

Postcolonial Literature
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Lecture No. #15
Caribbean Poetry : Derek Walcott

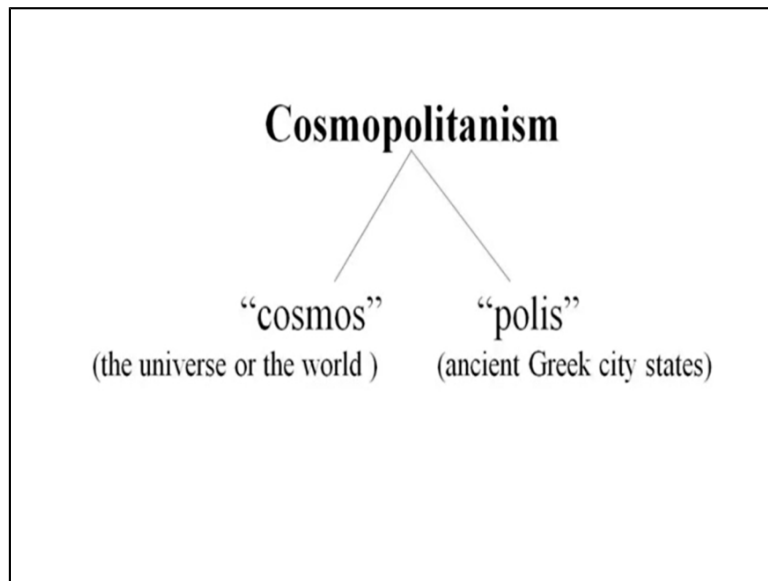
Welcome again, to this series of lectures, on Postcolonial Literature. We had ended our previous discussion by saying, that with intellectuals like Homi Bhabha and Salman Rushdie, we move from the confines of Nationalism, to the wider field of Cosmopolitanism. And, we will use this, as our starting point Today, for our discussion of Caribbean poetry, and specifically, for our discussion of the Poet, Derek Walcott.

But, before we move on to Walcott and his poetry, we will look at Walcott, and one of his poems, in fact, as representative of Caribbean poetry, Today. But, before we do that, before we move on to Walcott, let me dwell upon the concept of Cosmopolitanism, for a while. Because, in my previous lecture, I have presented Cosmopolitanism, as a kind of an alternative, to the sense of belonging in a Nation, or to the sense of Nationalism.

And, since we have discussed at some length, the notions of Nationalism, and the concept of Nation State, it is all the more reason, that we should discuss, this alternative of Cosmopolitanism. Now, the word Cosmopolitanism, is difficult to describe, in a brief and concise manner. And, this difficulty, primarily comes from the fact, that this word, or it's variance have existed, for more than 2000 years, now.

And, this 2000 year long history, makes the understanding of this word, particularly complex. But, having said that, I will try and simplify the matter, as far as possible, without making it too simplistic. But, let us start therefore, by looking at the roots of the word, Cosmopolitanism. Now, the word Cosmopolitanism, has its root in the Greek language. And, it combines, two specific Greek words.

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One is Cosmos, and the other is Polis. Now, here again, these Greek words, which were relevant 2000, 2500 years ago, are difficult to translate, in Today's context. And, it is difficult because, most of us are, not very well aware of the Greek context, in which, these words had their origin. But, roughly speaking, Cosmos, can be translated as, the Universe, or the World. And, the Greek word Polis, signifies ancient Greek city States like, Athens or Sparta.

Now, in order to understand Cosmopolitanism, we have to understand, how these two constituent parts, Cosmos and Polis, they combine and interact with each other. But again, before we do that, we need to focus on the component, Polis. Cosmos, is easily understood. When we say the Cosmos, is basically the Universe or the World, that is easy to grasp. But, what is difficult to grasp, in this sort of combination of words, is the constituent part, Polis.

Now, as I said, that Polis can be roughly translated as, a city State, in ancient Greece. But, this is not, a very useful definition to us. Because, in the contemporary World, we are used to the concept of Nation States, rather than city States. And therefore, it requires some kind of an explanation about, what a Polis was. Now, but the way, I want to explain this, is not by going into historical details about, the Greek Polis, as it existed.

But rather, I would just like to point out, that the nature of the ancient Greek Polis, can be understood, however imperfectly, by applying to it, the parameters of Nation States, and one's sense of belongingness to a Nation, with which, all of us are familiar. So, just like we form part of a Nation State, by sharing certain rights and obligations as its citizens, ancient Greeks

too, just like this, belonged to one particular Polis or another. And, they belonged to these Polis, by sharing certain obligations and rights, as citizens.

The second point, that helps us understand this concept of Polis, through the lens of Nation State, is that 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 very strongly determined, by his being part of one Polis or another. So, for instance, in the 5th century BCE, and I am talking about 5th century BCE, because we have already referred to this period, in one of our earlier lectures.

So, in the 5th century BCE, there was actually no concept of a Greek Nation. There was no Greece Nation State. Rather, people vowed their political allegiance, to a Polis. And, this allegiance, in fact, would define their identity to a large extent, just like Today, our affiliation to one particular Nation State or another defines, to a large extent our identity, defines who we are. So, for instance, Today, we know Plato, as a very famous philosopher, from Greece.

But, if Plato, during his time, would have been confronted with this identity, that you are from Greece, Plato would probably have been very bewildered, to say the least. Because, he was born in Athens, the Polis of Athens. And therefore, his identity, was primarily that of an Athenian. So, he was an Athenian, rather than a Greek. Now, therefore, the strong sense of Nationalism, that often ties us Today, with one particular Nation State or another, we can find a similar sentiment, connecting individuals in ancient Greece, with one particular Polis or another.

Now, I hope, we have arrived at some understanding of, what Polis, what the nature of Polis was, and more importantly, what was an individual's connection with the Polis, to which he belonged. But, now we come to the more important point, how the two elements Cosmos and Polis, interact and combined with each other, to form the concept of Cosmopolitanism. Now, the first recorded Cosmopolitan in history, is perhaps the 4th century BCE intellectual, who is known as, Diogenes the Cynic.

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Diogenes the Cynic

Born in Sinope (modern-day Sinop, Turkey) in 412 or 404 BC and died at Corinth in 323 BC



And, he was born in the Polis of Sinope, which is located in present-day Turkey. But, at that point of time, it was a Greek colony. Now, it is said that once, when Diogenes was asked, where he came from.

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Diogenes the Cynic's Definition of Cosmopolitanism

- He claimed he was not a citizen of any particular polis, but a "kosmopolitês" ie "a citizen of the world or of the universe"
- This claim of being a citizen of the world is to be understood here as a negative claim rather than a positive one, because 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
- Cynics advocate a lack of commitment to any particular state or geopolitical entity in general

He replied that, he was not a citizen of any particular Polis, but he was a citizen of the World. And, the Greek word, that Diogenes apparently used was, Kosmopolites, which is the root word of Cosmopolitan, that we use Today. Now, it is generally agreed that, what Diogenes was indicating, by his answer, that he was a citizen of the World, was that, he was no citizen at all. He did not belong to any Polis.

So, 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. And, he is in fact, beyond and above all the rights and obligations, that bound individuals in ancient Greece with their Polis, and binds individuals Today with their Nation State.

Now, this idea of renouncing the ties, with all geopolitical entities, be it a Polis or Nation State, this kind of renunciation, as a kind of Cosmopolitanism, has been shared by very few people in history. Yet, the critics of Cosmopolitanism, have levied their criticism, primarily at this strand of Cosmopolitanism, which advocates a lack of commitment, to any particular State or geopolitical entity. And, we are reminded here, of course, of the persecution of Jewish intellectuals, in Soviet Russia, by Stalin.

And, these Jewish intellectuals, were labelled as Cosmopolitans, or as rootless Cosmopolitans. And, they were labelled as rootless Cosmopolitans, because the Soviet State under Stalin believed that, they were not patriotic enough, they did not have, enough commitment, towards the Soviet State.

Now, as I said that, this brand of Cosmopolitanism, though it has often been criticised, adherents of the idea of Cosmopolitanism seldom, speak about this kind of Cosmopolitanism, rather they speak about a different kind of Cosmopolitanism, which can be identified, for instance, among the Stoics.

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Stoicism

- Stoicism as a philosophy first emerged in Greece during the 3rd Century BCE
- 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 beings 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.

Now, Stoics are practitioners of a Philosophy, or a Worldview, which is referred to as Stoicism. And, Stoicism, as a particular way of thinking about the World, first emerged in

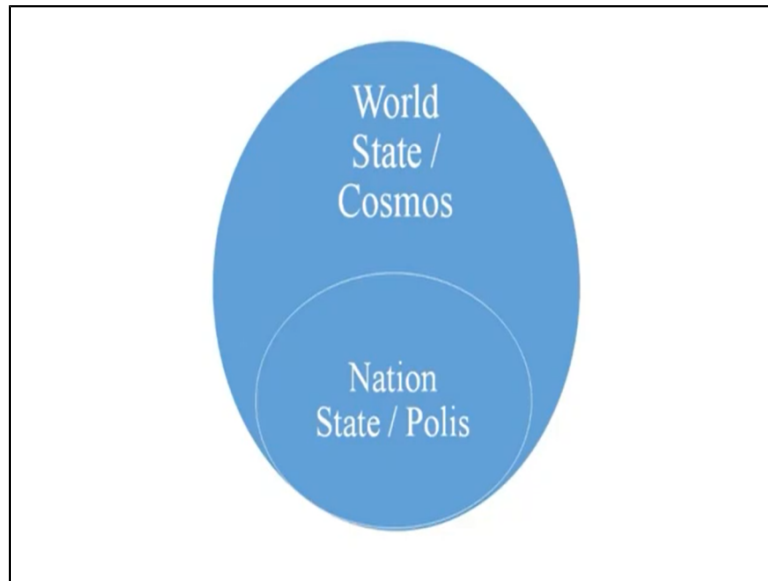
Greece, during the 3rd century BCE. And, since then, it has passed through many phases and transformations. And, here again, I will not bore you, with a detailed history of the various phases and transformations of Stoicism, as a branch of Philosophy.

But, what is to be noted here, is unlike Diogenes the Cynic, the Stoics believed, that being a citizen of the World, was not in itself, in opposition to being a citizen of a particular State. In other words, the notion, that one is the citizen of the World, is not in conflict with the idea, that one is also the citizen of a particular State. The Stoics, in fact, considered themselves to be citizens of the World. Because, they believe that, all human beings, formed part of a universal community.

And, any individual had duties and obligations, not just to his fellow citizens of a particular State, but also to this greater human community. Now, the whole World therefore, was conceived by the Stoics, as a huge Polis, or as a State, in itself. And, all human beings, were regarded first and foremost, as citizens of this World State, or World Polis, or Cosmo Polis.

And, but, if the entire World is a State, and therefore, each of us have obligations to that World State, and to all the human beings, who are citizens of that World State, then the notion of commitment, becomes somewhat diluted. Because, if we are to be duty-bound to everyone, then there is a risk, that we end up being duty-bound, to no one. But, the Stoics, had another argument.

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The Stoics said that, we can serve the citizens of our own Nation State or Polis, as representatives of that World State. Because, it is not possible for us to serve everyone. We serve, a representative section, of that human community. And, that representative section can be, the citizens of your own Polis, or your own Nation State. So, the State, or the Nation, or Polis, according to this Stoic Worldview, fits into the concept of a World State, or a World Polis, as smaller wheels, fit into a larger wheel.

And, ones commitment, to these two overlapping spheres of the Polis and the Cosmos, of the State and the World, is complementary, and not in opposition to each other. So, I mean, just to repeat myself, so that, you understand this very clearly. You can serve, both your Polis and the World State, simultaneously, according to the Stoics. There is no conflict, in this dual sense of commitment. They fit, as if they are concentric circles, one within the other.

Now, the most powerful proponent, of this particular version of Cosmopolitanism, which conceives the World as a super State, as a huge Polis, and which tries to couple one's allegiance and commitment to Nation State, and to the universal human community, is the 18th century German Philosopher, Immanuel Kant.

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Immanuel Kant
(1724 – 1804)



Toward Perpetual Peace
(1795)

Now, Kant, in his seminal essay, *Toward Perpetual Peace*, which was published in 1795, talks about a World State. And, not only does it talk about, the World as a single State, but he also talks about, World laws or Cosmopolitan laws, which will be applicable to everyone, to the entire humanity. Because, all of us, are citizens of that World State. But, here we need to remember that, Kant does not propose the end of individual sovereign States.

But rather, what he proposes, is a delicate balance, between the individual States, and the Nations, and the notion of a World State. So again, we go back to this idea of concentric circles, where Nation States fit, within the large circle of a World State. And, how this might work. We get a glimpse of this, by studying, for instance, how institutions like the United Nations, function Today. How, Laws or Charters, like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are implemented Today.

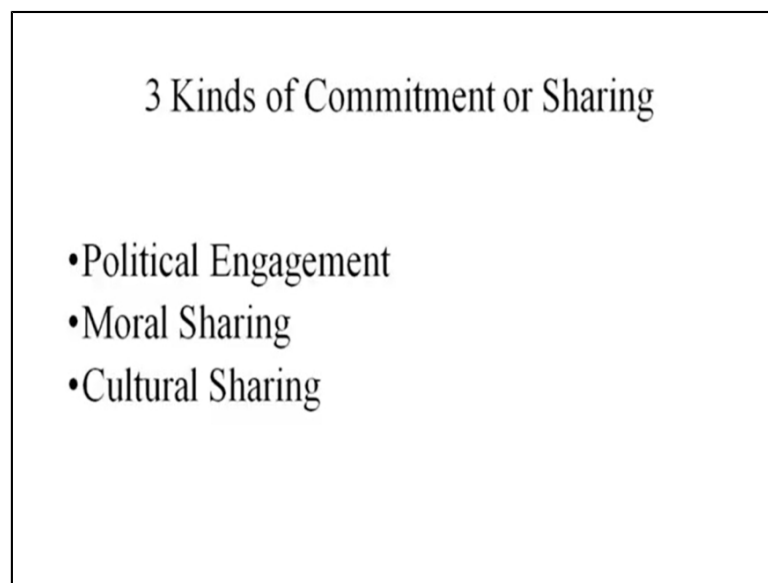
How, International Law Courts, like the International Criminal Court, in the Netherlands, how they function. And, they are, these institutions, these Laws, these Rights, which are internationally valid. They equate, this idea of Cosmopolitanism, that we first find in the Stoics, and then again in Kant. But, when we talk about Cosmopolitanism, as a State of being simultaneously committed, at a local level, to the Polis, or the Nation, or even to our own Family, to our Village, to our Clan. So, these are all local commitments.

And, we also speak of a simultaneous commitment, at a global level, to the entire humanity. In doing so, we are actually talking about, various forms of sharing and overlapping. Let me simplify this, for you. If, I am to be committed towards my own Nation State, as also towards

the universal sort of entire humanity, the universal notion of human beings, as citizens of the World State, what is going to be my commitment, what is going to be the nature of my commitment.

Well, the nature of my commitment, can be various, and can be different. And, can be different primarily because, different commentators of Cosmopolitanism, have understood this overlapping, in different ways.

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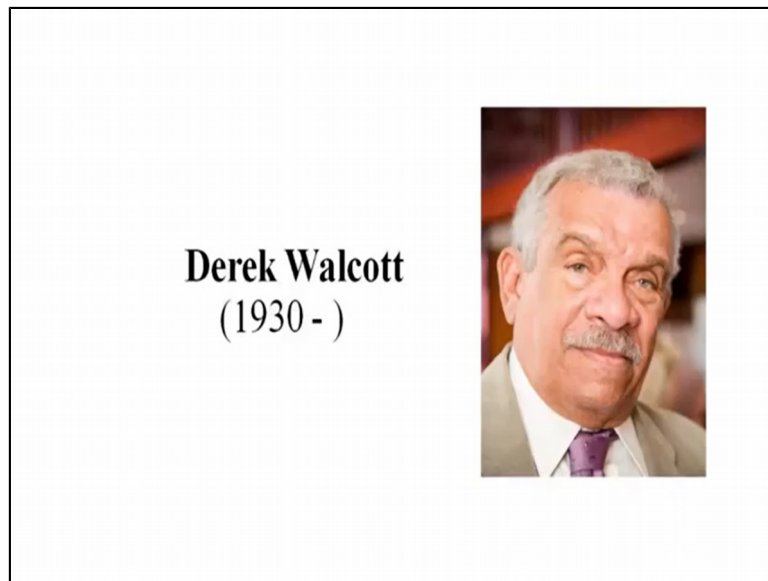
So, for instance, it can be political, this overlapping, where we act out our duties, as Citizens of India, for instance, by abiding by the Laws of this Country, while also performing our duties to our fellow human beings, by forwarding the cause of Universal Human Rights, which is an International Law, right. So, here, we are simultaneously committed to the Laws of our Nation State, and to the Universal Law of Human Rights. There is no conflict, right.

And, this is our political engagement, with both the Nation State, and with the World State. Apart from this political engagement, there can also be moral engagement, at these two simultaneous levels. For instance, this can be a moral sharing, where we perform our moral duties, towards our families, while at the same time, we try to reach out to humanity at large, through participating in institutions like, the Red Cross Society, and institutions like for instance, Doctors without Frontiers.

But, it can also be cultural sharing, cultural commitment, where we share our 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. First, let me introduce, Walcott to you, before we go on to discuss his poetry.

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Walcott, won the Nobel prize in literature, in 1992. And, he was born in the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia, in 1930. And, is renowned Worldwide, both as a Poet, and as a Playwright. And, he has been a prolific author, known both for his ability, to produce epic poems like Omeros, for instance, but also for his ability to write, very powerful shorter verses.

And, as a Dramatist, he is perhaps the most well-known for his play, Dream on Monkey Mountain, which was first produced in 1970. Now, to understand the notion of Cultural Cosmopolitanism, and how it operates in the writings of Walcott, we need to keep in mind the specific context, from within which, Walcott writes his poetry or his plays. And, this specific context, that I am talking about, is a context of Caribbean history.

Now, this context of Caribbean history, situates Walcott, at a unique cross road of cultural identities, and to explore the sense of multiple cultural belongingness, or Cultural Cosmopolitanism, that this context opens up, for Walcott. We will be looking at, a very well-known poem by him, which is titled, A Far Cry from Africa. But first, a few words about this Caribbean context, and Caribbean history.

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James Anthony Froude
(1818 – 1894)



Now, 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 a space, which did not contain, any trace of civilisation. Now, part of this Statement, is of course informed by the Colonial snobbery of a white man, who is speaking about a subjugated land.

And, we have seen, this snobbery at work, when we discussed the African context, where to someone like Marlow, standing in his boat, the Africans do not even qualify as human beings. So, part of Froude’s rejection of the Caribbean, as a land uninhabited by rational human beings, of course comes from this white Colonial snobbery.

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 16th century. And, this meant, not only a wiping out of a whole community of people, but also a wiping out of entire cultural and knowledge systems, which the indigenous people of a Caribbean islands, possessed.

And later, when the decline of the Spanish empire, in this part of the World, who was followed by the coming in of the British, and the French Colonisers, and the Dutch Colonisers, they brought to the Caribbean, millions and millions of slaves, and indentured labourers, from distant parts of the World, like Africa for instance, or India, and thereby changing the entire demographic profile of these islands.

The Caribbean's, 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 people, from different parts of the World, different languages and different cultures. So, on the one hand, the original cultural template was scrubbed clean almost, by the Spanish conquistadors.

But, on the other hand, Caribbean island as a location, where various different people, with various different cultures, from different parts of the World, came together, made Caribbean, a huge melting pot of peoples, of cultures, and of languages. However, as I just mentioned, when Froude wrote about the Caribbean islands, in the late 19th century, the civilisation and cultural attainments of the indigenous population, had all, but vanished.

And, a new Caribbean culture, was yet to emerge. Therefore, in the Caribbean, Froude could see, only an empty space of civilizational nothingness. And, the sense of nothingness, that Froude associated with the Caribbean, in the 19th century, was again echoed in the 20th century, by the Caribbean born Author, V S Naipaul, an author with Indian origins.

And, he too believed that, his home country, was actually a space of nothingness. It did not produce anything. It did not have, any history of its own. But, when we come to Walcott, we see that, this very nothingness, becomes a position of cultural strength, and cultural experimentation.

And, 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, of languages, of cultures, that had come together in the Caribbean. Thus, unlike the Nationalist writings, that we had studied before, in the Indian context, where we saw the attempt to recover a pure Indian identity, by carefully separating out, what is foreign, and by trying to reach at the indigenous core.

In the writings of Derek Walcott, we come across something really different. We come across, an attitude of Eclecticism, an attitude of universal acceptance. And, this Eclecticism, is beautifully brought out in the poem, that we are now going to discuss in the poem, which is titled, A Far Cry from Africa. Now, A Far Cry from Africa, was written in response to the news of the British atrocities, against Kenyan freedom fighters, during the Mau-Mau uprisings, of the 1950's.

And, 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 Caribbean's from Africa, bound in slave ships. But, even while extending his 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.

So, 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. The language of the Colonisers, being used, to lament the atrocities of Colonialism. And, this is very important. This cultural appropriation, is crucial, in Walcott. Because, it speaks of how, we can take hold of the very weapons of Colonial oppression.

And indeed, the forceful imposition of English language, on the Colonised subjects, was an act of cultural oppression. But, what Walcott is showing that, we can take hold of such weapons of Colonial oppression, and we can then use them to our own benefit. We can make these weapons, the tools of our self-expressions, in which case, they ceased to be modes of oppression, and they become the means of showing empathy, of showing kindness, of showing solidarity.

But, this process, which Walcott performs very beautifully in the poem, *A Far Cry from Africa*, is not an easy process. Appropriation is never easy. Because, as a legacy bearer of both the Coloniser and the Colonised, Walcott feels his identity, in conflict. And therefore, he writes in his poem, that he is, and I quote his words, divided to the vein, the veins that run within his body.

And probably, all of us, who have passed through the Colonial process, or whose ancestors have passed through the Colonial process, and irrespective of the fact, whether we belonged to the side of the Colonisers, or to the side of the Colonised, we are perhaps all divided to the vein, and our identity is invariably informed by this conflict. For Walcott, however, this conflict, becomes the very essence of his Hybrid Identity, of his new Caribbean identity.

Because, there is no way, he can wash away the African blood, that runs through his body, and neither can he unremember the English tongue, which is as much part of his identity, as

the African blood in his veins. We will discuss, this notion of Hybrid Identity, further, in our next lecture, on Diaspora and Diasporic Literature. Thank you.