

## Sea Imagery in Derek Walcott's The Sea at Dauphin

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This study explores how Derek Walcott consciously employs sea imagery to generate structural, thematic and technical complexities in his short play The Sea at Dauphin. In the course of the exploration I will show how the sea is used as a contextual and conceptual device to characterise both landscape and mindscape.

The action of Walcott's play is plotted on a windswept Island in the West Indies on the Atlantic sea coast, populated by a sparse and predominantly masculine fishing community, ranging over three generations. Much like the fishermen Achilles, Philocrete and Hector in Omeros<sup>1</sup>, in The Sea at Dauphin, we have Afa, Gacia and Augustin. But there are also references to dead fishermen such as Bolo, Boileau, Habal, Arnelles and Raphael. Then there is the young boy and old Hounakin. Thus landscape setting, its inhabitants and even the drowned are defined in terms of the seascape. In fact, the creation and continuity of the spatial and generational, is attributed to and recorded by the Sea as history when Hounakin remarks, "The Sea have many navels, many waves, and I did feel to die in Dauphin Sea, so I could born, "(p.69). This is corroborated when Afa says, "Ask it where Bolo's bones and Rafaeis and friends I did

have before you ever born," (p.53)echoing Walcotts poem Seacanes, "Half my friends are dead/I will make you new ones, said earth/ no, give me them back, as they were instead /I cried, "(p.331)<sup>2</sup>. Thus the Sea becomes the tribal memory which is more reliable and superior to personal memory. This is substantiated by the fact that when Afa tells Gacia, "But the sea forget," (p.47) when Bolo drowned, Gracia replies, "But the sea do what it have to do, like wind, like birds, like me, "(p.47). The emphasis is on the independence of the historical process and its relation to the individual and collective consciousness.

The sea imagery in Walcott's play also generates a variety of rhythms. On the one hand there are regularly repeated pulses of energy created through the mention of the sea's roughness, and altercations of strong and weak pulsations of wind and wave. On the other hand, there are up-down and backward - forward rhythmic patterns as well as contrapuntal movements. These provide structural cohesion and have thematic correlations.

The proceeding and receding tidal rhythm is structurally integrated into the play through the ambivalent attitude of the fishermen towards the sea. For them sea life is a compulsion; but the sea is also a source of comfort. There is the sense that island life lacks rootedness and stability, yet at the same time the seabed is the repose of the dead. Thus the sea is life and death, retribution and resurrection. Afa in The Sea at Dauphin voices the difficulty of cultivating a livelihood from the sea, he says, "you cannot plant it, the sea food does move and one must follow it, "(p.53). He comments bitterly on the harsh life at Dauphin, "forty years, quarante, I work this water," (p.50), and this becomes almost like a refrain which echoes throughout the play such as

when Afa reprimands Hounakin with, "What right a man is blind... to work the sea?" (p.53). Even Augustin reluctantly accedes, "Old man, the sun come up and sea have work," (p.65). Ironically Hector in Omeros paid the penalty of giving up the sea, "lost his life in a wreck,"<sup>3</sup> when he became a taxi driver (Lviii). As the play progresses, for Afa, the sea becomes a source of both anguish and compassion. He says, "Is I does make poor people poor, or this sea vex?... Everyday sweat, sun and salt, and night is salt and sleep and all dead days pack away and stink is Dauphin life... so I must work the sea that is my pasture, garce. If it is compassion you want, talk to the sea," (p.53) and, "it have compassion in the end," (p.61). The alliteration of sibilant fricatives such as 's' and hard alveolar 'd' sounds contribute to the ambivalent attraction and repulsion rhythm created through the sea imagery. The two views of the sea as survival and salvation find a parallel in The Odyssey in which the First Attendant says, "The seas a maw that devours," and Nestor contradicts with, "A god who saves," (p.23-4).<sup>4</sup>

A thematically post colonial ambivalence in the attitude of the black colonised towards the white coloniser is also made evident through the sea imagery. Afa, a 'nigger' is attracted and repulsed by the white sea much like Makak is enamoured with and afraid of the moon woman in Dream on Monkey Mountain. In fact, the corporal in the latter remarks, "is this rage for whiteness that does drive niggers mad" (p.255)<sup>5</sup>, a sexual connotation which finds a parallel in Afa's enraged question, "The Sea is Gacia Woman, no man must touch it?" (p.60). The tension between the masculine and feminine is voiced in Gacia's avowal to, "Finish with the sea", (p.78) to which Afa replies sarcastically, "you always finish with the sea. But you and I, compere, we cannot finish" (p.78). To this Gacia replies, "If you leave women, I

can leave the sea..." (p.78). The play also ends on a sexually connotative image of the, "Fond River coming down by the canes and making one with the sea at Dauphin" (p.80) echoing Afa's earlier observation about Point Jesu, "where water making white after Sablisse", (p.52).

Contrapunctal rhythms much like pendular movements, are set up and sustained in The Sea at Dauphin. In the first half of the play Afa's attitude to taking old Hounakin fishing is indignant and cynical, whereas Augustin's is pleading and respectful. In the later part Augustin becomes enraged and Afa tries to maintain self control. Hounakin is earlier afraid of the seatrip, yet when he is left on shore he commits suicide by jumping into the sea. Thus rising and ebbing sea tides find an objective correlative in human emotions. The gravitational force of the sea at Dauphin is very strong, and felt in Hounakin's temptation to succumb and yield to death. But there is an equally strong instinct in Afa to resist the sea and survive, and he advises a young apprentice to be, "Brave like Habal to fight the sea at Dauphin. This piece of coast is made for men like that," (p.76). The audience is also pulled in opposite directions by the lyrical wisdom of the Dauphin women's song in, "Farewell, my love, farewell, when fishermen die / there is no more bad luck and no more sea/" (p.70), and the foolish abandon of Lavoisier in, "Let the wind come, sea come, let the hurricane blow," (p.72). In Federico Garcia Lorca's '**Blood Wedding**', it is the land which generates connotations of preservation and destruction as the father tells his daughter's mother-in-law "when I was young, this land didn't even grow hemp we've had to punish it, even weep over it to make it give us anything useful" (p.222)<sup>6</sup> and yet the servant sings of "the fields wait for the whisper of spurting blood" (p.242)<sup>7</sup>.

The sea imagery also creates a powerful subtext in which opposite forces struggle for dominance. The sea is like a Pagan god of antiquity at war with the Christian god of the land. This technique magnifies the tension of the play to an epic proportion. Gacia remarks, "This sea not make for men. God self can't sail it," (p.59). Augustin defines the sea in terms of the undefinable, "The sea is the sea", (p.60) - an idea which finds a parallel in Gods words to Moses on the Mountain as, 'I am what I am'. Afa clarifies the dichotomy as, "Is land you know, old man, you don't know the sea...but this sea is no cemetery for old men, go on the morne behind the presbytery...talk to priest," (p.64). It seems as if Afa's faith in the sea is pitted against the faith and preaching of the priest, Lavoisier. Like Afa, the poet in *Crusoe's Island* remarks, "My father God is dead / past thirty now I know / To love the self is dread / Of being swallowed by the blue," (p.68)<sup>8</sup>. Hounakin verifies the stature of the sea as another pole of faith by, "Nobody know God height, and nobody know how deep the green sea is," (p.68). The water imagery is also used in its biblical context with connotations of Afa, like Christ, walking on water in the storm and the casting of bread on water, as Afa's boat is named *Our daily bread*.

In Walcott's Nobel Laureate lecture there is the repeated image of a broken vase restored with painstaking care. This finds a parallel in the Caribbean Islands as pieces of the African continent. Augustin voices the concern of a fragmented identity in, "You leave something in Africa?. Between there and Dauphin 10,000 miles?" (p.61). The sea was the slave trade route and thus also a witness to black exploitation and suffering at the hands of the Europeans and British. Thus the element of water carries not only associations of suffering, painful memories of amniotic unity, but also dreams of reunion. Post colonial existence becomes haunted by pre-colonial memories but paradoxically just as the past is part

of the present, so the nightmare is part of the dream.

Kinetic changes in the sea are accompanied by colour and textural changes. The play opens on, "Two weeks now this sea whiter than spit" and, "It white like the time when Bolo drown," (p.46). This is an image which recurs in *Sea is History* as, "The bitch hawk and spat / A spit like that worth any number of words" (p.350)<sup>9</sup>. Movement fluctuations very often follow a musical diminuendo-crescendo pattern intensifying colour as Gacia notes, "I see it bad, but never in a life like this," (p.47), Afa corroborates, "is more rough than you will see again for many weeks...every night it getting whiter," (p.57-8) and Hounakin exclaims, "The sea rough for two weeks" (p.67). But towards the end of the play a reversal begins as Afa predicts, "The sea will go down" (p.67) and as the sun goes down, "The sea too..." (p.80), recedes and calms down. The sea is thus churned from congealing spit to a fierce roughness and then subsides into a calm fluidity. It is through these changes and the naming of geographical and spatial markers such as Pointe, Maingot and Sablisse, that Walcott gives the expanse of whiteness a three dimensional quality of paradoxical enclosure and freedom.

The sea in Walcott's play is both character and device for characterisation. The progressive personification of the sea describes a physical and emotional constitution in terms of attributes ranging from the human and creatural to the mythical. It develops from a mischievous youngster with, "The next half [of the wind] in the sea back pocket" (p.46), as in *The Schooner Flight*, "Be Jesus, I never see sea get so rough... That wind come from God back pocket" (p.358 Sec.10)<sup>10</sup>. Then follows a malicious creatural mutation to the, "Sea grinding his teeth" (p.52) and, "Like a mad dog

fighting" (p.59) till like a hungry predator, "The sea took Bolo who was so brave" (p.70). Thus by the end of the play the sea becomes a mythical god with, "many navels" (p.69) which has to be appeased with sacrifice, "like somebody shaking this basin of the world / And making waves where man and boats is drowning. Is God..." (p.68). Metaphors and similes employed to create dynamic sea images, generate intertextual parallels of realistic African predators and mythical monsters and gods such as Scylla, Charybdis and Poseidon. Afa is identifiable as Odysseus, Shabine, Crusoe and even Santiago. The sea images are not only vividly visual and auditory but also emotive and cognitive, illustrated in Afa's contemptuous, "God's white man. The sky is his blue eye / His spit on Dauphin people is the Sea," (p.61). The sound of the sea as, "dead fisherman laughing...fisher woman crying...never quiet. Always noise, noise", (p.58) is also the meaning of the play: the coexistence of happiness and suffering in human life.

The reference to the fisherman fighting, feeding and finishing with the sea is a device of characterisation which gives these common men a warrior stature. Gacia and Afa are aggressive and Afa considers himself an equal adversary with, "The sea and I don't sleep", (p.49) whereas Hounakin and Augustin are defensive.

Through Walcotts use of sea imagery in The Sea at Dauphin we see an evolution of a medium of communication which has all the properties of language. The sea images are used, like a language, to convey information and record history. They have an intonational rhythm and denotative as well as connotative meanings. The sea images also perform speech acts characteristic of a language because they are used to praise, to insult, to evoke mood, to incite, to protest and even to placate. These images at times also become the shared

meaning of the senders and receivers of the messages within the play. The characters thus talk about the sea in a language of sea images, which has functional, semantic and metaphorical dimensions. The declamatory rhetoric of the sea images enlarge Walcott's themes in *The Sea at Dauphin* beyond the characters and confines of the play to address the audience as sharers of a common human fate.

All textual references have been taken from :

Derek Walcott, *The Sea at Dauphin*, pr. *In Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays*, The Noonday Press, (New York: 1970).

#### Endnotes:

1. Derek Walcott; *Omeros*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 1990).
2. Derek Walcott; *Seacanes*, pr. in *Collected Poems 1948-1984*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, (New York: 1986), p. 331-2.
3. Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, ( Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: 1990).
4. Derek Walcott, *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*, Faber and Faber, (London, Boston: 1993), p.23-4.
5. Derek Walcott, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* pr. in *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays*, The Noonday Press, (New York: 1970), p.228.

6. Federico Garcia Lorca, Blood Wedding printed in Collected Plays, translated by James Graham - Lvjan and Richard L. O'Connells, Secker and Warburg, London: 1976) p.222.
7. Ibid. p. 242.
8. Derek Walcott; Crusoe's Island, printed in Collected Poems 1948-84, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, (New York: 1986) p.68.
9. Ibid. p. 350.
10. Ibid. sec. 10, p.358.

This study explores patterns of FDI across the countries of world and investigates determinant issues for low FDI in

