

Postcolonial Literature

Lecture 15

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Welcome again to this series of lectures on Postcolonial Literature. We had ended our previous discussion by saying that with intellectuals like Homi Bhabha and Salman Rushdie we move beyond the confines of nationalism to the wider field of cosmopolitanism and we will use this as our starting point for today's lecture on Caribbean poetry which will be primarily focussed on one particular author – Derek Walcott. But before we move on to Walcott and his poetry, let us dwell upon the concept of cosmopolitanism for a little while. I have introduced cosmopolitanism as a kind of opposition or even an alternative to nation and the sense of national belongingness, and since we have discussed nationalism so extensively in our previous lectures, it is important that we spend at least some time looking into the idea of cosmopolitanism.

Cosmopolitanism

The word “cosmopolitanism” has its root in the Greek language and combines two Greek words, namely “cosmos” and “polis”. The translation of each of these two Greek words which constitute “cosmopolitanism” is fraught with difficulty but roughly “cosmos” means the universe or the world and polis refers to ancient Greek city states like Athens or Sparta. In order to understand cosmopolitanism we have to understand how the two constituent elements, “cosmos” and “polis” interacts with each other. But even before that I would like to dwell on the word polis for a moment because most of us living in today's world which is largely divided into nation-states might have some difficulty in grasping the nature of the ancient Greek city-state. However, rather than going into historical details about Greek polis, I would just like to point out that the nature of polis can be understood, albeit imperfectly, through applying the

parameters of nation-states and one's sense of national belongingness. So just like we form part of a nation-state by sharing certain rights and obligations as its citizens, ancient Greeks belonged to one particular polis or the other by sharing certain rights and obligations as its citizens. Again, just like the strong sense of nationalism that today pervades most of the global population and defines their identity, the identity of an ancient Greek was also strongly determined by his being part of one polis or the other. So for instance in 5th century BCE there was no concept of Greece as a nation. Rather, people owed their political allegiance to particular poleis and this would define their identities to a large extent. So for instance though today we know Plato as a philosopher from Greece, Plato himself would have been surprised if during his time someone would have identified him as a Greek national. Plato was born in the polis of Athens and he was therefore first and foremost an Athenian, and not a Greek. Therefore, the strong sense of nationalism that often ties us today with one particular nation-state or the other, we can find a similar sentiment connecting individuals in ancient Greece with one particular polis or the other.

Diogenes

But now let us come back to the relationship between the words cosmos and polis which together make up the word cosmopolitan. The first recorded cosmopolitan in history is perhaps the fourth century BCE intellectual, Diogenes the Cynic who was born in the polis of Sinope which is in present day Turkey, but which at that point of time was a Greek colony. It is said that once when Diogenes was asked where he came from he replied by saying that he was “a citizen of the world or of the universe” and the word that he used was “kosmopolitês” which forms the root word of “cosmopolitan”. Now it is generally agreed that what Diogenes was indicating by his answer was that he was not a citizen of any particular polis. In other words, the claim of being a citizen of the world is to be understood here as a negative claim rather than a positive one. Which means that by saying that he is a citizen of the world Diogenes is saying

that he is no citizen at all, and feels himself to be above and beyond the rights and obligations that bound individuals in ancient Greece with their poleis and binds individuals today with their nation-states. This idea of renouncing the ties with all geopolitical entities, be it a polis or a nation-state, as a kind of cosmopolitanism has been shared by very few people, yet the critics of cosmopolitanism often levy their attack precisely on this particular strand of cosmopolitan thinking which advocates a lack of commitment to any particular state or geopolitical entity.

Stoics

But most intellectuals who have identified themselves with cosmopolitanism throughout human history has understood cosmopolitanism not as a renouncement of commitments but rather as an enhanced sense of commitment. This alternative version of cosmopolitanism can be first detected among the Stoics. Now Stoicism as a particular way of thinking about the world first emerged in Greece during the third century BCE and since then it has passed through many phases and transformations, and here again I will not go into the details about the history of stoicism as a branch of philosophy. But what is to be noted here is that unlike Diogenes the Cynic, the Stoics believed that being a citizen of the world was not in itself contradictory to the idea of being a citizen of a particular state. The stoics considered themselves to be citizens of the world because they believed that all human being formed part of a universal community, and any individual has duties and obligations not just to his fellow citizens of a particular state but also to this greater human community. The whole world was conceived by them as a huge polis or a state and all human beings were regarded as its citizens. But in so far as one is unable to serve the entire humanity it is acceptable to serve one's fellow nationals as representatives of the greater humanity. So the state or nation or polis fits into the world-state as smaller wheels fit into a bigger one, and one's commitment to these two overlapping spheres of the polis and the cosmos – of the state and the world – is complimentary and not in opposition to each other.

Kant

The most powerful proponent of this version of cosmopolitanism which conceives the world as a super-state and tries to couple one's allegiance and commitment to nation-state and to the universal human community is the eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant in his essay *Toward Perpetual Peace* published in 1795, not only talks about a world state but also about cosmopolitan laws which will extend citizenship to all humanity. Kant however does not propose the end of individual sovereign states but rather proposes a delicate balance between the individual states and the notion of a world-state and a world-citizenship. The best manifestation of such a cosmopolitan aspiration can be found in today's world in institutions like the United Nations or International Criminal Court and charters like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Now when we talk about cosmopolitanism as a state of being simultaneously committed at a local level to the polis, to the nation-state or even to one's own family, or village or clan, and at a global level to the entire humanity then we are actually talking about various forms of sharing and overlapping. Such sharing can be political where we act out our duties as citizens of India for instance by abiding with the laws of this country while also performing our duties to our fellow human beings by forwarding the cause of universal human rights. It can be a moral sharing where we perform our moral duties towards our family while at the same time trying to reach out to humanity at large through participating in institutions like The Red Cross society or Doctors Without Frontiers. It can also be cultural sharing where we share a sense of belongingness to multiple cultures, and it is this cultural cosmopolitanism or multiple cultural belongingness that we will study today with reference to Derek Walcott and his poetry.

Derek Walcott

Walcott, who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1992, was born in the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia in 1930 and has earned world-wide recognition both as a poet and a playwright. He has been a prolific author, known both for his ability to produce epic poems like *Omeros* as well as shorter verse pieces. As a dramatist he is perhaps best known through his play *Dream on Monkey Mountain* which was first produced in 1970.

Now to understand cultural cosmopolitanism in Walcott we have to keep in mind different context from within which Walcott is writing. This context is that of the Caribbean history which situates Walcott at a unique crossroad of cultural identities. And to explore the sense of multiple cultural belongingness that each of this contexts open up, we will be looking at the very well-known poem by Walcott titled “A Far Cry from Africa”.

Now as far as the Caribbean context is concerned, the islands that form the Caribbean or the West Indies were infamously described by the 19th century British historian James Anthony Froude as an island uninhabited by “rational” human beings and without any trace of civilization. Part of this statement is of course informed by the colonial snobbery of the white man who looked down upon the inhabitants of the subjugated spaces as sub-humans, but part of it is also true in the sense that the native inhabitants of the Caribbean islands were driven to near extinction by the Spanish colonisers during the sixteenth century. This meant not only a wiping out of people but also entire cultural and knowledge systems possessed by the indigenous population.

Later, when with the decline of the Spanish empire other European colonial powers like the French and the British moved in, they brought to the Caribbean millions and millions of slaves and indentured labourers from distant places like Africa and India thereby changing the entire demographic profile of these islands. The Caribbean is therefore a space which do not retain

much of the traces of its original inhabitants and their cultures but which is nevertheless a huge melting pot of different peoples, of different languages and of different cultures.

However, as I just mentioned, when Froude wrote about the Caribbean islands in the late 19th century the civilization and cultural attainments of the indigenous people had all but vanished and a new “Caribbean” culture was not born yet. Therefore, in the Caribbean, he could only see an empty space of civilizational nothingness.

This sense of nothingness that Froude associated with the Caribbean in the nineteenth century was also later echoed and lamented by the Caribbean novelist V. S. Naipaul in the twentieth century. But when we come to Walcott, we see that this very nothingness becomes a position of cultural strength and cultural experimentation. Walcott uses the notion of his homeland as a blank slate to forge a new identity that brings together the traces of all the multiplicity of peoples, languages and cultures that had come together in the Caribbean during the course of history. Thus unlike the nationalist writings that we studied in the Indian context where we saw the attempt to recover a pure Indian identity by carefully separating the foreign from the indigenous, in the writings of Derek Walcott we come across as an attitude of eclecticism and universal acceptance.

A Far Cry from Africa

This eclecticism is beautifully brought out in the poem “A Far Cry from Africa” which was written in response to the news of the British atrocities against the Kenyan freedom fighters during the Mau Mau uprising of the 1950s. In the poem, Walcott extends his solidarity to the dead Africans, and here we need to remember that some of Walcott’s own ancestors came to the Caribbeans from Africa bound in slave ships. But even while extending this solidarity Walcott cannot distance himself from the English language which he has inherited from the very British colonisers who enslaved his ancestors and who now persecuted the Mau Mau

revolutionaries in Africa. He talks about his “love” for the English tongue which, though it originally belonged to the colonisers, is now being used by him to lament the death of the people suffering from the atrocities of colonialism. This cultural appropriation is crucial in Walcott as it speaks of how we can take hold of the very weapons of colonial oppressions – and the imposition of English language was indeed a weapon of cultural oppression – to our own benefit. We can make these weapons our own tools of self-expression in which case they cease to be modes of oppression and become the means of showing sympathy, kindness and solidarity. But this process of appropriation is never easy. As a legacy bearer of both the coloniser and the colonised Walcott feels his identity conflicted. Therefore he writes in his poem that he is “divided to the vein”. And probably all of us who have passed through the colonial process... both the coloniser and the colonised... we are all divided to the vein, and our identity is invariably informed by this conflict. For Walcott, however, this conflict becomes the true essence of his hybrid identity because there is no way he can wash away the African blood that runs through his body and neither can he un-remember the English tongue which is as much a part of his identity as his African blood. We will discuss this notion of hybrid identity further in our next lecture on Diaspora and diasporic literature. Thank you.