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Post-colonialism: Critical Appreciation

Through post-colonial literature, the authors try to explore the impact of colonialism and imperialism on native populations of colonised countries. It primary features the works of writers originating from these colonised countries, like Derek Walcott and John Agard. In their poems, “A Far Cry From Africa” and “Checking out me history”, both of these authors raise the question about their identity: both come from countries that have been colonised by the British Empire, and thus they were heavily influenced by the British culture. In fact, they were influenced so much that now they don't really know how to identify themselves: they are torn between their native culture and country, and the British culture and language.

In “A Far Cry From Africa”, Derek Walcott talks about his feelings about the African and British cultures, as well as how he can't identify himself fully with any of them. Through the hybridity expressed in his poem, Walcott tries to express his unhomeliness caused by his extreme feelings towards both Africans and British. He begins his poem with a scene where the European troops, possibly British, are raiding an African village and killing all black people they see: it is an act of revenge for the blacks killing a white child. The scene is described as if it is a form of a fallen paradise, where there's a battle going on: “Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt,/ Corpses are scattered through a paradise.” The author shows Africa as a paradise that should have stayed as it is, a calm place, but instead it has turned into a place of slaughter of the Africans. The European invaders, like the “worm, colonel of carrion”, have little to no regard for the native lives, concentrating on the lives of his countrymen. That is shown further with the caricature of European sciences, “Statistics justify and scholars seize/ The salients of colonial policy”, who actually tried to prove that the colonised people were uncivilised savages that needed “help” to become civilised. They tried to show that the colonised natives were in fact lesser people than the almighty Europeans, who thought of themselves as the masters of the world. Hence the European colonisator and colonel said: “Waste no compassion on these separate dead!”. He discredits and abases them while he profits from all the resources he takes away. The things go as far as the author compares the massacre with the Holocaust: “To savages, expendable as Jews?”. But in the end, the author asks “What is that to the white child hacked in bed?”, pointing out that the child that has been probably killed by the natives had nothing to do with the exploitation of Africa, and probably didn't even had any idea about it. And now the Europeans are out there avenging that child, while he probably couldn't even care less now he's dead. With that, it becomes clear that all the bloodshed in that scene is just pointless: what's done is done, and no matter how many blacks will die, the dead child will not come back. That leads the author to wonder about his and the British people. He compares the animals, who need to kill other animals to survive, hence it is considered “as natural law” for them, with the homo sapiens, the “upright man”, who “seeks his divinity by inflicting pain”. The humans don't need to harm each other, they are intelligent enough to reason with themselves; but no, they want to make their point stand through useless violence. That is why the human race is as “delirious as these worried beasts”, if not even worse than these “beasts”. But it is the natives who primarily suffer that violence, as Walcott says: “Of the white peace contracted by the dead.”. He compares the European “civilisation” to a disease, that is quite lethal and primarily touches the native populations of native countries. That's why Walcott appears as he hates the British culture, because “Again brutish necessity wipes its hands / Upon the napkin of a dirty cause”, as if it's violence is fully justified. But despite hating the British culture, the reader could presume that it is the contrary for the British language. This might be why he is torn between Africa and Britain, between “The gorilla [who] wrestles with the superman”. He is “poisoned with the blood of both”, tainted by the faults of the British and the Africans. He owes his allegiance to both, but he does not know where he actually belongs. He does not know “Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?”, where even his blood is torn between the two blood lusty civilisation. From one side, he's deeply connected with the British culture, but on the other side, there's Africa calling for him, the “Far Cry From Africa” is calling for him.

On the other hand, where “A Far Cry from Africa” takes a more contemplative tone over the author's issues with his identity, John Agard in “Checking out me History” becomes quite aggressive over his issues with learning his history. Instead of learning about people and events that would be relevant to him, he is forced into learning about things like Battle of Hastings, Lord Nelson, and even “Dick Whittington and he cat”, showing that these people and places that he learned in school just mean nothing to him, and he would vastly prefer if he would learn about people and events that were truly important. He begins his attack from the first lines of his poem, starting with “Dem tell me / Dem tell me / Wha dem want to tell me”. The reader can see here that the author is forced and entirely dependant on the history curriculum imposed by the British, where he learns about the British heroes and British victories instead of learning something that could truly shape his sense of identity. In fact, the British curriculum leads him to this statement: “Bandage up me eye with me own history / Blind me to my own identity”. Where as the “Bandage” should help him see properly, it ends up being a nuisance to him, because of it he can't truly identify himself. One could even go as far as saying that the “bandage” could be the British history curriculum that is thrown at the author's face in order to blind him to the “non-British history”. Next up, he expands on that thought in the next stanza, where he talks about the Battle of Hastings “and all dat”, as if it wasn't really important to him. Same with the story about “Dick Whittington and he cat”. He judges these things as unimportant in front of someone who should be known more: Toussaint L'Ouverture. As explained in the next stanza, Toussaint lead a revolution that freed an entire society of Black slaves. Sadly, the British judge that the 1066 and a children's story is more important than that. Agard's explanation of Toussaint's life is very rhythmic and aggressive, as if the author was angry that he needs to explain who Toussaint was, even if he considers it should be common knowledge. He repeats the same structure with couple other characters and events: “Nanny de maroon”, a woman who lead a group of ex-slaves who fled slavers, “Shaka de great Zulu”, “what happen to de Caribs and de Arawaks”, ending with the character of Mary Seacole: a nurse who managed to save a lot of lives even if she was commanded to not to do so by the British. The author shows all of these unknown characters to show the ignorance of the British rule, and possibly to show that the British might want to eradicate cultures and people who weren't directly with the British Empire or who didn't served in it's growth. He shows that the United Kingdom is still in the mindset of a colonisator, even ages after the period of colonisation is over. But John Agard decided to fight the British, and he starts to discover history by himself: “Dem tell me wha dem want to tell me / But now I checking out me own history / I carving out me identity”. In order to determine who he is, he needs to do it by himself, not through some flawed teaching programme. He challenges the British both through his willingness to not give up on his history, and through the language he uses: he writes in English, but in a very unformal and litteral way, showing the British that they might have imposed their language on him, it's going to be his decision on how to use it.

To conclude, both of these poems explore the problems created by colonisation, mainly the problem of their own identity. But each decided to approach the problem differently: Derek Walcott talks about his unhomeliness with lethargy and contemplation, where as John Agard decided to make an open stand against the colonisators and fight their rule. But despise them being unsure of their identity, they are called by their native countries. Their native countries want to show them who they truly are, and claw them out from the hands of the oppressors.