

A Postcolonial Reading of Derek Walcott's *Pantomime*

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Abstract:

Pantomime by Derek Walcott is a postcolonial text that offers a reinterpretation of the colonial narrative. The play explores the complexities of postcolonial identity, culture, and history through the reinterpretation of the characters of Robinson Crusoe and Friday from Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe. The play portrays the character of Robinson Crusoe as a victim of colonialism, struggling with the legacy of colonialism and searching for his identity. Friday, on the other hand, is portrayed as an indigenous man who has been oppressed and exploited by colonialism and serves as a symbol of resistance against colonialism. Through these characters, Walcott grapples with the themes of cultural identity, the legacy of colonialism, and the performative nature of the self. The play critiques the values and assumptions of Western civilization and challenges the dominant colonial narrative by offering a new perspective on colonialism and reflecting on the experiences of those who were directly impacted by colonial rule. Pantomime is a powerful example of postcolonial literature that explores the complexities of postcolonial experience and how the past continues to shape the present.

Keywords: Colonialism, postcolonialism, pantomime, culture, history, Caribbean, diaspora

Derek Walcott (1930-2017) was a Nobel Prize-winning poet, playwright, and visual artist from St. Lucia, West Indies. He is considered one of the most important postcolonial writers of the 20th century and has made significant contributions to the field of Caribbean literature. Walcott's works are known for their exploration of themes such as identity, cultural heritage, and the legacy of colonialism.

Walcott's play **Pantomime** is a significant work in the field of postcolonial literature. The play is a reinterpretation of the classic colonial narrative of Robinson Crusoe and offers a new perspective on colonialism and its impact on the Caribbean. Drama and theatre, in the postcolonial context, function as a weapon of resistance – an anti-imperial tool. The Empire 'writes back' to the imperial center through the reworking of European 'classics'. Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe.

Pantomime subverts the dominant discourse through his characters Harry Trewe and Jackson Philip, the lone inhabitants of a Guest House in Tobago who contemplate staging a reverse pantomime of the Robinson Crusoe story. The classic story of a white man stranded on an uninhabited island in the 17th century, overcoming his despair and hopelessness by mastering himself and "civilizing" a native slave, is reversed by Walcott in **Pantomime**, handing power to a black Crusoe while a white man assumes the role of Friday. Through the character of Robinson Crusoe, Walcott explores the legacy of colonialism and the difficulties of coming to terms with one's cultural identity in a postcolonial world. The character of Friday serves as a symbol of resistance against colonialism and a reminder of the importance of preserving cultural heritage in the face of colonial oppression.

Pantomime is a powerful example of Walcott's unique perspective on colonialism and postcolonial identity. Through the play, Walcott critiques the values and assumptions of Western civilization and challenges the dominant colonial narrative by offering a new perspective on colonialism and reflecting on the experiences of those who were directly impacted by colonial rule. The play remains an important contribution to the field of postcolonial literature and continues to be widely studied and discussed.

Pantomime is a postcolonial text that critically engages with the themes of colonialism, identity, and cultural representation. The play is a retelling of the classic story of "Robinson Crusoe," but shifts the focus from the colonial hero Crusoe to his slave, Friday. In this retelling, Walcott exposes the power dynamics inherent in the colonial encounter and critiques the exploitation and oppression of colonized peoples. The play questions the motivations and actions of European colonial powers and highlights the impact of colonialism on the lives and identities of colonized peoples.

Pantomime also engages with the idea of cultural representation, and how colonized peoples have been represented in colonial discourse. The play presents a counter-narrative to the dominant colonial narrative and offers an alternative vision of history and identity. By presenting the story from Friday's perspective, the play challenges the Eurocentric view of history and provides a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of the colonial encounter. Through Jackson Phillip and Harry Trewe, this play explores the complexities of the

relationship between slave and master, black and white, the colonized and the colonizer. Jackson hopes for a reorganization of the hierarchical ranks. "But one-day things bound to go in reverse," he says, 'With Crusoe the slave and Friday the boss.' The play exposes the exploitation and oppression experienced by Friday and other colonized peoples and challenges the motivations and actions of European colonial powers.

In **Pantomime**, the dilapidated condition of Harry's hotel is symbolic of the postcolonial state of the Caribbean islands. Jackson's persistent resentment towards the colonizer's exploitative nature is evident, as he transgresses boundaries, mimics the pretensions of ruling classes, and reinterprets social positions. Who should play Crusoe? Who should play Friday? Who is in charge now?

Pantomime subverts the dominant white discourse by presenting an alternative vision of history and identity. The play offers a counter-narrative to the dominant colonial narrative and provides a more diverse and inclusive view of the complexities of the colonial encounter. The play is a powerful critique of colonialism and its legacy and offers a more nuanced and nuanced understanding of the experiences of colonized peoples.

Jackson's role as Crusoe provided him with the chance for a bitter attack on the imperialists. His rebellion petrifies Harry Trewe who verbalizes the colonizer's fear of being overpowered, "This is too humiliating," he says, "Now, let's just forget it and please don't continue or you're fired." Harry and Jackson's attempt at staging pantomime results in satirical humor and laughter. The utterly chaotic situation in which Walcott places his characters presents a perfect platform for satirizing the colonizers. Walcott uses the language of the colonizer both as a symbol of resistance and also as the primary mode of eliciting humor. Jackson's blatant refusal to pronounce certain words as they ought to be and the incorporation of indigenous Creole into English often leads to hilarious consequences. Jackson also takes to rename things and invent a new language which, as the black colonizer, he attempts to teach Harry. He insists on calling himself 'Thursday' instead of being christened 'Friday' by his master.

Pantomime by Derek Walcott is a significant play for several reasons:

- Postcolonial critique: **Pantomime** is a powerful postcolonial text that offers a critique of colonialism and its legacy. The play is a testament to Walcott's commitment to subverting dominant narratives and giving voice to marginalized communities and offers a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of the colonial encounter.
- Alternative vision: The play offers an alternative vision of history and identity, presenting a counter-narrative to the dominant colonial narrative. The play is a powerful critique of colonialism and its impact on colonized peoples and provides a more diverse and inclusive view of the complexities of the colonial encounter.
- Cultural representation: **Pantomime** is also significant because it explores the themes of cultural representation and identity. The play is a testament to Walcott's commitment to preserving and celebrating the cultural heritage of the Caribbean and provides a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between colonialism and cultural representation.
- Theatrical innovation: The play is also significant for its innovative use of theatrical devices and its incorporation of music, dance, and pantomime-style performances. Walcott's use of these elements makes **Pantomime** a unique and memorable theatrical experience.

Pantomime is a significant play because of its powerful critique of colonialism, its alternative vision of history and identity, its exploration of cultural representation, and its innovative use of theatrical devices. The play is a testament to Walcott's commitment to subverting dominant narratives and giving voice to marginalized communities and provides a more nuanced and nuanced understanding of the complexities of the colonial encounter.

In Derek Walcott's play **Pantomime**, Friday calls himself Thursday a symbol of how colonialism has erased his cultural heritage and identity. By taking on a new name, Friday is rejecting the name that was imposed upon him by his colonizer, Robinson Crusoe. The name "Friday" is associated with the Western Christian tradition and reinforces Crusoe's power and dominance over Friday. By renaming himself "Thursday," Friday is reclaiming his cultural identity and asserting his agency. The name "Thursday" is closer to the indigenous names of the Caribbean and is a symbol of Friday's connection to his cultural roots. the concept of Friday calling himself Thursday as a symbol of resistance against colonialism and a reclaiming of his cultural identity is a central theme in the play.

Through this naming choice, Walcott highlights how colonialism has erased the cultural identities of indigenous people and the importance of reclaiming one's cultural heritage. The character of Friday in "Pantomime" serves as a symbol of resistance against colonialism and a reminder of the importance of preserving cultural heritage and identity in the face of colonial oppression.

The title **Pantomime** of Derek Walcott's play is significant in the context of postcolonial texts in several ways:

- The use of pantomime as a form of entertainment in the play can be seen as a metaphor for the performative nature of identity and how individuals may adopt different personas to navigate their relationships and experiences in a post-colonial world.

- The exaggerated and often comedic nature of pantomime can be seen as a commentary on the cultural appropriation and stereotypes that are often perpetuated in colonial and postcolonial societies, as the characters in the play must navigate the complexities of cultural identity and the legacy of colonialism.

- The use of pantomime as a form of storytelling can also be seen as a nod to the oral traditions of Caribbean culture and the importance of performance in the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge.

The title **Pantomime** serves as a complex metaphor for the themes of performance, identity, and cultural heritage that are central to postcolonial literature and discourse.

Derek Walcott's play **Pantomime** subverts Daniel Defoe's **Robinson Crusoe**:

- Reversal of power dynamics: In "Robinson Crusoe," Crusoe is portrayed as a colonizer who exerts power over the indigenous people he encounters. In "Pantomime," Walcott flips this dynamic, as the main character, known only as "Crusoe," is portrayed as a victim of colonialism and must navigate the complexities of postcolonial identity.

- Critique of colonialism: "Robinson Crusoe" is often seen as a celebration of colonialism and the supposed superiority of Western civilization. In "Pantomime," Walcott critiques these ideas, exploring the negative consequences of colonialism and how it has shaped the cultural identities of the people it has impacted.

- Reflection on cultural identity: "Robinson Crusoe" is primarily concerned with Crusoe's journey and his relationship with God. In "Pantomime," Walcott shifts the focus to the cultural identity of the Caribbean people and the legacy of colonialism on their collective experiences.

Pantomime subverts 'Robinson Crusoe' by challenging the colonial narrative and exploring the complexities of postcolonial identity, culture, and history.

Pantomime challenges the colonial narrative and explores the complexities of postcolonial identity, culture, and history by:

- Re-examination of history: The play offers a new perspective on colonialism, challenging the dominant narrative and exploring the experiences of those who were directly impacted by colonial rule. Walcott explores the legacy of colonialism and how it continues to shape the cultural identities of postcolonial societies.

- Reflection on cultural identity: The play grapples with the complexities of cultural identity in a postcolonial world, exploring the various influences that shape it, including colonialism, cultural appropriation, and stereotypes.

- Themes of performance and illusion: The play uses the pantomime form to explore the themes of performance and illusion, suggesting that the self is a constantly evolving and performative construct, shaped by the cultural and historical forces that surround it.

- Critique of Western civilization: The play also critiques the values and assumptions of Western civilization, challenging the idea of Western superiority and exploring how colonial legacies continue to shape the experiences of postcolonial societies.

Pantomime challenges the colonial narrative and explores the complexities of postcolonial identity, culture, and history by offering a new perspective on colonialism, reflecting on cultural identity, and exploring themes of performance and illusion. Colonial mimicry and the "helpless obedience" of the slaves is a recurring images in the play. Harry accuses Jackson of mimicking the masters and equates the colonized with the colonizer's shadow. Jackson, in the pretense of acting in the pantomime voices out against Harry. "...in that sun that never set on your empire I was your shadow", he says.

The motif of the parrot is another metaphor for colonial mimicry. As in Robinson Crusoe, here Harry and Jackson are accompanied by a talking hotel parrot. Jackson feels mocked by the "pre-colonial" parrot as the only word it utters is 'Heinegger'.

For Jackson, the 'prejudiced' parrot embodies the colonial principles and ideas while for Harry the parrot is merely repeating its German master's name because for him 'the war is over'. This shows the disparate perspectives of the colonizer and the colonized. The parrot mocks the absurdity of Harry and Jackson's existence as master and slave in a postcolonial society, long after such hierarchies are supposed to have been erased. The colonizer civilizes the natives to create a 'domesticated other' to assist the colonial project. The natives might sometimes misappropriate their role, mocking the very discourse the colonizer is trying to propagate. Jackson's attempt at playing Crusoe is criticized by Harry as imperfect and he is infuriated at the mocking return gaze of the colonized, Jackson.

The characters of Robinson Crusoe and Friday in **Pantomime** serve as powerful symbols of how colonialism has shaped the experiences and cultural identities of postcolonial societies. Through these characters, Walcott explores the complexities of postcolonial identity and how colonial legacies continue to impact the experiences of individuals in postcolonial societies.

Walcott juxtaposes pantomime, a distinctly 'British' form of popular entertainment with the Calypso tradition of Trinidad and Tobago. The dichotomy between a pantomime actor Harry Trewe from the English music hall and Jackson, an ex-Calypsonian, is used to reinforce the central theme of the play since a native tool

of political resistance is integrated into a purely 'colonist' art form and that during colonization, there is a descent of the native land from paradise into a Third World country.

Walcott explores the complexities of the postcolonial experience and how the past continues to shape the present. Harry and Jackson working together to put up a show to avoid the hotel's deteriorating state is an image that shows the harmony that can exist between the two groups. Walcott is in harmony with his Afro-Saxon identity and desires peaceful coexistence without any disparity between races. Harry stepping down and offering Crusoe's role to Jackson is the first step in the realization of Walcott's dream. Jackson initially finds it difficult to accept the new role of the master offered to him by Harry but as the play progresses, he gets accustomed to the idea of being the master, while Harry struggles to give up his dominant position. Jackson's initial reluctance can be interpreted as the colonized subjects' internalization of the inherited "unchangeable" roles. Jackson's improvisation of the role of Crusoe is symbolic of his imagination taking flight because he transitioned from that of a bonded man to a free human. This is not just a release from physical bondage but also implies creative freedom.

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