition, irony, or double entendre.

In *Pantomime*, this concept becomes central as it reflects how characters reframe or reinterpret each other's words and actions to challenge or destabilize existing dynamics of power and hierarchy. The "repetition" described here is not mere mimicry; it is a deliberate and strategic act designed to expose, critique, or disrupt what was previously accepted as harmonious or stable. This process of reversal and subversion is a key theme in postcolonial literature, as it highlights the way language and performance can be used to question and undermine colonial authority and cultural dominance.

Pantomime is theoretically and structurally threaded on narrative of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The play brings together two actors whose present relationships are conditioned by colonial historical terms. The two characters

are Harry Trewe, an English man; a retired actor whose conditions of a castaway/shipwreck are reminiscent of Robinson Crusoe in the text of the same title. The other character is Jackson Phillip, a Trinidadian; a retired calypsonian whom Harry would like to see in the light of Defoe's Friday but who, however, rejects to be seen in such terms.

Through the dialogues between the two characters, Walcott effectively delves into the psyche and worldview of the European man, particularly as it relates to his attitudes towards colonial subjects in the postcolonial era. These conversations serve as a critical lens through which Walcott examines the lingering effects of colonialism, revealing how deeply entrenched notions of superiority, paternalism, and cultural dominance continue to shape interactions between former colonizers and the colonized. By skilfully portraying these dynamics, Walcott exposes the complexities and contradictions in the European man's perspective. On one hand, there is an ostensible acknowledgment of change and progress in the postcolonial era; on the other hand, subtle remnants of imperialist ideology persist, often manifesting as implicit biases or patronizing attitudes.

In doing so, Walcott not only critiques the European man's mind-set but also highlights the challenges of forging genuine equality and understanding in a world still grappling with the vestiges of colonialism. The conversations between the characters serve as a microcosm of larger societal tensions, reflecting how power, identity, and history continue to shape relationships in the postcolonial landscape.

Through their dialogue it clearly emerges that Harry is still nostalgic of *Crusoe's* world and would wish to see it reenacted long even after the end of slavery and colonialism. From his portrayal, Harry seems to be suffering from what could be called "acute colonial hangover syndrome." A malady/condition which blinds him from envisaging and embracing the great changes that have occurred in the relations between the colonizer and the colonized. That is, Crusoe and the consciously rejuvenated Friday. Most probably it is Harry's inability to accept that colonial history is not deterministic that makes him insist on staging a 'panto' on *Robinson Crusoe* as part of Christmas entertainment. However, the most intriguing aspect of the whole play, is indeed the way in which Jackson uses the sketching and improvisation of the same play to assume a privileged position in his relation with Harry; and at the same time using the play to bring Harry into terms with present realities; realities of a post-coloniality completely different from Crusoe's.

In a sense, and this is actually true to a very large extent, Jackson is a trope of signification and can only be compared to the "Signifying monkey"[2] in the folklore tradition. He repeats, reverses and twists Harry's words as well as the discourse of the hypo-text - *Robinson Crusoe.*

This interplay of repetition and reversal enables him to create new meaning(s) in his own experience(s) and realities, previously, misrepresented by the other. For example, he uses the metaphor of the parrot to completely de-legitimize and invalidate the assumptions and myths inherent in Defoe's text. For Jackson, there is no difference between the parrot, Harry, and the Crusoe narrative that they are sketching. All these are relics of the pre-colonial situation and colonialism and therefore should be discarded. He says of that parrot and also implies the same of Harry and Crusoe's narrative; that,

> Well, I am not give the bird a fair trial, but I see nothing wrong in taking him out the Cage at dawn, blindfolding the bitch, giving him a cigarette if he want, and perforating his arse by firing squad (Walcott, 1980, p.100).

The parrot like Harry and Crusoe's narrative still look down upon the colonial subject even after independence. Jackson therefore asserts that they are all bad influence and must transform if they have to survive in the post-colonial period.

> The same damn way they corrupt a child. By their upbringing. That parrot survive from a Pre-colonial epoch, Mr. Trewe, and if it want to last in Trinidad and Tobago, then it go have to adjust (ibid.).

Indeed, Jackson reveals in his song that the kind of relation that perpetuates slavery and exploitation must finally be subverted. In anyway, he completely shatters the image that portrays Crusoe as a savior of savages and in turn re-presents him as the pioneer slaver and exploiter of non-Europeans:

> I want to tell you 'bout Robinson Crusoe. He tell Friday, when I do so, do so. Whatever I do, you must do like me. He made Friday a Good Friday Bohbolee. That was the first example of slavery, cause I am still Friday and you ain't me. Now Crusoe he was this Christian all, And Friday, his slave, was a Cannibal, But one day things bound to go reverse, With Crusoe the slave and Friday the boss (Walcott, 1980, p.117).

In his role as a trope of signification, Jackson raises certain issues that for most people might pass as trivialities, but which, in fact, are very crucial in our understanding of the ways in which the colonial powers have always justified the process of slavery and colonialism. The way in which he twists the issues of nakedness is quite interesting. Historically, the idea of nakedness has been

[2] The 'signifying monkey' is a trope of signification which Loius Gate Jr, deploys extensively in the development of Black literary theories.

used as a parameter for measuring levels of civilization but in this play, Harry as Robinson Crusoe incarnate, does not understand why he should be prodded into dressing; and he ironically complains that:

> You people are such prudes, You know that what? What's it you, Jackson that go so Victorian about a man in his own hotel deciding to have breakfast in his own underwear, on a totally deserted Sunday morning (p.104).

The irony comes out in the sense that the first ritual that Friday had to go through in order to get initiated into the world of civilization was to get "dressed". And here, Harry is wondering why Jackson should be so obsessed with the issue of dressing.

The climax of Jackson's signification comes when he insists on acting the role of Crusoe and relegating Harry to the subaltern role of Friday and at the same time he decides to change the name of Friday to Thursday. This in fact reveals Walcott's strategy of empowering the colonial subject. And it is at this moment that Jackson extricates himself completely from Harry. He notes:

> May I say what I think Mr. Trewe?
>
> I think it's a matter of prejudice
>
> I think that you cannot believe: One;
>
> That I can act, and two: that any black man should play Robinson Crusoe.
>
> A little while aback, I came out here quite calmly and normally with
>
> the breakfast things and find you almost stark naked, kneeling down, and you
>
> told me you were getting into your part.
>
> Here I am getting into my part and you
>
> Object. This is the story... history.
>
> This moment that we are now acting here is the history of imperialism; it's nothing less then- that. And I don't think that I can - should - concede my getting into a part half way and abandoning things, just because you, as my superior, give me orders. People become independent. Now I could go down to that beach by myself with this hat, and I could play Robinson Crusoe, I could play Colombus, I could play Si Francis Drake, I could play anybody discovering anywhere, but I don't want you to tell me when and where to draw the line! (pause) Or what to discover and when to discover it.
>
> All right? (Walcott, 1980, p.125)

Walcott gives us a reawakened and conscientized 'Friday' who no longer accepts to be defined by Crusoe and would like to be defined in his own terms. In fact, at the end of the play, Jackson accepts to take part in the play but with the new title "Pantomime" and not Robinson Crusoe. It should also be noted that this is not going to be exactly the same play originally co-

authored by Harry but will be hybridization of the input of the two-reflecting the duality of the colonialism. This is revealed in the final song

> One classical actor and one Creole,
> Let me act together with use heart and
> Soul. It go be man to man, and we go do it fine,
> and we go give it to the title of pantomime (Walcott, 1980, p.170)

Through this strategy of signification, Walcott successfully reimagines and injects new meanings into Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. By engaging with and subverting the original text, Walcott dismantles the entrenched colonial hegemonic hierarchies that had been embodied in the relationship between Crusoe and Friday, which symbolized the Master-Servant dynamic. This is symbolized in Derek Walcott's play *The Pantomime*, Jackson's act of killing the parrot carries profound symbolic and thematic significance, highlighting the complex power dynamics and cultural tensions between Jackson, a Black Tobagonian servant, and his employer, Harry Trewe, a white Englishman.

The parrot symbolizes colonial mimicry, representing the pressure exerted on colonized individuals and cultures to adopt the language, customs, and behaviors of their colonizers. Known for their ability to imitate sounds, parrots mirror the colonial expectation for colonized peoples to mimic Western norms, often at the expense of their own identities and voices. By killing the parrot, Jackson symbolically rejects this mimicry, defying the role of an 'entertaining native' who uncritically echoes the dominant culture. Instead, he asserts his own agency and cultural authenticity.

Jackson's act can also be understood as an attempt to reclaim power. The parrot represents the colonial gaze—the constant surveillance and judgment imposed on the colonized by colonial standards. Killing the parrot signifies Jackson's effort to break free from this oppressive gaze. In this defiant act, Jackson challenges Trewe's authority and disrupts the roles they are expected to perform in their "pantomime"—a theatrical reenactment of *Robinson Crusoe* in which Trewe assumes the role of master and Jackson is cast as the servant, Friday. By stepping out of this imposed role, Jackson resists the colonial hierarchy and asserts his independence.

Furthermore, the parrot's death reveals the complexities of identity for both men. Jackson's rejection of the role Trewe assigns to him forces Trewe to confront his own self-perception as a benevolent figure. The act shatters illusions on both sides, creating the potential for a more genuine, though tense, relationship between them. Ultimately, the killing of the parrot in *The Pantomime* serves as a powerful act of defiance and self-assertion. It disrupts the colonial narrative imposed on Jackson and marks a moment of profound

symbolic liberation. This act challenges both men to reevaluate the limitations and oppressions of their roles within the colonial framework.

CONCLUSION

In Defoe's original narrative, the relationship between Crusoe and Friday reflects the colonial ideology of domination and subjugation, with Crusoe positioned as the authoritative "master" and Friday as the obedient "servant." Walcott, however, disrupts this paradigm by reframing their interactions and renegotiating the power dynamics between them. The result is a radical shift from a relationship of dominance and submission to one that implies equality—a "man-to-man" connection rooted in mutual respect and shared humanity.

This transformation not only critiques the colonial mind-set embedded in Defoe's work but also challenges the audience to reconsider the narratives that have historically justified oppression and hierarchy. Walcott's approach underscores the possibility of creating new, equitable relationships that transcend the legacy of colonialism, reflecting the broader aspirations of postcolonial discourse.

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