"Africa of the Heart": The African Experience in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

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Abstract

Derek Walcott's book-length poem *Omeros* won critical acclaim soon after its publication in 1990. In this poem, the world of the Caribbean is linked with that of Homer by recalling the dramas of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in a Caribbean setting. Africa is heavily featured in *Omeros* as most of the major characters of the poem who in one way or another go through the African experience. 'Return to Africa' is a recurrent theme in Derek Walcott's works. However, this kind of return is not for the sole purpose of finding their old lost homeland, but rather for establishing roots and maintaining identity for the characters. The purpose of the study is to investigate the poet's use of Africa in *Omeros* in association with roots and identity. The study argues that Africa is projected on all the characters to retain a strong link to Africa not as a surrogate home but as a place from which they get inspiration.

Keywords: Africa, Derek Walcott, identity *Omeros*, root.

أفريقيا في القلب: التجربة الافريقية في ملحمة أوميروس لديريك والكوت

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المستخلص:

حصلت ملحمة الشاعر ديريك والكوت الشعرية (اوميروس) على الثناء النقدي حالما تم طبعها في سنة 1990. ربط الشاعر في القصيدة الملحمية بين العالم في منطقة البحر الكاريبي وذلك الذي في ملحمة شاعر الاغريق الاعظم هوميروس عبر اعادة تقديم ملحمتي الاوديسة والالياذة بسياق كاريبي. تضمنت القصيدة حضوراً كبيراً لقارة افريقيا تبعا لحقيقة ان معظم الشخصيات الرئيسية فيها يمرون بشكل او بآخر بما يسمى بالتجربة الافريقية. ان موضوع العودة الى افريقيا يعاود التكرار في اعمال ديريك والكوت الادبية. ان هذا الشكل من العودة لا يرمي الى ايجاد وطنهم المفقود بل هي دعوة من الشاعر لتثبيت الجذور والحفاظ على هوية تلك الشخصيات. تهدف الدراسة الى تحري توظيف الشاعر لقارة افريقيا في قصيدة اوميروس بالعلاقة مع الجذور والهوية. تناقش الدراسة الاشارة الى ان افريقيا ذكرت في القصيدة ليس بوصفها وطنا بديلا بل بوصفها محل الهام لشخصيات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: افريقيا, ديريك والكوت, اوميروس, جذور , الهوية.

Introduction

Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990) is a poem of seven books, divided into 64 chapters of three cantos. The poem is written in the epic tradition along the lines of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, although it is not meant to be an epic *per se* or even a mock-epic poem. The poem has a plot, albeit very difficult to analyze and understand, and moves in a journey in both time and place, from the past to the present, from St. Lucia to Africa, from Europe to America, etc. The whole poem is the story of a wandering Odysseus-like characters intercepted with stories of love, friendship etc. The characters are people with symbolic, historical as well as literary significance: both Achille and Hector are named after characters from Homer's *Iliad*, Denis and Maud Plunkett are the white Europeans, and Helen and Ma Kilman are the postcolonial Caribbean women the former is an emblem of the island of Saint Lucia and the latter is an obeah healer.

The two worlds of the Caribbean island and the ancient Greece are masterfully linked together, the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic ocean cross each other. Mostly the African descendant characters express their wish to be connected somehow to Africa. They fell under some type of an African experience that changes them forever. This 'return' to Africa in *Omeros* does not mean taking it as a permanent home and can never be taken as a campaign with Back-to-Africa as a slogan. The African connection, so to speak, is important to retain a meaningful living because it provides the Caribbean people with roots.

Omeros as a Twentieth Century Epic

An epic is defined by Harmon & Holman (1999) as "A long narrative poem in elevated style presenting characters of high position in adventures forming an organic whole through their relation to a central figure and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation or a race" (99). There is a problem of genre, so to speak, about *Omeros*. One cannot easily concede that this is an epic in the Greco-Roman fashion. Even though Walcott was fully aware that he was influenced by the classical Greek epics that nurtured, as it were, his poem, the poet renounces his poem to be an epic. Even before the poem was first published, in answer to the question 'Is this an epic poem?' Walcott replied, 'Yes. I would think that the design of it, yes.' Nevertheless, he draws attention to one of the characteristic features of the poem: 'It's not like one long poem with a hero. In an epic, you presume that there is no narrator, but I am in this, coming in and out' (quoted in Baugh, 186). Upon its publication Walcott repeats his denial of this association between *Omeros* and the epic by saying:

> I do not think of it as an epic. Certainly not in the sense of epic design. Where are the battles? There are a few, I suppose. But 'epic' makes people think of great wars and great warriors. That isn't the Homer I was thinking of; I was thinking of Homer the poet of the seven seas. **(**Quoted in Hamner 1993; 396-399)

Although it is not the attention of this paper to feed on the already accumulated literature that delves into the generic classification of the poem, it tells much about the genre and sometimes about the theme(s) of that poem. The combination of both the European and the African traditions is an essential trait of the Caribbean culture. Hence, Walcott chooses to combine two literary forms that belong to cultural scene in

Europe and Africa. Thus, *Omeros* was written in the epic form structurally speaking, but the oral African- derived folk tradition is also there.

Through the structure, one can put the poem under the right genre. The poem follows no systematic pattern (unlike classical epic or Dante's *Comedy*). It incorporates four-, five-, and six-beat lines in both stress verse and syllable stress verse, with certain part that simply follows no pattern. Callhan (2003) stipulates that "*Omeros* is ultimately a work whose prosody is most unlike anything else ever attempted in English" (15).

Furthermore, the poet avoided the use of a heroic language sufficing it to the standard English intercepting by both the patios and the Creole languages (both are spoken in Saint Lucia). Walcott used no special effort to write in a refined language just like any other poem he has written before and after. The poem has utilized language in the specific end of representing all the district cultural entities in the story. Thus, Calhan notes that *"... Omeros* can only be considered successful insofar as it bears witness to the multivocal foundation upon which the culture uneasily rests"(59).

So, in terms of fulfilling the major characteristics of an epic, *Omeros* is closer to the classical epics than it is to book-length post-colonial poem. First, in terms of plot the poem begins *in medias res* "in the middle of action'. Another important tenet of the classical epic is the setting in *Omeros* which is enormous, and covers many countries, the world or the universe. But most importantly both the classical epic and *Omeros* begin with a statement of the theme, i.e. searching for roots:

> "This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes."
> Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking
> his soul with their cameras. "Once wind bring the news
> to the laurier-cannelles, their leaves start shaking
> the minute the axe of sunlight hit the cedars,
> because they could see the axes in our own eyes
> (*Omeros,* 1).

The very first image of the poem is the uprooting the deified laurel tree to make canoes; something likened by Walcott to the displacement of people of Africa

The characterization of the poem is more epic-like created, something suggested by their Greek names (through the use of epithets). The poem clearly uses the Homeric references- Hector, Achille, Helen, and Philoctete

as the foundation of enforcing the genre. Characteristic of the poetry in both classical epic and *Omeros* is the long lists, called an epic catalogue. However, the feature that links *Omeros* to the classic epic is the use of the supernatural occurring. In addition to ghosts and time-travelling, the poem features divine intervention in human affairs.

But why should Walcott adapt the epic form to express his theme? Reading the poem carefully requires a close consideration of the motifs employed by Walcott. Of the many motifs Walcott employs the journey in time and place heavily throughout the poem. Actually, the whole story is introduced through journeys. A major convention of the epic poetry is the journey. A hero (Odysseus in the *Odyssey* travels home from the Trojan war) is usually participates in a cyclical journey or quest, faces hardships that attempts to overcome him in his journey and returns home significantly transformed by his journey. The same can be applied to the characters in *Omeros* who each go through a kind of journey. For instance, Achille's journey to Africa is a heroic journey like those of Odysseus and Aeneas, so, Achille's quest for his people's root in an idyllic Africa that is free from fleets of commercial fishing ships. This echoes Aeneas' heroic journey to establish Rome. Although the characters in *Omeros* are anything but heroic in the fashion of the epic larger than life personae, their journeys are equally significant to those undertaken by the classical epic personae. For both Achille and the poet-narrator traveling to Africa and Europe respectively is a milestone for discovering the two places mainly impact the Caribbean identity.

The complexity of the poem is structural rather than thematic, albeit both are intertwined. In other words, the poet chooses to create an amalgam of genres in one long poem just to reflect the hybridism of the Caribbean peoples. John Thieme (1999) indicates that the poem "conflates the genres of epic, nature poetry autobiography, historiography and metaliterary poetic essay to create a hybrid form which... crosses the meridian" (59). The structure of the poet is fragmented which reflects the fragmented nature of the Caribbean society. *Omeros* is an important milestone in the poet's career in that it achieves a larger incorporation of African cultural sources into the poet's multicultural vision of New World classicism (Tynan, 242).

Africa and the Caribbean Identity

The issue of identity is vital in understanding what motivates the characters in the poem. The long history of colonization damaged the original identity of the colonized peoples of the Caribbean, shattering their

own self-concept. In addition to that, the conflict between the colonizer and the colonized eventually left a scar to the cultural and material legacy of the Caribbean nations. Derek Walcott has come from a Caribbean island called Saint Lucia. The long history of colonization and slavery has shaped the identity of people in West Indies. Being both African and European but with no clear ties to both, the people of the island, to quote Callahan (2003), "…seemed to exist in a kind of cultural limbo which could not be delineated in a specifically Caribbean manner"(1). Caribbean people emerged from over three hundred years of brutal oppression; hence, they find themselves "custodians of a culture inextricably tied to an imperial history which they themselves have had no part in writing" (ibid).

Central to the formation of the nation identity is language. Linguistically, the Caribbean people have no language of their own; rather they speak the language of their colonizers (the English and the French). The type of those languages is called the Creole (a language of the Caribbean that emerged from plantation communities shaped when a small group of somewhat homogenous Europeans dominated large and linguistically diverse peoples of African slaves). The language and culture of the slaves brought from Africa have neither been totally absorbed nor formed a kind of homogeneity seen in the other parts of the New World. The uniqueness of the historical tradition has left its impact on the Caribbean cultural scene. Khan implicates that "[c]ultural history is lost to West Indians…because language, the fundamental carrier of culture and tradition is lost" (quoted in Callahan, 3).

Culturally speaking, Caribbean culture is viewed as a melting pot of many cultures, specifically that of the European colonizers and the African slaves brought to work in the sugar plantations. The number of the white European people has not been great enough to form a Eurocentric culture as in North America. Hence, both Europe and Africa have been left in the background, shaded but not totally forgotten in the conscience of the Caribbean peoples. Callhan (2004) describes the Caribbean culture as "a newly emerged and unique …"(2). Africa and Africanism are in the background whenever there is a talk about the cultural identity in the West Indies, even though the people had come from various ethnic and racial backgrounds.

The influence of Africa on the formulation of culture in the West Indies is the theme frequently employed in Derek Walcott's works. But of all the

poems and plays he wrote, no where one can find the salient presence of Africanism as in *Omeros*. Walcott is practicing his role as a bard to discover the cultural roots of his people. Baugh (2006) comments that *Omeros* is Walcott's "deepest, most unqualified acknowledgement to date of the African presence in the Caribbean" (190).

The presence of Africa in *Omeros* is geographic more than anything, i.e., the characters are involved geographically in the events. For example, the yam garden of Philoctete and the sea-swift are both clear testimony that the characters' African background projects their subjectivity on the native landscape. Thus, the Saint Lucian landscape is essentially a continuum of the African one.

This section investigates two important elements in the poem that link Africa with the identity of the West Indies through geography. The first is the sea-swift and the other is the yam garden. The sea-swift functions as an important unifying motif symbol of the poem. It unifies the two cultures vacillating between the West Indies and Africa. Thieme (1999) thinks that "one of the most interesting migrant figures in [*Omeros*] is the sea-swift which, like the Odyssean poet and Achille who dreams of a return to Africa, travels east-west routes across the Atlantic".(185)

As divine messenger, the bird appears both at the start and at the end of the poem just like Achille. Its significance springs from being an African bird travelling to and fro Africa over the Atlantic Ocean. The link is apt since the bird carries the seed that has a spiritual transcendental force and with which the symbolic wound of Philoctete is healed. The herb Ma Kilman must retrieve has crossed the Atlantic Ocean as a seed carried by the sea-swift, just like the enslaved Africans who had brought their ancestors as "*seeds in* [*their*] *stomachs*" (*Omeros*, 149).

In *Omeros*, characters have an identity crisis vacillating between two worlds and searching for their true *self* in the middle of the conflicting influences of the East and the West. In fact, the characters in the poems are either the descendants of the slaves brought from Africa to work in the plantations or the masters who brought them. Achille, for example, suffers from a confused self-identification knowing not his own self; "*Then, for the first time, he asked himself who he was*" (*Omeros*,130). As the above quotation would suggest, it is necessary for Achille to find out his true name and purpose in life. In order for Achille to ponder the presence of Africa in his cultural identity, as it were, Walcott calls a bird (the sea-

swift) to cross time and space in order to fetch Achille from the New World (Saint Lucia) back to the Old World (Africa).

The presence of the swift-bird bears a divine character. The exposition shows that the setting is a Caribbean island with a culture that fuses both the African and European. In the very beginning of *Omeros*, the central character, Achille, has an initial glimpse of the sea-swift just after he uproots the cedar trees with his friends. The laurel tree is a tree of high significance for the Caribbean people as they use its timber as the material from which their canoes are made. The chopping down of the god-trees is an act of a shear rape of the sacred natural landscape to which men had to drink strong alcoholic beverage in order to perform the act: "*it gave [them] the spirit to turn into murderers*" (*Omeros*, 3).

The sea-swfit presence is a blessing as the wound is instantly cured:

> *Achille looked up at the hole the laurel had left.*
> *He saw the hole silently healing with the foam*
> *of a cloud like a breaker. Then he saw the swift*
> *crossing the cloud-surf, a small thing, far from its home [….]*
> *(Omeros,* 6)

The sea-swift, thus, has become a part of the thematic manifestation of the poem. In other words, the bird is made as a link to the epical image of the wanderer-hero 'far from its home.' It can be easily, and rightly, said that the real wanderer *is* the swift not Achille.

Achille, during a moment of sunstroke, inquires about his own identity for the first time. After contemplating the question of his origins, the sea-swift leads him to the Africa of the past: "*She touched both worlds with her rainbow, this frail dancer / leaping the breakers, this d art of the meridian*" (*Omeros*, 130).

Achille follows the sea-swift in his canoe boat towards Africa, reversing history and the Middle Passage route. The significance of Achille's emblematic journey back to the past is so big since it restores forgotten associations to an African identity. Although his dream journey cannot alter the past, that redemptive revisit to Africa endows him with the power he needs to find cultural identity. Achille's journey brings together the two worlds forming the long-lost peoples' understanding of their *raison d'être*.

It is the sea-swift journey from the Old to the New World that brought healing to the wounded dignity, as it were, of the progeny of the African slaves in Saint Lucia (and by extension to all the former Caribbean colonies). Ma Kilman's remembering of the herb's name brings about

healing to Philoctete's wound. The bird has brought in its stomach vine whose flowers offer "the cure that precedes every wound." Originally, the seed is deposited near the beach by the African swift, grew and climbed like a trail of ants up the mountain; reminiscent of Achille's vision of his forefathers chained and taken like ants into the shore of Africa to be shipped: "*it climbed like the ants, the ancestors of Achille / the women carrying coals*" (*Omeros*, 239).

At the end of the poem the sea-swift is described in terms of textual hyphen, a link, a connector.

> *I followed a sea-swift to both sides of this text;*
> *her hyphen stitched its seam, like the interlocking*
> *basins of a globe in which one half fits the next*
> *into an equator, both shores neatly clicking*
> *into a globe; except that its meridian*
> *was not North and South but East and West [. . .]*
> (*Omeros*, 319)

The description of the sea-swift as a hyphen (ironically the very name of the bird is hyphenated) is to highlight the link between Africa and the Caribbean identity. The hyphen is a sign shared between the sea-swift and the poet that reflects their overlapping attributes. An imaginary hyphen following the swift's flight charts a winding course between the Old World and the New World. The hyphen suggests the in-between spaces that Walcott negotiates: "*Her wing-beat carries these islands to Africa,\she sewed the Atlantic rift with a needle's line,\the rift in the soul" (Omeros, 319).*

Like Walcott's own text, the sea-swift brings separate pieces together in an attempt to mend the "rift in the soul".

Naturally the people of such culture would create associations with the landscape to form a kind of bond denied to them due to the long history of subjugation. Thus, the kind of belongingness to the African landscape that the characters feel in *Omeros* is but a manifestation to that association. Their view of the landscape is not objective but personalized. The characters see the landscape as an integral part of their cultural identity (the one they are trying to regain).

Philoctete is another character whose African experience comes in the form of a wound and a garden. He is named after a character in Homer's *Iliad*. He is the epitome of suffering. He suffers from a wound that keeps him in pain and shame. Philoctete's wound stands for the suffering brought

about by the colonization of the West Indies. The poet uses the yam garden to connect both the Africa and the Caribbean identity. Yam is the vegetation planted in many parts of the world, however, it is associated with Africans and has been the traditional food of plantation slaves. It is the staple food of many African countries and people. Creating a yam garden, it seems, is to provide an escape to Philoctete. This yam garden is kept by Philocete as a kind of farm to get income from. Yam is a vegetation that is linked to Africa; '*the wind turned the yam leaves like maps of Africa*' (*Omeros*, 20). This implies that the garden is the key to help him accomplish his lifelong endeavor of being healed and signified his lost ancestral root.

In an early scene in Philoctete's yam garden, where "*wind turned the yam leaves like maps of Africa/their veins bled white*,"(*Omeros*,20) he gives vent to the pain of his predicament.

When cutlass cut smoke, when cocks surprise their arseholes
by shitting eggs, he cursed, black people go get rest
from God; at which point a fierce cluster of arrows
targeted the sore, and he screamed in the yam row.
He hacked them at the heel, noticing how they curled,
head-down without their roots. He cursed the yams:
"Salope!
You all see what it's like without roots in this world?"

21*)-Omeros*,20*)*

Being rootless is not Philocete's main problem, but having a leg with a rotten wound is. The roots he tries to establish can never be found as long as he is separated, spiritually speaking from, the land of his ancestors. Therefore, creating the yam garden with African plant is an attempt from Philocete's side to reach his ancestral roots by bringing Africa nearer. He has committed the act of cutting the yams in the garden out of anger because of the frustration caused by the long time of his physical pain. The analogy of Philoctete with the yams becomes complete when both are uprooted.

Burnett (2000) compares the yam garden to Eden in which the Adamic Philoctet feels the enormity of his loss. She continues the comparison by stating that

> [His loss] is a postlapsarian cultivation of the yam, brought from Africa on the Middle Passage; he is the Adam forced to "delve," when before the Fall all he had to do was pluck the fruits of the garden. If Philoctete demonstrates the concept of Original Sin, then

Ma Kilman represents its salvation, returning to the innocence of wild nature to pluck the wound's cure. (117)

Philoctete is cutting the yam garden in an angry reaction to the pain of his wound for which he asks God's pardon.

In Philoctete, Walcott concedes that the recrimination he rejects is understandable, but demonstrates that, as Burnett (2000) remarks, it inevitably perpetuates the pain that caused it. Ma Kilman, owner of the No Pain Café, where Philoctete spends most of his time, wracks her memory for a folk cure among those her elders once practiced, which would cure Philoctete's spirit by recovering a facet of the African culture lost to him just as it would cure his body (19). Finding a cure for Philoctete's wound becomes the thematic crux of the poem, more than the pursuit of Helen.

Central to the thematic development of the poem is to pay attention to Ma Kilman's African-based spiritual practice, namely, the obeah. Obeah is defined as "an Afro-Caribbean practice that utilizes herbal remedies, possession by ancestral spirits or African-based deities, and diagnosis or divination through trancework"(Collins, 1995; 144). This practice has been used not only to cure physical diseases or wounds but to solve community problems as well.

Philoctete has a foul-smelling wound from which he suffers a long time, and for which he turns to Ma Kilman for motherly care and treatment. Even though she is a typical post-colonial woman in terms of Christian devotion and clothing, Ma Kilman also has an African experience. Hence, the role of Ma Kilman is a mother-figure and the curer of all the villagers. She represents Walcott's vision of a return to Africa for solution to modern problems. The problem of Philoctete's wound is a symbol of the continual anger over colonization and slavery:

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 (*Omeros,* 19)

Ma Kilman plays a major role as an obeah to diagnose and treat the wounds of those infected. However, the biggest turning point is when she forgets the names of the herbs necessary for the healing of Philoctete/ She

is placed in the centermost position of the poem to connect the different elements of the Caribbean culture with Africa forging a new Caribbean identity.

Ma Kilman is assigned the task of healing Philoctete; something she cannot perform without remembering the names of the African gods. Evidently, Ma Kilman's role as an obeah and healer is both a material and spiritual manner that bring about social change. Thus, she assists the postcolonials in this narrative, heal and positively reconceptualize their Caribbean identities. Appropriately, at the poem's finale, she says the predictive line, "*We shall all heal*" (*Omeros.* 319). Philoctete's healing becomes the catelyst for finding the true identity for himself and all the other characters in the poem.

Root and Achille's Journey to Africa

The most important theme is the conflict between those who adapt themselves to the new reality of modernizing the island economy to the touristic industry and those who live according to the basic life. The writer employs this motif to present up another theme, i.e. the search for roots. The two themes are interconnected and can be linked directly to Achille something that places him in the center of the poem. After witnessing the abuse of the natural landscape by the new tourism trend in economy, Achille shows his objection to the downbeat side which tourism caused in the island. For example, Achille does not attend the festival during which tourists socialize with the villager. He distances himself from any touristic activity holding on to the more precious trade of fishing.

To find his roots and that on his people Achill embarks on a visionary journey for Africa, the nature of which is never stated by Walcott. Achille's condemnation of the violation of the natural landscape is evidenced in him refusing to be photographed by tourists, "*work was the prayer of anger/for a cursing Achille, who refused to strike a pose/for crouching photographers*" (*Omeros,* 298). He objects to letting himself become a cheap souvenir. So, while the tourists "*came flying to them to capture the scene/like gulls fighting over a catch, Achille would howl/at their clacking cameras, and hurl an imagined lance!"* (*Omeros*, 299).

The association of the tourists with the colonizers is inevitable, as both have victimized the native people. Achille is furious about letting the door open to tourists to stomp on the Saint Lucian land. Angrily does he address Helen who stands for St. Lucia for staying during the festivals with tourists: "*More men plough that body than canoe plough the sea*" (*Omeros,*

115). Helen, who stands for Saint Lucia, is the butt of the tourists' admiration and lust.

The enormity of Achille's difference from his compatriots is seen in his relation to another character and rival named Hector. Like Achille Hector is an Afro-Caribbean fishermen even though in the course of the story he sells his canoe for a passenger van to transport tourists in the village whereas his opponent Achille remains true to the traditional economic activity of fishing till the end. Hector's trading his canoe with a tourist automobile (which he names The Comet) is seen as an emblem for Saint Lucia's new shift in economics which Achille vehemently opposes. Though the sea links Achille and Hector together, there is animosity ("bad blood") between them as they vie for the love of Helen, who stands for Saint Lucia. Both Hector and Helen are example of the exploitation of the Caribbean natives. If Philoctete is the manifestation of the historic exploitation of the African slaves, Hector and Helen are manifestation of the modern-day physical and sexual exploitation respectively of the natives. Whereas Hector dies of a car accident in the very car he traded-off with a canoe, Helen bears a child by him and when the redemptive moment comes she approves to give the child an African name.

Unlike both Hector and Helen, Achille cannot be absorbed by the new pattern of livelihood and the whole new life brought about by the presence of tourists on the island. Like Walcott, Achille lives the dilemma of refusing to succumb to the idea in vogue that the Caribbean cultural existence is solely African in roots and also rejecting the bitter Colonial past. To reconcile the two conflicting ideas Achille chooses to go in a journey for information to complete his notion of the Africa of his ancestor. Being a fisherman, Achille feels a very strong sense of belongingness to the ocean: "*Achille felt the rim\ of the brimming morning being brought like a gift\ by the handles of the headland. He was at home.\ this as is garden"* (*Omeros*. 126). Moreover, he expresses his gratitude for the sea, where "*his heart trembled with enormous tenderness for the purple-blue water*" (*Omeros,*126). Yet Achille still questions his sense of belongingness, even where he feels most at home, the ocean. Achille, to quote Zargarzadeh (2014), "is both a sea-farer and a hi/story teller who recounts the history of Africa and his unforgettable tribal memory; a history buried in the Atlantic Ocean along with the countless corpses at the bottom of the cold sea" (150).

Africa is an important point for the Caribbean Achille for the journey to self-knowledge, yet it in no way constitutes the destination. Taynan (2006)

believes that "The roots to which Achille "returns" are imagined and based on a need of the fisherman to renegotiate his identity as opposed to a firm point of origin from which this culture derived" (241). Like Walcott, Achille does not romanticize Africa as the promised land to which the Afro-Caribbean populace must return. His journey is not into a Utopia, or, the "Africa of the heart," but rather of the one that was being colonized. Walcott makes him witness by his own eyes the slave mongers take the tribesmen villagers out of their home.

Achille is the one whose Africanness urges him to travel back to Africa to find answers. This journey includes to quote Taynan (2006), "a typical feature of epic poetry"(234) that is the hero goes on a quest with a concern with the fate of his nation or people. Achille tries to deliver his people from oppression through slavery, but is saddened as "[h]e foresaw their future. He knew nothing could change it" (*Omeros,* 146). Achille compares his ancestors to trail of ants chained and taken to the shore to be shipped to which he reacts violently by killing one of the slave-traders brutally. Yet he cannot save his ancestors from slavery just the way he is unable to prevent the creeping of tourism into the heart of Saint Lucian economy.

However, as griot reveals, it is not their tragic destiny which torments them. They suffer more when they see that the younger generations like Helen, Hector and Lawrence of St. Lucia have forgotten their ancestors' pains and work for the tourists.

As an epic hero, the purpose of Achille's trip is collective rather than egoistic. He is self-delegated to Africa taking with him the story of his whole nation. Zargarzadeh (2015) affirms that "Achille not only attempts to maintain his own sense of 'Africanness' when he returns to his village but he also tries to enlighten others of their racial lineage and heritage". (158)

Hence, the characterization of Achille is made in such a way as to be associated emotionally to the sea more than to the land. This association is not for his passion for fishing but for the function of the sea as a bridge to Africa to which he travels to find root.

Achille's spiritual question is a quest for self-knowledge – "*His name / is what he out looking for, his name and his soul*" (*Omeros,* 154). However having healed a wound brought on by a colonial past, the "*homesick shame / and pain of his Africa*" (*Omeros,* 134), Achille must now return to the present. The peace provided by Achille's new connection to the legacy of Africa creates a conscious of his roots and origins.

Walcott implies that once Africa is lost, Africanness could still be cherished in the New World. Both Achille's visionary journey to Africa and then his undersea exploratory journey back indicate connectivity between the old continent and the New World. Consequently, the purpose of Achille's visionary journey is to reclaim his ancestral values something he has fulfilled in immersing himself in the African heritage without being totally taken by Africa. Now that he has recovered the linking past with Africa he is well-equipped to live his life.

Conclusion

The weighty presence of Africa serves as the hub that links all the Afro-Caribbean characters in the poem *Omeros*. They either live the African experience in the West Indies or travel (imaginatively) to Africa to witness history-changing events. Walcott tries to say that both the social and historical influences of Africa contribute to the cultural dynamic that everyone in the West Indies experiences on some level. The poem asserts that all characters, whether they like it or not, will somehow be taken back to Africa. Achille's journey to Africa is not a return *per se*, but rather extending the roots of well-fixed trees.

Just like the way the characters accept the West Indies as their homeland, they also accept the past though not are controlled by it. Achille's attempt to change the course of history by freeing those who are taken as slaves is denied. His journey has brought him face to face with the real question of spiritual extension of the Saint Lucian people and found many spiritual answers in the traditional African religion. That in turn pushes him to create a cultural-spiritual root in Africa through his dangerous sea voyage. There is no communication problem in the encounter between Afro-Caribbean Achille and his African father since the ancestor caters the cultural roots for the progeny. The exchange between them is facilitated by time, which functions as an interpreter.

For the characters, after the African experiences, so to speak, they are brought face to face with a new reality. Now they possess what can be described as full-fledged identity of their own. Instead of going to Africa, Ma Kilman discovers the healing plant by Africa coming to her: it comes from a seed borne in the stomach of the sea-swift (an African bird) that drifted off course above the Atlantic Ocean to the island St. Lucia.

In no way the Afro-Caribbean characters idealize Africa or identify themselves as Africans. Historically, the black people of the West Indies have gone through many hardships and experiences to be identified with

the Africans. Culturally, the West Indies is a place where nobody is an aboriginal but they all belong to. Africa, by no means, constitutes not only the destination but rather a necessary harbor on a journey to self-knowledge.

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