

Tribhuvan University

Politics of Myth and History in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

A Research Report Submitted to the Central Department of English, T.U.

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Arts in English

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March 2020

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Letter of Approval

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Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my supervisor Raj Kumar Baral, Lecturer of Central Department of English, who supported me through his proper guidance, co-operation, suggestion, and motivation to complete my thesis. I can only express my gratitude towards him with all due respect for his supervision throughout the research project, from its initial stage of preparing proposal to its final form.

I also express my deepest gratitude to Prof. Dr. Anirudra Thapa, Head of the Central Department of English, for his co-operation. I extend my special regards to respected lecturer Hem Lal Pandey for his instructions that contributed to my understanding of a research.

I pay my sincere appreciation to my family for supporting me to this far. Finally, I share my thanks to my friend Sandip Dhungana for his assistance in collecting materials.

March, 2020

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Abstract

To read Derek Walcott's epic Omeros is to focus on its representation of myth and history to narrate the story of St. Lucia with reference to the history of wars and slavery, and to relate mythical references with common people of St. Lucia. This research analyzes the politics behind the use of myth and history of Caribbean by using alternative modernity vis-a-vis Caribbean discourse. Through mythical references, Walcott revives the native history of St. Lucia as an alternative to Western modernity resulted by the history of imperialism. This research concludes that Walcott, in this epic, valorizes the rich cultural heritage of St. Lucia and highlights the significance of ancestral heritage and the need of cultural revival against the domination of Western culture.

Key words: Alternative modernity, culture, history, myth, identity

The Caribbean poet and playwright, Derek Walcott, in his epic *Omeros*, is concerned with the social, political, and cultural history of Caribbean islands which includes slavery, history of colonialism and wars, especially Battle of the Saintes and Second World War that affected the formation of the Caribbean culture. During seventeenth century to early nineteenth century, millions of Africans were forcibly brought to Caribbean islands for plantation through Transatlantic Slave Trade (Patrick 281). Gradually, people from other parts of the world also settled in Caribbean islands during the time of imperialism which amalgamated the African, Asian, American, and European cultures resulting to the formation of hybrid culture in Caribbean which caused the culture of Africans, who were brought there centuries before and became the natives, to shatter arousing the feeling of rootlessness among them.

Walcott characterizes his main characters as fishermen living the traditional

island life who are still haunted by the war history and the ancestral history of slavery that shows the anxiety of common people caused due to lack of their own prehistoric identity. During the period of colonialism, European modernity tremendously impacted the culture of Caribbean. Forests were cleared to build hotels and clubs. Wild Caribbean was transformed into a modern city, the place for business. People became detached from their ancestral culture and enjoyed modern way of life, which caused the native culture to struggle to sustain.

Therefore, with an attempt to preserve Caribbean culture, Walcott, in *Omeros*, especially focuses St. Lucia, and structures his epic resembling Trojan myth for the formation of St. Lucian identity and to show that as present is connected to past, people are connected to their ancestral roots. By bringing mythical references of Trojan War through the characters like Philoctete, Hector, Helen and Achille, and by presenting the wounded history of St. Lucia, Walcott intends to travel back to his ancestors where he can gain necessary wisdom and experience in order to initiate cultural renewal as a part of cultural healing among the wounded St. Lucians. Also, through the employment of common people, he emphasizes on the celebration of the beauty of small moments of everyday life not affected by modernity. Moreover, he indicates over the significance of returning to one's own traditional way of living as it is the way that upholds one's identity and existence. Accordingly, Walcott valorizes St. Lucian traditions over Western modernity in *Omeros*.

Walcott uses Greek myth of Trojan War as the principle structure to shape his epic *Omeros*. Just by looking at the names of its major characters like Philoctete, Hector, Helen, and Achille, readers instantly remember the Trojan myth. Not just names but its story also resembles the Trojan myth. Achille and Hector are two fishermen in St. Lucia who build rivalry against each other to win a girl named Helen.

But Helen cannot choose any one of them and switches side frequently. She is compared with the mythical Helen for her beauty and its impact on men. Another character Philoctete is presented as a wounded warrior Philoctetes of Trojan myth.

Characters in *Omeros* not only reflect myth through their names and stories but also carry the burden of history. Philoctete has inherited a wound on his ankle from his ancestors, which was created by rusted chain used by whites to chain blacks as slaves. He remains wounded almost throughout the epic and is healed only towards the end. Time and again he is haunted and hurt by the wound of slavery. His wound resembles both physical and psychological wound. As he feels that slavery uprooted his ancestors and made him rootless, he is in immense suffering. Thus, Philoctete resembles suffering and isolation of blacks caused by slavery.

Walcott also attempts to recreate the time when the whites attacked black community in Africa and took the Africans as captives to make them slaves. He takes one of his characters, Achille, to Africa where his ancestors lived. Achille, who has forgotten his culture while living in St. Lucia, travels back to the time of his ancestors and only after living there for a short time, he experiences the first threat to his community. White people attack his village and capture all black people emptying the village like a graveyard. The captives are taken into a ship and traded through Atlantic Ocean. Some do not survive the voyage and are thrown into the ocean. Even the Atlantic Ocean becomes the graveyard of the Africans. Those who make it out of the voyage reach a new world where all of a sudden, they are transformed from humans into commodities, and are forced into intense labour.

Moreover, Walcott invests much time in narrating war histories, especially the Battle of the Saintes and Second World War. He jots down the wars in words in such expressive and detailed manner that readers can visualize the actual war that had

happened centuries ago. Battle of the Saintes was fought when French troop, led by Admiral Comte de Grasse, planned to attack British colonies in Caribbean islands. Right after getting the information, British navy, led by Admiral George Rodney, met French force and one of the important naval wars was fought. Several wars were fought between the two forces before and the rule over St. Lucia was frequently switched between Britain and France. In the Battle of the Saintes, the blacks fought for Britain and defeated French troops and their famous flagship *Ville de Paris*, thus securing no further threat in St. Lucia. So, Walcott brings Rodney, his leadership, and victory several times in the epic.

Walcott also refreshes the memories of Second World War in *Omeros* through one of the characters, Major Dennis Plunkett, a retired British soldier who fought in Second World War. He is living his retired days in St. Lucia. He remembers the days of the war and when Britain was extending its territories. The wound that he got during the war has not healed as the memories are still fresh, and time and again he recalls those days. He remembers the war field where thousands of soldiers died. He especially recalls the scene when his fellow soldiers, Tumbly and Scott, died horribly at the battlefield. He tries to find the purpose of the war; what it brought to him and others because though he prefers St. Lucia over his homeland England and lives there after war loving it dearly, he feels that the natives hate him and treat him as an outsider only because he is white. The suffering inflicted by whites upon blacks during the time of colonialism has still retained bitterness in the hearts of the blacks for whites.

Further showing the threat of colonialism, and how natives of different places had to suffer because of whites, Walcott moves a little further from Caribbean islands and pictures Wounded Knee Massacre through his words in *Omeros*. He takes his

readers back to the winter of 1890 when the natives are preparing for the Ghost Dance, unaware of the upcoming massacre. U.S. soldiers forward to the village and the participants of the Ghost Dance are captured. But not only those participants but hundreds of native Red Indians including women and children are shot dead. The Reds are then all covered with the whites of the snow of that deadly winter.

In this way, Walcott's modern epic *Omeros* is composed of common fishermen with common life affairs along with the narration of historical events. In contrast, classical epics were composed on the divine or noble subject matter with heroic characters. Moving away from the trend of writing classical epics, it is remarkable that Walcott invests much time to narrate the history of slavery and colonization, and to create the story of common people of St. Lucia using mythical references. Now the question arises—why does Walcott bring history and myth in this epic of late twentieth century? Also, why does he give so much space to common fishermen and narrate their story in his epic?

In *Omeros*, Walcott reflects the problem of modernity and globalization resulting to the fragmentation and isolation in the lives of common people. He shows the problem of modernity as city problems, where too powerful technology, consumerist culture, a rootless population living in crowded conditions, and other factors add to the condition where people get themselves to the state of isolation due to declining interest in tradition and communal values. So, focusing on these aspects as presented by Walcott in his epic, my research, in order to show the politics of myth and history along with the mystical aspects of Caribbean people and to prove my stated hypothesis, uses alternative modernity based on Caribbean discourse as theoretical perspective, especially the ideas developed by Kwame Anthony Appiah, Bill Ashcroft, Arif Dirlik, Edouard Glissant, and Paul Gilroy.

By modernity, we understand Euro/American or Western modernity that has built itself as the canonical structure of modernity throughout the world. But Western modernity cannot accumulate the ethos of non-Western countries because of cultural difference and different set of values and beliefs they possess. Therefore, in the era of capitalism and globalization, non-Western countries seek for an alternative to Western modernity.

Modernity has affected St. Lucia too. Walcott depicts the feeling of rootlessness, frustration, and identity crisis among St. Lucian influenced by modernity in his epic. St. Lucian possess their own native values and culture which Western modernity fails to keep intact. Their love for nature and wilderness is not acknowledged by Western modernity that prioritizes a concrete city built for capitalist motives. Their values and beliefs are more spiritual than material. So, as St. Lucia is a West dominated society, in order to preserve the essence of St. Lucian cultural heritage and its root, it is essential to seek for a counter-culture to Western modernity.

Derek Walcott, born in the family of English, African, and Dutch descents, inherited mixed cultures. However, being born and raised in St. Lucia, he felt rooted to Africa. So, as he was living far from Africa, the central theme in most of his plays and poems is the search for identity and cultural root, which was shattered by and during slavery system. Moreover, because his grandfathers were whites and his grandmothers, the descendants of slaves, he encountered the cultures of whites as well as blacks. This led him to be in a hybrid position with mixed cultures. So, due to lack of proper identity, he longed for the need of identity in his works. Also, while in St. Lucia, he encountered the effect of colonialism that brought modernity along with it. This wounded Caribbean culture as people got busy in trying to afford modernity and worried less about traditional cultural practices. As the natives and majority of the

Caribbeans are African descendants, Walcott valorizes African culture in Caribbean islands which is different from Western modern culture. His works are centered to the idea that cultural heritage is the source of identity and that is why it is essential to remain attached to one's own ancestral root.

Due to the confrontation with two different cultures, he seems to be in dilemma, in his literary works, on which one to choose. He searches for his cultural identity and its root, mostly his African root. In his poem, "The Sea is History," Walcott questions the Caribbean people about their history and culture. He claims that sea carries their history that had drowned their culture and ancestors during slave trade. Here, he seeks for the lost African culture. Similarly, in "A Far Cry from Africa," his split identity is clearly seen when he writes that he cannot abandon neither English nor Caribbean culture because he has inherited both. So, he feels identity-less and searches for a proper identity. Besides, the search for cultural root and identity, his poems explore racial and colonial struggle of Caribbean people.

After the publication of Walcott's *Omeros* in 1990, it has received a lot of responses and criticisms till date. Some of them are: David E. Hoegberg in his "Unstable Identities: Allusion and Hybridity in Walcott's *Omeros*" views that Derek Walcott has provided unstable identities to his major Caribbean characters by giving them Homeric names like Achille, Philoctete, Hector, and Helen to reflect the hybridity of Caribbean culture which Walcott defends as not an imitation of the canonical culture. No culture is pure. Every culture is influenced by some other culture during its formation. Hoegberg claims, ". . . the 'cultures' Walcott mentions as meeting in the Caribbean— Asiatic, Mediterranean, European, and African—are so broadly defined that each is already a commingling of many strains" (53). Hence, not only Caribbean culture but every established culture itself is a hybrid one. Thus,

Walcott, by providing Homeric names to his Caribbean characters, is not demonstrating that Caribbeans are lacking identity of their own but is defending the hybrid culture of Caribbean that is formed by the influence of different cultures like every other cultures of any region.

Jahan Ramazani in “The Wound of History: Walcott’s *Omeros* and the Postcolonial Poetics of Affliction” focuses on Philoctete’s wound in *Omeros* that symbolizes Caribbeans’ suffering; in past through slavery and colonialism and at present through imposed history, culture, and language by the oppressors that do not acknowledge native Caribbean culture. He states, “Early on in *Omeros*, Walcott uses one of Philoctete’s seizures to suggest that the inexpressible physical suffering of enslaved Africans is retained in the bodies of their descendants and that the pain still presses urgently for an impossible verbal release” (406). Walcott victimizes Philoctete to remind his readers that the Caribbeans have been victimized by the colonizers like Britain and France, and the suffering continues due to lack of recognition of Caribbeans pre-historic identity.

In “Fated to Unoriginality: The Politics of Mimicry in Derek Walcott’s “*Omeros*,”” Paul Jay defends Walcott’s *Omeros* as it has been criticized for its connection to Homer and trying to reinvent *Odyssey* which marks *Omeros* as unoriginal. Jay views:

Mimicry in the poem finally has less to do with Walcott’s trying to copy Homer than with his desire to explore the centrality of mimicry in the construction of Caribbean identity. The syncretic or hybridizing effects of colonization define the context in which subjectivity and identity develop, so that mimicry, defined in positive terms by Walcott as the imaginative work of appropriation and invention, is central both to being Caribbean and writing

about it. *Omeros* . . . is as much a poem about writing about the Caribbean as it is a poem about the Caribbean . . . (556)

Culture, language and even the Caribbeans, like the poet Walcott, are imported. It is the result of colonization. Caribbean is the union of cross-cultures of Africa, Asia, America and Europe. So, Jay views that appropriation to mimicry results to the creative invention. He also views that mimicry in *Omeros* is not associated to copy Homer but to link it with the process of formation of Caribbean identity.

Jonathan Martin in “Nightmare History: Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*,” criticizes *Omeros* as lacking aesthetics of art and revolving around history and facts. He mentions, “*Omeros* is seriously a flawed work of art, and its failures are directly related to its author’s tragic obsession with the demons of history” (202). Walcott is related with a Greek tragic hero as he is fated to settle things that he did not mess. Martin further mentions, “*Omeros* marks no new access of freedom for its author from the coils of history, and the poem offers no evidence that Walcott has resolved the antinomies of his birth and dual heritage” (204). Throughout the epic, Walcott is submerged in the suffering of Caribbeans created by history and even at the end the author is not able to hint over the resolution of the suffering of hybridity. Similarly, criticizing *Omeros* for sticking only on its theme carrying historical agenda, Sven Brikerts in “Making blind birds sing” writes, “The work suffers from its own ambitiousness” (368).

Departing from the views of above-mentioned critics, my study of *Omeros* focuses on how Walcott rejects the idea of modernity as created by the West and seeks for the alternative modernity that acknowledges and carries the essence of the native cultural heritage without distorting it in his native land, St. Lucia.

Derek Walcott, in *Omeros*, advocates for the need to return to traditions. He

stresses on the Western modernity born out of colonialism in St. Lucia which negatively impacted its native culture. He recreates the history of slavery and wars that had distressed blacks and altered their culture. He shows how the culture of colonizers made the native culture of St. Lucia to be faded. So, by revising history, he reflects the suffering of the St. Lucian and aspires to heal it through the revival of their ancestral culture as an alternative to Western modernity. Walcott emphasizes on the significance of cultural root in order to ensure the existence of his people with cultural identity that carries the values and beliefs of the community that have existed from the prehistoric time, and to give it continuation in future as well.

The major characters, Philoctete, Hector, Achille, and Helen, in *Omeros* are common natives of St. Lucia but have been provided European names in order to signal over the effect of Western imperialism on the island. James V. Morrison in his article "Homer Travels to the Caribbean: Teaching Walcott's "Omeros,"" informs "Walcott's decision to tell the story of his native island in terms of the classical models of European culture has been seen . . . as reinforcing the cultural imperialism of the West" (92). Walcott presents the consequence of Western imperialism that has affected everyday life of the natives of St. Lucia, resulting to the state of hybridity with the mixture of black and white culture that provides no specific cultural identity to St. Lucian.

This state of hybridity that Homi K. Bhabha describes as a 'third space' or 'in-between space' means "neither the one nor the other but something else besides, in between" (41). Walcott himself being in in-between position creates hybrid consciousness in characters of *Omeros*. The characters' position in the epic constitutes Walcott's own fragmented state that he desires to fix by returning to tradition that accommodates pre-historic identity of his African community. Raj Kumar Baral in his

research, on the hybrid consciousness in Walcott, “The Images of ‘In-Between’ in Derek Walcott’s Poetry,” observes, “Walcott is a poet situated on the in-between location with hybrid prototypes of his own creation in order to evoke discourse on the cultural root and identity” whose “poems are the examples of a hybrid poet’s muse on cultural duality and its simultaneously poetic resolution” (29). Walcott’s *Omeros* also recreates the cultural duality of St. Lucia with the need to find what has been lost and to get connected with own ancestral roots and culture by maintaining proper distance with alien culture.

Walcott, to reveal how Africans landed in St. Lucia, moves back centuries before when white soldiers attacked Achille’s village in Africa. The unarmed black men, women and children were all held captives by the armed white soldiers, and were taken to the other side of the world through Transatlantic Slave Trade. Those who died of starvation and weakness during the voyage were thrown in the Atlantic Ocean and those who survived were sold and taken to different parts of the New World: “So there went the Ashanti one way, the Mandingo another,/the Ibo another, the Guinea. Now each man was a nation/in himself, without mother, father, brother” (Walcott 150). They were separated from their families and scattered far from Africa.

After being traded to different parts of the world, they were forced to intense labour. Walcott describes how the slaves were abused to build St. Lucia:

Hell was built on those hills. In that country of coal
 without fire, that inferno the same colour
 as their skins and shadows, every laboring soul
 climbed with her hundredweight basket, every load for
 one copper penny, balanced erect on their necks
 that were tight as the liner’s hawsers from the weight. (74)

The Caribbean slaves were forced to do more than they could. They could not revolt because the armed whites were way more powerful. They were restricted to enjoy their culture. White culture and religion were imposed upon them. Due to this intense torture, they were detached from their culture and slowly forgot what was theirs:

Their whole world was moving,
 or a large part of the world, and what began dissolving
 was the fading sound of their tribal name for the rain,
 the bright sound for the sun, a hissing noun for the river. (Walcott 152)

Their world was shattered and their tribal language began to fade away due to the intensified suppression.

Regarding slavery, Edouard Glissant, in his *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, views, “Slavery was accompanied by reification: all history seemed to come to a halt in the Caribbean, and the peoples transplanted there had no alternative but to subject themselves to History with a capital H, all equally subjected to the hegemony of Europe” (248). Blacks’ history was obliterated and their new history began after European brought them to Caribbean to make them so-called civilized. They could do nothing but accept what the whites told. Then they had no history, no ancestry, no culture, and no identity. They struggled under horrifying condition. All fishes were equal in the Caribbean Sea but on land blacks were not equal to whites. For three long centuries the injustice prevailed when the blacks lived hellish life on earth.

In “Expressive Countercultures and Postmodern Utopia: A Caribbean Context,” Supriya Nair mentions, “The lack of civilized culture was once identified as the explanations for the islands’ backwardness . . .” (72). Africans were once identified as the people with lack of civilized culture. They were supposed to be carefree lower beings with animalistic instincts. But these were only airy claims by

whites to make themselves superior, to expand their reign, to universalize their culture and to keep other suppressed with their power, like they did to the Red Indians in Wounded Knee.

In order to explore the brutality of those in power during the period of colonialism, Walcott spends few pages of his epic to review the Wounded Knee Massacre as well. During the period of colonial expansion, non-whites were under terrible threat. Colonizers did not leave any chance to suppress tribal communities and disseminate white culture all over. For the same reason, US force exterminated hundreds of native Indians in South Dakota obliterating their voice, freedom and their culture. Walcott fears, "What would not remain/was not only the season but the tribes themselves" (176). He presents the threat of colonialism. During this period, no tribes were safe. African tribes in St. Lucia were also degrading. Gradually, they were made rootless, stuck in between black and white culture. Thus, in *Omeros*, Walcott longs for a stable identity. He wants back his pre-historic identity that slavery and colonialism took away from him and the natives.

Walcott continues to explore the history of colonialism through different wars that directly affected St. Lucians, where they were forced to fight but were never counted. In *Omeros*, St. Lucian fight for the British troop in the Battle of the Saintes under the leadership of Admiral George Rodney. After the battle is won, "It was then that the small admiral with a cloud/on his head renamed Afolabe "Achilles,"/which to keep things simple, he let himself be called" (Walcott 83). Walcott reveals that St. Lucians were frequently used by colonizers for their benefit while the blacks' identity kept changing. They were given European names and were called whatever colonizers wanted. Till then Africans were made to accept that they were meant to be ruled by Europeans and therefore changed themselves accordingly.

Similarly, Walcott brings the events of Second World War in the epic through the memories of ex-soldier, Dennis Plunkett. Walcott intends to explore what the war resulted to. Through Plunkett's wound that has not healed and so hurts him, Walcott signifies over the long-term suffering caused by the war. Moreover, during the war, people from different places settled in Caribbean countries as safe haven. And after the war, people from around the world settled there. Diversified population increased in St. Lucia, which further affected the culture of the natives.

During the period of colonialism, only few of the Western countries were powerful which had threatened the entire world. Glissant observes, "One of the most disturbing consequences of colonization could well be this notion of a single History, and therefore of power, which has been imposed on others by the West" (93). History was written by those in power which showed the West as superior and non-West as inferior. Due to the threat West had created and maintained, whatever it claimed was the canon which no one could challenge. He further asserts, "History is a highly functional fantasy of the West, originating at precisely the time when it alone "made" the history of the world" (64). At that time, power was totally in the grasp of the West and it alone decided what to mention and what to obliterate. In the process, it obliterated the history of St. Lucia as well.

Walcott also agrees that during the West domination in St. Lucia, "History was fact, History was a cannon, not a lizard . . ." (92). Historians wrote history of St. Lucia after the Europeans found it. The indigenous tribe of St. Lucia got no space on the pages of history. They were presented as if they had been dropped from sky; no history, no ancestors, just as found by Europeans during colonial mission. According to the history, St. Lucia was made through wars, cannons and fires, not by the natives there. History of different events and wars was written. Europeans valorized their

bravery while fighting for St. Lucia but gave no space to the cultural history of the island. Related to this fact, Jan Marinus Wiersma, in “Politics of the Past: The Use and Abuse of History,” observes, “Most professional historians agree that objective interpretations of historical facts are not possible Historians select them and create the framework within which they get meaning” (15). History is written the way historians find beneficial for themselves.

Regarding the suppressive history, Glissant remarks, “We can be the victims of History when we submit passively to it—never managing to escape its harrowing power. History (like Literature) is capable of quarrying deep within us, as a consciousness or the emergence of a consciousness, as a neurosis (symptom of loss) and a contraction of the self” (70). History creates identity which is responsible in forming consciousness of a community and individual. Letting other write one’s history is to let them to control to recognize who one is. So, St. Lucians, in order to establish their dignity, must challenge West by writing their own history. And if it is rewritten, even the whites know that they will be shown as evil. Plunkett fears:

. . . History will be revised,
 and we’ll be its villains, fading from the map
 And when it’s over
 we’ll be the bastards! (Walcott 92)

For this kind of attempt of challenging history, Simon Gikandi in *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* asserts, “what Caribbean writers have done is to weaken the foundation of the Western narrative, expose what Laclau calls ‘the metaphysical of rationalist pretensions’ of Western modernity and its absolutist theory of history” (253). Walcott, by presenting the domination of West while writing history, intends to encourage St. Lucians to dig into the history to show the West that

they have the history of their own by bringing out their pre-historic identity attached with their culture that existed long before canons were written.

To further elucidate what the history of colonialism resulted in St. Lucia, Walcott shows how the West encroached their religion. Churches were built and everyone had to follow Catholic path, which Walcott did not enjoy. He criticizes:

. . . The Church of Immaculate Conception
 was numbering the Angelus. With lace frills on,
 balconies stood upright, as did the false pillars
 of the Georgian library; each citizen
 stood paralyzed as the bell counted the hours. (120)

To be able to change people's religion is to be able to change people's daily courses. St. Lucians had to leave their age-old religion and had to follow Christianity that was alien for them. Kwame Anthony Appiah in *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* views, "All aspects of contemporary African cultural life . . . have been influenced, often powerfully, by the transition of African societies through colonialism . . ." (149). Now they must pray, eat, and work according to the rituals of the colonizers. Church bells ring the Angelus to mark the time of their daily activities. This has paralyzed the natives as if diseased and marked desolation of St. Lucia. Those false pillars of British empire serve no favourable purpose for the St. Lucians.

Moreover, Walcott mentions about the schools in St. Lucia where the children of the natives learn English and speak in American accent, which is devaluing their native language. Highlighting the importance of language, Hans Kohn, in *The Idea of Nationalism* brings Johann Gottfried Herder's notion and quotes that language does not only act as "a tool of the arts and sciences [but is] a part of them. Whoever writes about the literature of a country must not neglect its language" (qtd. in Kohn 431).

Though Walcott writes *Omeros* in the language of white people, which shows his in-betweenness, he does not want his language to get lost. He worries that the future generation of St. Lucia may understand nothing of the native language. After all, “. . . the spirit of a nation [is] expressed above all in its language, its *Sprachgeist*” (Appiah 20). Language is one of the emblems of nation. It signifies one’s nationality, without having to tell. So, he wishes his ancestral language to be passed on to the later generation with equal importance.

Also, students in St. Lucia learn the history written by their colonizers. They are taught about the wars of British victory. The successful Admiral Rodney from British troop is praised but the blacks who fought in the frontline in those wars are not mentioned. Walcott writes, “School-texts rustle to the oval portrait of a/cloud-wigged Rodney but the builders’ names are not there/not Hector’s ancestors, Philoctete’s, nor Achille’s” (315). They learn nothing about their African ancestors at school.

During the period of colonialism, modernity entered St. Lucia along with Europeans, which changed St. Lucia religiously, institutionally and structurally. In the epic, Walcott, as a narrator, visits St. Lucia after several years and is definitely not happy with the changes he observes. As he passes through the highway, he sees the wilderness of St. Lucia destroyed to build a modern city. Transformation of “the wild savannah into moderate pastures/. . . hotel development . . .” have resulted to the “Old oarlocks/and rusting fretsaw” (Walcott 227). Modernity is shining while tradition is getting rusted. Glissant remarks, “Building a nation means today thinking first and foremost of systems of production, [and] profitable commercial exchanges . . .” (235). Whites have done the same to St. Lucia. In the process of building a modern nation, profitable exchanges are made and large portion of wild vegetation is being destroyed to build hotels:

. . . . On the charred field, the massive
 sawn trunks burnt slowly like towers, and the great
 indigo dusk slowly plumed down, devouring the still leaves,
 igniting the firefly huts, lifting the panicky egret. (Walcott 234)

People see money in the burnt leaves of trees. Wildlife and vegetation are all under threat.

Walcott stresses over the negative impacts of Western modernity in St. Lucia. Natural environment is destroyed to build a concrete city. The country has become a tourist holiday destination and big hotels are built for their accommodation. But while changing St. Lucia into a modern city, it is made like every other city in Europe. The island looks like any other island made for tourist destination. Walcott is saddened in St. Lucia seeing the “. . . beach that now looked just like everywhere else,/Greece or Hawaii. Now the goddamn souvenir/felt absurd, excessive” (229). In adherence, Supriya Nair claims, “The average North American or European can no more tell them apart, or in some cases whether they are in Caribbean or Micronesia . . .” (75). Now, there is nothing unique about the Caribbean islands. Tourists visit there for recreation just like they go to any other island. So, souvenir now seems absurd as there is no uniqueness to resemble its distinctiveness, there is nothing extra to take home as memento.

Nair claims, “The transformation of manufactured territory from sugar plantation to tourist plantation continues to shape the material destiny of these islands” (72). St. Lucians are now chained by material life and are controlled by capitalism. Walcott writes, “Who screams out our price? The crows of the Corn Exchange./Where are the pleasant pastures? A green baize-table/Who invests in our happiness? The Chartered Tour” (197). St. Lucians’ worth is set in numbers by

companies. They are chained by material possession. So, Walcott fears that St. Lucians have “dark future down darker street” (197).

Concerning the black man at the age of modernity, Richard Wright in “Foreword to George Padmore” in the book *Pan-Africanism or Communism?* views:

The black man’s is a strange situation; it is a perspective, an angle of vision held by oppressed people; it is an outlook of people looking upward from below. It is what Nietzsche once called a ‘frog’s perspective.’ Oppression oppresses, and this is the consciousness of black men who have been oppressed for centuries,—oppressed so long that their oppression has become a tradition, in fact a kind of culture. (12)

Blacks are continued to be suppressed by whites. Whites always put blacks in the low level and themselves at the place where they can rule. Walcott claims:

. . . . These were the traitors
 who, in elected office, saw the land as views
 for hotels and elevated into waiters
 the sons of others, while their own learnt something else. (289)

Whites see St. Lucia as a mine to extract money through hotels. They continue to use blacks as slaves for capitalist motives while they and their lineage continue to be masters.

Further, Nair views that “. . . lack of development of the agricultural sector, channeling the profits by multinational hotels into the countries of origin, control over the domestic sector by international monopolies of capital . . .” have extended the “. . . perpetuation of colonial inequalities” (76) in St. Lucia. St. Lucians continue to struggle to afford a modern life. Due to the replacement of agricultural land by hotels, natives of St. Lucia must rely on seasonal employment in tourism sector, when more

tourists visit there. This has made their lives more difficult. Therefore, Walcott observes that Western modernity has not uplifted their lives but has degraded it. Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* views, “Modernity is . . . defined above all through the consciousness of novelty that surrounds the emergence of civil society, the modern state, and industrial capitalism” (49). Walcott, in *Omeros*, shows that this Western concept of modernity does not fit in the African milieu. Hence, Glissant seems to be in adherence when he observes that in Caribbean islands, “The monster of industrialization has perhaps broken the link with the land . . .” (160). St. Lucians enjoy wilderness, not the concrete blocks; modernity that destroys natural habitat is destroying St. Lucia.

In *Omeros*, Walcott, along with the structural changes, criticizes cultural changes brought by modernity in St. Lucia. As he visits there, he feels confused: “It was another country, whose excitable/gestures I knew but could not connect with my mind” (167). He does not understand the creole language that his people are speaking. But he feels connected with the skin of the natives. He further sees the changed lifestyle as the villagers are having night life in dance bars. His peaceful village is draining in noise while European DJs are playing the song: “. . . we go rock this village till cock wake up!” (Walcott 110).

Walcott shows the island being morally corrupted when the black women are selling themselves to white tourists:

She was selling herself like the island, without
any pain, and the village did not seem to care
that it was dying in its change, the way it whored
away a simple life that would soon disappear. (111)

Modernity has destroyed native values in St. Lucia. People are doing anything and

everything for money. Walcott worries that “One day the Mafia will spin these islands round like roulette” (29). Everyone is being corrupted. Island and its people are under the rule of Western modernity. If this continues, Achille worries that the future of St. Lucia is going to be terrible because “the young took no interest in canoes/That was longtime shit. Once it came from Africa/And the sea would soon get accustomed to the noise” (112). Achille sees his culture and history being crushed and he fears that it will continue till it is totally devoured by Western modernity. In this regard, Simon Gikandi states, “. . . the implication of [European] modernity for the natives of the islands and African slaves was nothing less than the loss of cultures, physical annihilation and historical displacement” (253). Western modernity made St. Lucians culturally and historically displaced.

Lots of changes have taken place in St. Lucia. Island and its people are becoming modern but “. . . the step from tradition to modernity did not parallel the distinction between primitive and civilized, or even the opposition between black and white” (Gilroy 162). Tourists still see the natives as primitive and sometimes another form of being, “as if they were horses, muscles made beautiful/by working the sea . . .” (Walcott 298). This prejudice enrages Achille because “the tourists came flying to them to capture the scene/like gulls fighting over a catch . . .” (299). He is frustrated that their camera cannot capture the true virtues, simplicity and essence of St. Lucia.

Achille, exhausted by being compelled to listen to the loud European songs, prefers the songs composed by his own people. European songs are shallow but black music has depth in it; it has a story to tell, a history to explore, a suffering to express, and a struggle to reveal. Achille’s mind keeps playing “. . . a Marley reggae-/ Buffalo soldier” (Walcott 161) which is the song about the search for identity in the midst of suffering of blacks. The music keeps thudding in his head as he himself is in a similar

situation. As Gilroy states, “. . . black music [is] the central sign of black cultural value, integrity, and autonomy” (90) and is “. . . the primary expression of cultural distinctiveness” (81-82), it is enriched with black culture and history, at the same time representing black experience and struggle that every black can relate to.

Regarding Western modernity, Arif Dirlik in his article “Thinking Modernity Historically: Is “Alternative Modernity” the Answer?” states, “It is at best the self-view that emerged in societies in Western Europe which in the seventeenth century began to think of themselves as an epochal improvement over their ancestors as well as other peoples, therefore claiming a break with the past and the Rest” (34). This notion was disseminated throughout the globe trying to make it universal. But as majority of the countries in non-West have the cultural values that are completely different from this notion, most of the non-Westerners think Western culture as ethically unacceptable. So, Western “Enlightenment assumptions about culture, cultural value, and aesthetics go on being tested by those who do not accept them as universal moral standards” (Gilroy 10). Similarly, Walcott, in the epic, challenges Western culture and stresses over their native cultural heritage as the remedy of the suffering of St. Lucia, and takes Achille to a spiritual journey to his ancestral land Africa, marking his diversion from Western modernity.

In order to revive the forgotten African ancestral heritage, Walcott takes Achille in a revitalizing voyage to Africa. Though Achille maintains the traditional island life in St. Lucia and respects his culture, he is bewildered by the domination of Western culture, and therefore, fails to remember the names of his god, rivers, and trees. Achille resembles every St. Lucian who is stuck between two cultures, lacks proper identity, and feels rootless, which further leads to frustration and failure in life. So, Walcott feels the urgency to locate ancestral roots of black people that the

European history has denied. Gilroy also presents similar view, when he remarks, “The need to locate cultural or ethnic roots and then to use the idea of being in touch with them as a means to refigure the cartography of dispersal and exile is perhaps best understood as a simple and direct response to the varieties of racism which have denied the historical character of black experience and the integrity of black cultures” (112). Practice of racism has shadowed black cultures and experiences throughout the history. So, Walcott intends to locate the roots of blacks in general and particularly of St. Lucia in his epic as a response to racism.

Walcott provides Achille a Christian name to emphasize on the influence of colonialism. When Achille fails to introduce himself properly to his ancestors, he realizes that the colonizer’s culture is not his culture. When his father asks him the meaning of his name, he replies, “I do not know what the name means. It means something/maybe. What’s the difference? In the world I come from/we accept the sounds we were given . . .” (Walcott 138). These lines reflect the condition of St. Lucian’s identity. They are so tired of the suffering from the whites that they do not fight for their identity. They accept the way whites identify them. So, Walcott signifies the importance of name in African culture when he, through Achille’s father, stresses, “. . . you nameless son, are only the ghost/of a name . . .” (138-39). Similarly, Appiah differentiates precolonial African culture guided by religion and modern culture guided by science. He explains, “Precolonial African cultures . . . are inclined to suppose that events in the world have meaning; they worry not about the possibility of the unexplained . . . but of the meaningless (what has no function, no point)” whereas “. . . the scientific worldview . . . accepts that not everything happens has a human meaning” (124). Africans believe in reason for everything that happens. So, Walcott stresses to show that they have a meaningful culture of naming everything

with a proper meaning. Their names signify their qualities and characters. So, they believe that if the name has no meaning, the person has no identity and hence no existence.

Also, through Achille's journey to Africa, Walcott delivers that St. Lucians also have their own culture, ancestors, and history. They are not rootless and have their own ancestral home in Africa. He implies that Caribbean is rooted to Africa when he writes that ". . . two worlds mirrored there . . ." (136) in the meeting of Achille and his ancestors. In Africa, with his ancestors, Achille learns his culture. He learns African language, listens to the myth and folk stories, learns to eat and drink in a traditional way, and learns African names. As the postulation "there's more than just slavery to the history, we have dignity" made by Rebel MC in his track "Soul Rebel," Achille learns that his community has its own civilization and customs shared by its people. Glissant observes, ". . . we discover daily in the world that one . . . needs a sense of a collective personality, of what is called dignity or specificity, without which the nation would precisely be stripped of meaning" (235). Collective identity helps us recognize our origin, hence identifying who we are and where we belong. It can be gained only through the respect of our origin. So, Walcott here tries to show what it is to be an African.

Walcott, through Achille, targets every African who was separated from their land and people. Like St. Lucian, every other person of African origin cannot create a space in the world and its history unless has a specific identity. Concerning this issue, Stuart Hall in "Negotiating Caribbean Identities," claims, "The African diasporas of the New World have been in one way or another incapable of finding a place in modern history without the symbolic return to Africa" (9). In order to be capable to get that space, one must exist and to prove the existence, one must have an identity.

And to have that identity, every person of African origin must return to their tradition and stay connected with their African root, wherever they may be.

The question that Achille asks to himself that who he is and where he belongs to is answered after he learns his culture. Walcott signals that by discovering self-identity, one learns the values of one's being and this heals much of the psychological suffering as it guides the person to live under certain values and beliefs. Achille gets healed through the process of knowing his ancestors and culture. When he is back to St. Lucia, he no more has jealousy, hatred and rivalry against Hector. He now respects everyone of his tribe as he has learnt communal values from his ancestors.

Walcott favouring tradition further criticizes modernity by revealing the impact of capitalism in ecology of St. Lucia. As Arif Dirlik mentions that global capitalism has brought several problems among which the “foremost . . . problems are ecological destruction and the concentration of wealth in fewer hands across the globe” (8), Walcott criticizes that natives and nature of St. Lucia are suffering due to global capitalism. Due to modern techniques of fishing for business, the sea is becoming empty of fishes—there are “. . . no more lobsters on the seabed” (Walcott 300), “. . . the shrimp were finished . . .” (301). Broken Achille asks, “was he the only fisherman left in the world/using the old ways, who believed his work was prayer,/who caught only enough, since the sea had to live” (301). Capitalism does not care about others' lives. All it cares about is market domination. It has targeted Caribbean Sea as well, like Walcott writes, “. . . once men were satisfied/with destroying men they would move on to Nature” (300). The people involved in this business are only getting richer whereas people like Achille and Philoctete who only earn enough to live as they respect and worship nature are suffering in crisis. Further, Walcott signals on unnatural climatic changes due to capitalism when he writes:

[Achille] had never seen such strange weather; the surprise
of a tempestuous January that churned
the foreshore brown with remarkable, bursting seas
convinced him that “somewhere people interfering
with the course of nature” (299)

Human encroachment into nature has changed its course. So, exhausted Achille, who cherishes traditional life, thinks that “. . . He might have to leave/the village for good . . ./far from the discos, the transports, the greed, the noise” (Walcott 301). Referring to similar context, Dirlik asserts, “Culturally conceived notions of alternatives ignore the common structural context of a globalized capitalism which generates but also sets limits to difference” (6). Achille does not get tempted by the capitalist motives but decides to continue his own tradition.

Further, Walcott also raises the problem created by modernity in social relations. Appiah observes that “. . . industrialization and urbanization have made social relations puzzling and problematic” (122). In *Omeros*, Helen is a native of St. Lucia with African origin, but has been influenced by Western modernity and thus does not have much of a good social relation. She cannot stick to one lover and keeps switching side between two lovers and even sells herself to tourists in nightclubs. Many people do not like her because they think “she too proud!” (Walcott 24). Hotel managers do not want to employ her because “. . . she was too rude” (33). Her social relation seems more problematic when she is also denied of work as a housemaid by her former mistress Maud Plunkett:

. . . . Of course you dare,
come back looking for work after ruining two men,
after trying on my wardrobe, after driving Hector

crazy with a cutlass, you dare come, that what you mean?

“We’ve no work, Helen.” (Walcott 124)

Natives of St. Lucia do not prefer this kind of life influenced by Western modernity because they have their own ethnic values which are different from modern values. In this regard, Gilroy views that the conception of ethnic cultures to counter modernity:

. . . looks . . . for an artistic practice that can disabuse the mass of black people of the illusions into which they have been seduced by their condition of exile and unthinking consumption of inappropriate cultural objects like . . . pop music, and western clothing. The community is felt to be on the wrong road, and it is the intellectual’s job to give them a new direction, firstly by recovering and then by donating the racial awareness that the masses seem to lack. (32)

Walcott, through his artistic creation *Omeros*, is making people aware of the values and aesthetics of their own culture.

Walcott, in *Omeros*, presents that Western modernity is not suitable for traditional St. Lucians who are guided by their ancient religion and culture. So, he attempts to revive the traditional culture and religion that Western modernity has shadowed. He believes that in St. Lucia suffering caused by domination can be solved by returning to the ancestral tradition because “like law . . . culture articulates conflicts and alternatively legitimizes, displaces or controls the superior force” (de Certeau xvii). Culture can be a form of resistance to domination. So, Walcott emphasizes on culture to resist Western imposition of modernity upon St. Lucia. Relating similar concern to alternative modernity, Arif Dirlik views that alternative modernity “. . . focuses on cultural renovation of human subjectivities in the course of global struggles against the anti-democratic politics of capitalism in all its local

variations” (14). Walcott, by emphasizing on cultural revival, is seeking for an alternative to Western modernity in St. Lucia.

To present ancestral tradition as the source of healing, Walcott characterizes Philoctete as a wounded fisherman with a wound on his ankle that represents the cultural wound inflicted by slavery and colonialism upon the natives of St. Lucia. In the epic, all the major characters have either physical or psychological wound created by the history of imperialism but Walcott especially focuses on Philoctete’s wound to heal it with the help of his ancestors.

Philoctete leads tourists in St. Lucia to show the place around as a tourist guide. Though he is working as a guide to earn extra money, he has not left fishing which is the traditional occupation of the natives of the island. His wound is so old that he has been hurt for years and has not found any cure yet. So, he believes that the wound is inherited from his slave ancestors. Walcott writes:

He believed the swelling came from the chained ankles
of his grandfathers. Or else why was there no cure?
That the cross he carried was not only the anchor’s
but that of his race, for a village black and poor
as the pigs that rooted in its burning garbage,
then were hooked on the anchors of the abattoir. (19)

The wound reflects the suffering of the blacks inflicted by slavery. Historian C.L.R. James in *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* discusses the harrowing ways to mistreat Caribbean slaves like “salt, pepper, citron, cinders, aloes, and hot ashes were poured on the bleeding wounds” (12). This kind of terrifying treatment of the slaves did not let their suffering to be healed but it passed on to their descendants.

Glissant discusses the slave trade as “. . . being snatched away from our original matrix. The journey that has fixed in us the unceasing tug of Africa against which we must paradoxically struggle today in order to take root in our rightful land. The motherland is also for us the inaccessible land” (160-61). Slavery system shattered cultural identity of the blacks and the descendants became unaware of their original culture making them feel rootless. The descendants like Philoctete struggle in between the colonizer’s culture and their native culture, without a proper identity of their own. His struggle and failure outburst his frustration of rootlessness:

. . . a fierce cluster of arrows

targeted the sore, and he screamed in the yam rows.

He stretched out the foot. He edged the razor-sharp steel

Through pleading finger and thumb. The yam leaves recoiled

in a cold sweat. He hacked every root at the heel.

He hacked them at the heel, noticing how the curled,

head-down without their roots. He cursed the yams: “*Salope!*

You all see what it’s like without roots in this world?”

Then sobbed, his face down in the slaughtered leaves. . . . (Walcott 21)

Walcott, in these lines, expresses the inexpressible suffering of enslaved Africans that has passed on to their descendants. As the wound keeps hurting, Philoctete remembers his painful past and gets frustrated towards slavery and colonialism for cutting his roots and degrading his culture. He also feels ashamed of forgetting his culture that has made the existence of his community to be insignificant in the world resulting to his inaccessibility of his motherland. For the Africans, who are known to be enriched with traditional and communal values, to be rootless can be devastating. So, Philoctete’s wound resembles the cultural wound of St. Lucians that keeps haunting

and hurting them.

Also, development of scientific study about human body and illness, modern equipment to cure disease and manufactured medicines have made people to turn away from traditional way of treatment through natural herbs. So, to support the inclination of Africans towards traditional natural remedy, that can be effective and sometimes irreplaceable, Walcott heals Philoctete through traditional method. Philoctete keeps applying manufactured ointment but it does not help him. He then realizes his disrespect towards his culture and ancestry for not being able to preserve these. He has a “. . . tribal shame/A shame for the loss of the words, and a language tired/of accepting that loss . . .” (Walcott 248). After all, he was healed by the help of his ancestors, by their traditional practice. After the recognition, he cries and cleanses his soul and is reborn. Walcott emphasizes on healing cultural wound through culture. This must be done by the victims themselves. So, like Philoctete, every St. Lucian is encouraged to get healed and to get their freedom back because as Gilroy remarks, “. . . slavery . . . [is] a cluster of negative associations that are best left behind” (189).

Philoctete is helped to heal by Ma Kilman, a “. . . sibyl, obeah-woman/webbed with a spider’s knowledge of an after-life” (Walcott 58). She is an old woman whom villagers see as a guardian with the mystic knowledge of after-life, and can connect with the invisible forces. As Appiah asserts that in Africa, “. . . traditional people regularly appeal to the invisible agencies of their religions in their explanations of events in what we would call the natural world” (116), Ma Kilman is a traditional African woman preserving the mysticism of traditional Africa. She is also not untouched by Western modernity, yet she has not left practicing African beliefs.

Ma Kilman runs “the oldest bar in the village” (Walcott 17), NO PAIN CAFÉ, where she sells Coca-Cola and western stuffs, and also helps people communicate

with the dead and consoles their families as an obeah. She relieves both the pain of loss and thirst of people. Bill Ashcroft in “Alternative Modernities: Globalization and the Post-Colonial,” discusses that alternative forms of modernity “. . . emerge out of a relation to other modernities and the processes of appropriation, adaptation, and transformation have been their characteristic features” (83-84). Similarly, Ma Kilman has appropriated and adapted Western products to help her continue healing people with her traditional knowledge. When more tourists come to her café for Coca-Cola, she can have more customers for her traditional occupation as sibyl and obeah.

However, due to Western imposition of Christianity, Ma Kilman struggles to remember the traditional recipe to cure wound that her grandmother used to make: “It have a flower somewhere, a medicine, and ways/my grandmother boil it. I used to watch ants/climbing her white flower-pot. But, God, in which place?” (Walcott 19). As she learned Christian names, she slowly forgot the African names and now she does not know where she can find that flower: “by the weight of a different prayer, had lost their names/ and therefore, considerable presence . . .” (242). She tries to preserve her tradition but goes to church as well. So, she cannot remember traditional way because of its distortion by Christian values. In this regard, Paul Gilroy argues, “Though African linguistic tropes and political and philosophical themes are still visible for those who wish to see them, they have often been transformed and adapted by their New World locations to a new point where the dangerous issues of purified essences and simple origins lose all meaning” (48). African cultures have been transformed by New World values. Though there are majority of Africans in St. Lucia living as the natives, they could not resist the imposition of western values which caused their culture, language and thoughts to be in distorted form.

So, Walcott, to suggest the natives to remove the veil of Western culture and

to bring out the inherent Caribbeanness, makes Ma Kilman to take off her hat and wig while she also “. . . unbuttoned the small bone buttons/of her church dress . . .” then “. . . she rubbed dirt in her hair, she prayed/in the language of ants and her grandmother, to lift/the sore from its roots in Philoctete’s rotting shin” (Walcott 244). Right after she takes off her wig and Christian dress, ants climb over her body passing the ancestral knowledge to her. Now she understands their language. As she starts praying in her ancestral language, Philoctete feels the pain draining out of his body. Here, Walcott suggests that the complications of modernity brought by Western colonialism can be healed through the spirit of ancestral culture. Just like Philoctete, the island can be healed too.

Walcott, to further support tradition over Western modernity in St. Lucia, employs Hector to be the victim of Western modernity. As for Western modernity, Dirlik asserts that “. . . modernization discourse . . . perceived modernization as progress from tradition (culture) to a modernity ruled by technological rationality and, therefore, implicitly cultureless” (11). Along with modernity and importation of technology “the Space Age had come to the island” (Walcott 117). This further departed people from their tradition. As “. . . modernity celebrates distance from our predecessors, while the traditional world celebrates cognitive continuity” (Appiah 125), Hector chooses modernity abandoning his tradition with the hope of earning more to afford a modern life. He gives up his traditional occupation of fishing and distances himself from his culture for modern way of earning.

J. Michael Dash, in the “Introduction” section of Glissant’s *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, asserts that “. . . the suppression of local self-supporting productivity . . . make[s] the disintegration of a collective identity and creative sterility inevitable” (xviii). Hector sells his canoe to buy a taxi. Canoe is not just a tool

that helps fishermen for fishing, rather it is the continuation of their tradition through which they are identified in St. Lucia. So, Hector selling his canoe means destroying his collective identity. But as Dash remarks, “The individual self has no future without a collective destiny” (xx), Hector soon realizes that his new life is giving him no happiness because technology in St. Lucia had given traditional people an “. . . Icarian future they could not control” (Walcott 117).

At the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, professor Abiola Irele in his lecture on “In Praise of Alienation” explains, “We are wedged uncomfortably between the values of our traditional culture and those of the West. The process of change which we are going through has created a dualism of forms of life which we experience at the moment less as a mode of challenging complexity than as one of confused disparateness” (212-13). Hector is in a similar situation. When he feels that there is no dignity in modern life and he is no more happy, he reaches the state of confusion, stuck between two cultures:

. . . he was making money,
 but all of that money was making him ashamed
 of the long afternoons of shouting by the wharf
 hustling passengers. He missed the uncertain sand
 under his feet, he sighed for the trough of a wave,
 and the jerk of the oar when it turned in his hand,
 and the rose conch sunset with its low pelicans. (Walcott 231)

Finally, Hector not being able to control himself in the pace of modernity, his “. . . arc was over, for the course/of every comet is such. The fated crescent/was printed on the road by the scorching tires” (Walcott 226). As a comet falls brightly in speed but shortly disappears, his Comet, the taxi, was also fated to end. Walcott writes, “He’d

paid the penalty of giving up the sea/as graceless and as treacherous as it had seemed,/for the taxi-business” (231). He dies of speed; punished for selling his tradition to buy modernity.

Walcott, in *Omeros*, seems not to let his ancestral heritage fade away and therefore keeps digging out their traditional practices. Myth making is also one of the ancient practices of Africans, and mythical stories are one of their ancient heritages. So, to give special significance to myth as a part of African heritage, Walcott structures the story of his main characters in the frame of Trojan Myth. He borrows and reworks the Greek myth and appropriates it in St. Lucian context. Alongside, Horton asserts that African belief system has dynamic and “open” way of thought in which they “devise explanations for novel elements in . . . experience,” and have “. . . capacity to borrow, re-work and integrate alien ideas in the course of elaborating such explanation” (qtd. in Appiah 127). This highlights the adaptability of African world which helps for its continuation even during changes in different epochs.

Myth is adaptable, thus universal and eternal. It is rich in meaning and knowledge. At the same time, as Glissant views, “Myth disguises while conferring meaning, obscures and brings to light, mystifies as well as clarifies and intensifies that which emerges, fixed in time and space, between men and their world. It explores the known-unknown” (71). Walcott brings Trojan Myth in *Omeros* in a disguised form to give light to the identity of St. Lucia that has been lost because of the exploitation of its natural land as a result of modernity. St. Lucia is known as the ‘Helen of West Indies’ for its immense beauty and its naturalness. But that identity is shadowed because it is no more natural and unique. Seeing no beauty of St. Lucia, people “. . . all turned their back/on the claim” about St. Lucia as the “Helen/of the West Indies . . .” (Walcott 311). This identity of St. Lucia that it had in the past is now forgotten. So,

Walcott stresses on the original beauty of St. Lucia and its identity by relating it with the beauty of mythical Helen. This way, he informs that the identity of St. Lucia is in its naturalness not in the artificiality of Western modernity.

Furthermore, Walcott employs common people in his epic to present the reality of St. Lucia. Glissant remarks, “The artist’s ambition would never be more than a project if it did not form part of the lived reality of the people” (235). St. Lucia is not made by the kings but by slaves, who now live as common people involved in fishing and other traditional occupations. Those common people are the ones who are keeping the native tradition alive. And as Walcott intends to show how the ancient culture of St. Lucia has been impacted by Western modernity, he presents the reality of the common people who are struggling like warriors to save their culture and identity against modernity. The traditional natives of St. Lucia continue to live their traditional life in the face of modernity. Walcott writes, “. . . Everything that was once theirs/was given to us now . . .” (119) but “A government that made no difference to Philoctete,/to Achille . . .” (119-20). St. Lucians who enjoy traditional life do not care what big changes happen around them. And even when a huge part of the world is changing due to modernity, the natives of St. Lucia who are preserving their culture continue to do what they have been doing.

Moreover, Walcott creates the story of his major characters resembling the story of the mythical characters of Trojan War to show that the suffering and struggle of the natives of St. Lucia is also immense as those of the great warriors in the myth. But the history ignores their suffering by taking slavery as the mission of civilizing blacks. The wounded character, Philoctete, in *Omeros*, resembles great suffering as that of Philoctetes of Trojan War. Slavery inflicted immense suffering on blacks which is immensely difficult to heal. So, the natives of St. Lucia who are trying to

cope up with the suffering are the warriors like the Trojan warrior Philoctetes. Besides, through the love triangle between Helen, Hector, and Achille, Walcott intends to show that present is related to past. Through these characters, Walcott revises and recreates the love triangle of Trojan myth. There is the echo of “. . . Trojan War/ in two fishermen . . .” (Walcott 271). This connection between these two stories of modern world and ancient mythical world shows that present society is related to its past world. Further, present human society is the developed figure of the past. One cannot distance the self from his/her origin. Walcott, in this way, criticizes Western modernity for detaching itself from past.

Similarly, to stress over how past makes way for future possibilities, Walcott uses myth as a means to create history. As Glissant views, “. . . myth anticipates history as much as it inevitably repeats the accidents that it has glorified; that means it is in turn a producer of history” (71), Trojan Myth produced the history of the Battle of the Saintes. Naval war fought between Britain and France to win St. Lucia in 1782 is connected by Walcott with the Trojan War fought between the Trojans and Greeks for Helen in ancient mythical time. This also signals over the reliability of myths created by ancient people. It has the tendency to prefigure the upcoming possible time and events. So, Walcott valorizes ancient time, people and events.

By reviving the forgotten identity of St. Lucia and by linking present with past, both through the use of myth, Walcott signals over reviving the ancient traditions of Africa in St. Lucia at present. Cultural nationalist Dr. Maulana Karenga believes that Africans “. . . must rescue and reconstruct African history and culture to re-vitalize African culture today . . . [and] stress the need for a reorientation of values to borrow the collective life-affirming ones from our past and use them to enrich our present” (11). In *Omeros*, Walcott reminds St. Lucians that during Christmas, they

have their own African festival. After Achille returns from his spiritual journey to Africa, he is more eager to explore African tradition and to share it with his people. The day after Christmas, Achille and Philoctete get ready for the dance in disguise. Walcott writes:

Achille explained that he and Philo had done this
every Boxing Day, and not because of Christmas,
but for something older; something that he had seen
in Africa (275)

Africans have their own ancient festival that most of the St. Lucians have forgotten. Because of Western imperialism, St. Lucians are turned to Christians and must celebrate Christmas which is an alien festival to them. So, through *Omeros*, Walcott shares that St. Lucians have their own native ceremony during the time of Christmas, and encourages them to celebrate their own festival to save it from being overshadowed by foreign culture.

As Glissant observes that “. . . carnival[s] are increasingly reduced to small gatherings and limited to parades in which we detect the representation of alienation . . .” (215), Helen, in *Omeros*, does not know about the ritual that Achille and Philoctete are about to perform. It is also a form of carnival that Achille’s ancestors celebrated which he wants to continue. But like Helen, many people now no more know about the significance of this ritual: “At first she laughed . . .” (Walcott 275) but after Achille informs her about it, she realizes its importance and becomes serious, then “She did not laugh anymore, but she helped him lift/the bamboo frame with its ribbons and spread them out/from the frame, and everything she did was serious” (275). Walcott, here, encourages St. Lucians to celebrate their culture and let others know about it, so that their ancient tradition continues to live on. In relation, Glissant

remarks:

What is called almost everywhere the acceleration of history, which is a consequence of the saturation of Sameness, like a liquid overflowing its vessel, has everywhere released the pent-up force of Diversity. This acceleration . . . has suddenly allowed peoples, who yesterday inhabited the hidden side of the earth . . . to assert themselves in the face of a total world culture. If they do not assert themselves, they deprive the world of a part of itself. (99)

West, through its canonical history, repressed the history of several tribes. It imposed its values and cultures upon them. Due to long repression, people have now moved forward to show their cultural uniqueness. Acknowledging its necessity, Appiah views, “. . . not to address this issue is to leave the outcome in the hands not of reason but of chance; or, perhaps, to leave the intellectual future of the . . . Africans, to be decided by the fact of the technological superiority of the already hegemonic cultures of the metropolitan world” (98). If they don’t do this, their identity and diversity will be lost. So, Walcott encourages St. Lucian to stand for their identity and their ancestral heritage.

In this way, Walcott challenges Western modernity, that does not fit in traditional St. Lucia, through nativism. As Appiah views, “Nativism invites us to conceive of the nation as an organic community, bound together by the *Sprachgeist*, by the shared norms that are the legacy of tradition, struggling to throw off the shackles of alien modes of life and thought” (72), Walcott, through the characters of his epic, revives African traditional culture by rejecting the alien culture. Towards the end of the epic, Achille is able to awaken nativism within himself. On the day of carnival, Achille was ready to dance the ritual dance in disguise through which he

revived his true-self and his freedom. On the ceremony, “. . . he was African, his own epitaph,/his own resurrection” (Walcott 273). He was born with his new identity, the real identity.

Similarly, Achille, after realizing the significance of native language, and tradition, decides to provide his child with an African name. He does not want his child to have a dual identity like his. With an African name, his child will have an African identity, and with this the child will carry on the legacy of their ancestral tradition. Through the child, Achille and Ma Kilman want to remind Helen, the mother of the child, who is much influenced by Western modernity, of her root and the values. Walcott views, “. . . Helen must learn/where she came from” (318). In relation, Gilroy asserts that the “. . . disputes over the contending values of traditional and universal cultures . . . has extended into the active reinvention of the rituals and rites of lost African traditions. African names are acquired and African garments are worn” (193). African descendants are reviving African traditions through African practices to challenge the Western imposition.

Moreover, Glissant observes, “The distant, uncertain emergence of the Caribbean is nonetheless capable of carrying forward our people to self-renewal and of providing them with renewed ambition, by making them possess their world and their lived experience (wherein a Caribbean identity is present) and by making them fall into step with those who also share the same space . . .” (223-24). Caribbean coming together to renew their culture can heal themselves, and experience their Caribbeaness. At the same time, other people can be encouraged to do the same. In *Omeros*, Achille and Philoctete, through their ritual dance, bring out their reality—their Caribbeaness. Though they are in disguise, they are reflecting their true identity. They experience it themselves and influence other by making them experience their

culture in the epic.

In this way, Walcott shows his love towards his nation, culture, and nature. In *Omeros*, as rain clears away the impurities of St. Lucia, nativism clears away alien culture. After the rain stopped, “. . . there was a different brightness/in everything, in the leaves, in the horses’ eyes” (Walcott 222). He again hopes for the naturalness of the past in St. Lucia at present. The narrator of the epic gets connected with the natural surrounding and local foods of St. Lucia which he cannot find in city. So, Walcott seems to be close to Glissant’s view that “The creative link between nature and culture is vital to the formation of a community” (63). People in capitalist world often see nature as commodity. They shape and reshape landscape according to the demand of people for pleasure. In the process, culture lags. While befitting oneself with modernity, people leave their tradition behind as it is too old. Due to this, community does not remain whole anymore. So, Walcott focuses on preserving both nature and culture for the identification of a place and community. Thus, he prefers traditional society because the capitalist motives of modern society destroys these both. To be in nature, for Walcott, is “like a sail towards Ithaca” (223). He cherishes the natural beauty of island over man-made artificiality. Here, he indicates over the significance of natural world in Caribbean culture. In relation, Dirlik explains that “. . . in the weight they give to cultural persistence . . . they are easily distinguishable from the politically and socially conceived search for alternative modernities . . .” (14). Walcott, in *Omeros*, explains the significance of culture and valorizes it throughout the epic, where he criticizes and challenges cultureless Western modernity. He also stresses that art lives in history, tradition, and naturalness, not in the artificiality of modernity. So, in the epic, he seeks for an alternative to Western modernity in St. Lucia that can keep its tradition alive, so that it can have a proper

cultural identity of its own.

Finally, Walcott, through *Omeros*, not only encourages St. Lucians to revive their cultural heritage but also urges all Africans scattered in different parts of the world to come together to preserve African culture as they share common ancestry and are connected as a family with the same race. W.E.B. Du Bois in “The Conservation of Races” explains that race “. . . is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life” (76). Slavery scattered blacks but are always connected through racial history and characteristics. So, Walcott, through *Omeros*, appeals black people to carry Africa wherever they are and preserve their traditional African culture as the counter-culture of modernity.

Derek Walcott, in his epic *Omeros*, presents that St. Lucians are rooted to Africa. So, they have their own ancestral culture and identity. With centuries long settlement and struggle of Africans in St. Lucia, they have built and accepted it as another home. The two lands are connected through their people and common ancestral culture. But encroachment of Western modernity has affected various aspects of St. Lucian life like occupation, lifestyle, education, etc. which has degraded their African ancestral heritage and their identity. So, Walcott showing concern on the fading native culture of St. Lucia urges St. Lucians to search for counter-culture to Western modernity not to let their cultural heritage be contaminated by modernity and preserve their ancestral culture and identity.

Due to the history of slavery and different wars during the period of colonialism, identity of St. Lucians was dislocated. Walcott first introduces the sources of suffering, recreates it and later proposes solution with the hope of a better

future. Walcott shows that the history of imperialism inflicted immense suffering, both physical and psychological, in St. Lucians by erasing their cultural identity. And through mythical references, Walcott attempts to heal the wound by connecting present with the past, thus connecting the natives of St. Lucia with their ancestral heritage to revive their identity, that has been fragmented by the impact of modernity.

Moreover, Walcott presents that in material world, everyone is in the race to win, everyone is in hurry to earn more but that kind of world is not favourable for everyone. For traditional people, modern world can be the world of insecurity, uncertainty, crowd, chaos, unfaithfulness and lust. And those who cannot co-operate with these are led to tragedy. Walcott, therefore, warns not to be departed from one's root because it is the major part that keeps all other remaining parts alive and helps them grow.

Finally, stressing much on the significance of traditional culture and by criticizing the impact of Western modernity in St. Lucia, Walcott is seeking for an alternative to counter the hegemonic culture of Western modernity. He desires to revive the fading identity of St. Lucia with the continuation of its native culture that is different from the modern culture of West. Following Western culture will decay the traditional world of St. Lucia. So, by returning to tradition, he is sure to keep up the spirit of the culture of St. Lucia alive. He wishes to present the tourists, visiting St. Lucia, the uniqueness, naturalness, simplicity and elegance of St. Lucia, not what they have been seeing and experiencing in other modern cities of Europe and America.

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