



‘Environed and Emplaced’: *Sense of place and its perception as home in Derek Walcott’s ‘The Prodigal’*

Dr. A. J Manju, Priya Vijayan

Professor and Head of the Department, Ph.D. Scholar

Department of English

Sree Narayana Guru College, Chavadi, Coimbatore

Abstract: This paper attempts to examine the sense of place as represented in Derek Walcott’s *The Prodigal*. Initiating a brief run-down on the various possibilities of perceiving places, the paper intends to specifically emphasize experiencing place as home. As a master trope depicting physical and symbolic space, home is explored alongside the scope of experiencing it physically and psychologically. Using Edward Relph’s theories and conceptual purview of place (as detailed in his work *Place and Placelessness*) as a theoretical scaffolding from which to consider a reading of *The Prodigal*, the study builds on two major angles of home (i) landscape and (ii) history that assign meaning and relevance to a place, clubbing them with the analogous aspects of identity and rootedness. The speaker’s nostalgic detour that drives the poem’s narrative is waded through conclusively.

Index Terms - Walcott, home, place, history, rootedness, identity, landscape

Derek Walcott was the product of a profound world, distinctly Caribbean, whose intricately metaphorical poetry captured the charms of the Caribbean coast and the chaotic colonial heritage at once. *The Prodigal*, published in 2005, contains chronicles of the speaker’s travels in a memoirist style of poetry, diarizing his movements and cataloguing the events. Swaying between places and time, the poem details the self-reflective meanderings of and assiduous traveller who resembles the Biblical parable of the prodigal son. The journey he embarks on exploring his own fears and joys seeks to broaden the scope of his personal experiences and cultural insights. It encompasses numerous places culminating in his homecoming.

Place signifies multiple meanings and can be perceived in multitude of ways. Edward Relph whose research concerned human geography, in *Place and Placelessness*, aims to examine human situations, incidents and their meanings in relation to place as an inescapable dimension of human life. He affirms that “place appears to possess some perceptual unity” (Relph 4) the meaning of a certain place can only be assessed through one’s experience with it.” He enumerates this argument through an elaborate discussion on different experiences of place as home (in terms of spatial dimension), through time (with respect to temporal dimension) and in association with weather (which is closely connected to experience of place and passage of time).

Focus on the experience of place as home and the related aspects of (i) History and rootedness and (ii) Identity and landscape form the foundational feature in the reading of *The Prodigal*.

Place signified as ‘home’

In Ralph’s view, home “is a central point of existence and individual identity from which you look out on the rest of the world” (Ralph 83). As an important aspect of man’s emotional domain, home is a highly suggestive concept with diverse interpretations. It becomes synonymous with shelter, safety and security.

But in *The Prodigal*, Walcott exploits the extent of its meaning beyond its regular regard as a simple spot fit for habitation. He links it with the identity of an individual (here, the speaker.) Home, hence, is that guideline that affects every connection between human and his surroundings because at the end of all their rambles in the unknown, they surely seem to want to return to the known. St. Lucia, to the speaker, is that perfect place of return, his home, which he refers to as “his warm island,” (Walcott 14) “the home of his young manhood” (5) and “the precipices of my island” (93). He completely identifies with St. Lucia and always feels one with the island with which he had made a pact of “life-long fealty:”

to the horizontal sunrise, acolyte
to the shallows’ imprecations, to the odour
of earth turned by the rain, to the censer of mist,
to the pennons of cocoa, though I hated its darkness,
to the wrist of a cold spring between black rocks,
and any road that lost its mind in the mountains,
to the freight train of the millipede, to
the dragonfly’s biplane, and the eel’s submarine,
as the natural powers I knew, swearing not to leave them
for real principalities in Berlin or Milan (94)

Although away, the island had been a part of him all along his travels that guides him in his “search of his own “shire” (82), where he discerns, he is destined to return. The sense of alienation which he feels on returning as a stranger carrying “the smell of cities in his clothes” (59), hence, scares and confuses him. The long absence and disconnection from his island make him wonder: “Prodigal, what were your wanderings about” (70)?

Disseminating throughout the poem, are the answers to this question, the speaker’s impression (of the places) and responses (to the incidents) that reveal the deeper nuances of comprehending home in terms of its history and his identity linked to it.

(i) History/ Rootedness

Experiencing a place (as home) in its entirety ensues from being enlightened of its history. Aligning with Ralph’s take on it, there “is for virtually everyone a deep association with a consciousness of the places where we were born and grew up, where we live now or where we have had particularly moving experiences” (43). A historical review of the Caribbean, for this reason, enables to clarify the background of the place that the speaker in *The Prodigal* considers home.

The island’s history is blemished by conquest and colonization consequence of which were serious psychological and ecological and damage. Consciousness of their complex origins resulting from displacement and uprooting from their indigenous ancestry exposed the Caribbean to a confused state in which creating a new sense of place in a strange environment seemed fearfully hard. Subsequently, as Elizabeth Deloughrey in *Island, Ecologies and Caribbean Literatures* observes:

A particular dialectic between the land and its residents,” was established,
which was “specifically rooted in the region’s violent history; an unprecedented
upheaval and relocation of European, Asian and African peoples and cultures,
rapidly condensed within the boundaries of island topic. (Deloughrey 299)

Erased of their histories, the islanders remained isolated and contained within their island space. New narratives (created to maintain the colonial objective) were imposed on the indigenous inhabitants. Partaking of this fate of the people, was that of the land which was also colonized turning the landscape of the island unrecognizable. Consciousness of one’s history coincide with a sense of rootedness, which becomes pertinent to origin and heritage. This sense of grounding one feels in a known, familiar surroundings is crucial to his

well-being which Walcott relates through the speaker who has etched in his memory a detailed trace of his island, its smell, the colours and the roads and hills:

Across the dry hillock, leaves chasing dead leaves
in resurrecting gusts, or in the ochre quiet
leaves too many to rake on the road's margins,
too loaded to lift themselves, they lapsed singly
or in yellow chute from the cedar, burnt branches:
lyres of desiccation choked the dry gutters
everywhere in the country, La Feuillie, Monchy
by the caked track to Slatibus, over D'eenery. (60)

A sudden sight of the sea triggers an excited response – an exhilaration, that one feels when in a place of rootedness, which is “where we know and are known” (Relph 37). To Walcott, time spent in Italy (with its seas), is a constant reminder that brings memories of home to the speaker: “down the sea's serrated summer coast from Nice/ to Genoa, the sea's tinfoil striations/ are close to home (Walcott 23).

His love for Milan, the “city of annual invitations/ predictably in spring or the sweat beads of summer” (88), his adopted city is evidenced as he discloses his “widening love of Italy growing stronger/ against [his] will with sunlight in Milan” (26). Yet for rootedness to materialize, initiating a meaningful connection with a place is imperative. This attachment aids in figuring out “where you are,” letting one experience the place “from the inside while being surrounded by it and part of it” (Relph 49).

Regardless of his love and envy (for its the architectural splendour as there were “no such memorials on the island/ Our only cavalry were the charging waves, / pluming with spume, and tossing plunging necks” (Walcott 58). The speaker mirrors, Walcott's fervour for his roots: Susanna Soosaar recording this, says: “Against the backdrop of his island, the great cities will recede and when it comes to making a choice between other places and St. Lucia, as for him, his village is ‘unimportantly beautiful’ (SOOSAAR 65):

Do not diminish in my memory
villages of absolutely no importance,
the rattling bridge over the stone- bright river,
unornate churches, chapels in the provinces
of light-exhausted Europe. (Walcott 78)

Walcott's undeniable ties with his (is)land is explicitly portrayed in these lines that addresses the St. Lucians to “hoard, cherish/ [their] unrecorded history” (78).

(ii) Identity/ Landscape

Deep and sensible affinity with a place is essentially pinned on to the identity of the place. When isolated from situations and surrounding and its relevance reduced to a location, place loses its essence and experiencing it becomes a soulless affair. Speaking of the visible aspect of the identity of a place, Ralph considers landscape an indelible part of it, where he states “the spirit of the place lies” (Relph 30). He continues: “Landscape is not merely an aesthetic background to life, rather it is the setting that both expresses and conditions cultural attitudes and activities. It functions both as a context for a place and an attribute of it” (123).

It creates reference points that link all other particulars, including the people who inhabit it. Landscape of a place never remains constant, but the feel of a place, with its people and intimate human relationship reinstates its identity. “People are their place, and a place is its people,” Relph acknowledges, thereby, the mutual influence of community and place (Relph 34).

In *The Prodigal* the speaker's substantial globetrotting has enriched his experiences and equipped him with an exquisite adaptive ability. This has helped him establish dwellings in different cities with a strange sense of possession. About his home in the United States, he describes, “there is a continent outside my window” (Walcott 6) and “the bells on a bright Sunday from my bed” (7), but in contrast, the home that awaits the speaker, in St. Lucia, the island he claims to own in whole, is pointed as “the country of ochre afternoon” (64). By colouring his island, the speaker brings in an intimate touch that turns and personal and more

welcoming with “the dry frames stirring infrequently sometimes with the rattling pods of what they will call women’s tongues, in/ the afternoon country the far hills are very quiet/ and heat hazed” (64).

The constant reference to Hudson River does ring a bell of attachment, however, the extent of his intimacy stays limited. Reminiscing about St. Lucia; he becomes eloquent:

Across the dry hillock, leaves chasing dead leaves
in resurrecting gust, or in the ochre quiet
leaves too many to rake on the road’s margins,
too loaded to lift themselves, they lapsed singly
or in a yellow chute from the cedar, burnt branches
lyres of desiccation choked the dry gutters
everywhere in the country (60)

This intense belongingness that he feels stems from his close correspondence (even while away) with the physical specifics of the landscape of St. Lucia. The identity of his home is etched in his memory that it becomes part of him as much as he is a part of it. He becomes eloquent while referring to it or recalling it and attentively focuses on a sensory description of the surrounding.

Grass, bleached to straw on the precipices of Les Cayes,
running in the blue and green wind of the Trade,
a small church hidden in a grove past Soufriere,
hot dasheen and purpling pomme arac,
and heavy cattle in a pasture, and repetition
of patios prayers by the swalloes of Troumassee (101)

Of equal interest and importance are his recollections of Columbia that details close-to-home memories and feelings. The similarity in weather in these two regions (apart from its proximity to his home) evokes pleasurable responses in the speaker. Describing a road to Cartegena, he exclaims at the sudden sight of sea:

and then a bright gap, an outburst and there it was
the white combers running and beaches through the trees
the Caribbean, owned and exultant grinning and comforting
between sea- grape and sea- almonds and spindly palms
unguarded by soldiers. Not a new coast, but home. (46)

His experience of Italy too receives an exclusive elaboration while alluding to its landscape. Looking at the “light fine towns” (18), with its “serene soft mountains those, those tacit gorges that? was Abruzzi” (18), the speaker compares it to be “incorruptible as the faith of a young priest” (18).

Not thoroughly diverging are the graphic sketches “chasms and fissures of vertiginous Alps/ through the plane window/ meadows of snow/ on powder precipices.” (9) This recurring snowy landscape of Zermatt (Switzerland) prompts the speaker to wonder “How many more/ peaks of these iced – sized mountains, and towns/ locked in by avalanches.” (9-10)

Undeniably proven through the expressions from these extracts is the speaker’s urge and earnestness in experiencing every single place as home. His emotional ties with St. Lucia invariably eclipse the effect that the rest of the world has on him. Despite his clear involvement as an insider resulting from what Relph calls imaginative and empathetic inclination that incites an immediate intimacy with the place of inhabitation, Walcott’s eventual homecoming was bound toward “Not a strange coast, but home” (45).

Notes

1. ‘Environed & Emplaced’ - Phrase borrowed from Lawrence Buell’s *The Future of Environmental criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, page 62

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