New Academia: An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory

(Online ISSN 2347-2073) Vol. V Issue IV, Oct. 2016

Rewriting the Caribbean Experience in Homerian Style: A Study of Themes, Style and Vision in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

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Abstract

This study investigates the themes that bother upon the Caribbean experience in Derek Walcott's Omeros. A brief introduction to the poetry of Derek Walcott is given before attempts are made at rendering some of the themes of the work such as identity, slavery/colonialism, rootlessness, reconciliation, and migration. These themes are discussed with relevant extracts from the poem. It is realised that the poem is a re-enactment of the total Caribbean experience in all its totality. However, the study goes further to underscore the peculiar Homerian style of the poem. The style is discussed with regards to the extant epics of Homer and Dante and some of the stylistic indicators discovered include the use of the epic genre itself, the use of the terza rima, statement of theme, the use of symbolism and imagery and, of course, the language of the poem. These stylistic devices are used to underscore the importance of the poem in the Caribbean literary canon. Finally, Derek's Walcott's ultimate vision of reconciliation is briefly examined in this work. Findings show that this poem is Derek Walcott's seminal masterpiece on reconciliation for the Caribbean people.

Keywords: Derek Walcott, Caribbean, Homerian, Themes, Techniques

Introduction

This study investigates the themes, techniques and vision of Derek Walcott in rewriting the Caribbean experience in his epic poem, *Omeros.* This poem is regarded as Walcott's magnum opus and it has received many critical acclaims. The poem is praised for its form, originality, and thematic thrusts. Derek Walcott etched his permanence in the history of Caribbean poetry when this poem was published. This work examines the Caribbean experience, which is dominant in the poetry of Walcott, in *Omeros.* The relevance of this

study is hinged on the fact that the study goes beyond examining the thematic thrusts of the work but also examines its distinctive and unique Homerian style as well as Walcott's vision in the poem. This study also investigates the multiple layers of the poetry in its totality with a view to unveiling the symbolic, allegorical, and metaphorical nature of the work.

The Poetry of Derek Walcott

Derek Walcott's poetry has been described by Rai and Rai (1) as the "the most important West Indian poet writing today". Livingston further described Walcott as the "major voice of the Caribbean naissance" (1). He further places Walcott's strength in "the creative tension between the particularity of his Caribbean setting and the universalities of his theme and style" (1). Walcott is regarded as the poet laureate of the West Indies. Born in St. Lucia, this acclaimed writer is the first Caribbean writer to win the Nobel Laureate. Majinder Kaur has described Derek Walcott as a poet who represents the "unfortunate encounters of people and islands with alien, hostile forces" in his poetry (541). This view is drawn from the depiction of the Caribbean experience from all dimensions (both historical and contemporary) which can be found in Walcott's poetry. Drawing from Vendler's opinion that Walcott is "a poet of divided worlds is divided ethnically, historically, culturally and psychologically" (23), Kaur further asserts that Walcott's poetry throws up "complex issues of conflict and portrays the impact of the cyclical waves of colonial incursions on the West Indian past and its geographical location, and that changed their destiny and identity forever" (541).

Iftekarul Azam believes that some of the themes that recur in Walcott's poetry bother on hybridity, ambivalence and the postcolonial dilemma (342). These come as no surprise because they inform some of the major thematic thrusts of Caribbean poets. However, Walcott presents these themes with particular vigour such that Catherine Douillet believes his poetry can "serve as ethnographic documents of the challenges and tensions of postcolonial societies, calling into question the place of colonial history and language in their contemporary culture and identity" (1). She further sees Walcott's poetry as exploratory of the themes of Caribbean identity and the divided postcolonial self (1). Kaur also believes that the themes of spirituality and religion are present in Walcott's poetry (542). Walcott confirms this view when he asserts "I have never separated the writing of poetry from prayer. I have grown up believing it is a vocation, a religious vocation." (qtd. in Kaur 542).

Critics have also praised Derek Walcott for his unique literary style. Jaime Tung believes that the style of Walcott is constructed around "melancholic metaphors" (13). He further adds repetitions as one of the style in which Walcott uses to "mesmerise the reader" and to further this point, Tung says:

> Walcott repeatedly returns to a single word, rhyme, or symbol within a poem, but almost always presents it differently the second time around. Thus, unlike his counterpart, Walcott masters the art of subtlety while simultaneously maintaining the reader's interest. In "Exile," for example, the instances of repetition are similar to a trail of clues. These clues in turn, encourage us to return to a previous stanza and in a sense, literally "remember" how Walcott had previously used a certain word or rhyme (24).

Other aspects of style are identified by Tung such as Walcott's use of alliteration which, according to him, "greatly contributes to the feeling of repetition" (25) and the committed use of rhyme and rhythm. Carmen Castaneda further identifies the use of metonymy and allusion as part of the "innovate and elegant style" of Walcott (1). Akuso Solomon examines the allusiveness of Walcott's poetry and identifies major influences that his poetry alludes to such as "Baudelaire, Cesaire, Gauguin, Homer, Joyce, Rhys and Wordsworth" (181). Rai and Rai (1) believe that one of the key indicators of Walcott's style is the "abandoning of dead metaphors", which are often repeated metaphors in European literature. They further identify the uniqueness of his language as a protest against European norms by challenging the grammar of the English language and the use of creoles. Rai and Rai (4) also examine the use of imagery as Walcott's "unassailable forte". They fully assert, "With the help of images, Walcott has been successful in creating a rich textual density which adds to poetic beauty of the poem, uncovering his unique poetic skills which make him stand out as a very talented poet in the sphere of world poetry".

Derek Walcott's ingenuity in thematic and stylistic aesthetics has earned him an undisputable place in the literary pantheon of the Caribbean world. Critics have identified *Omeros* as his magnum opus and the poem that was cited for his Nobel Laureate. Some of his other known works include *In a Green Night, The Castaway and Other Poems, The Arkansas Statement, The Prodigal* and *White Egrets*, among other numerous poetry collections.

Thematic Constructions of the Caribbean Experience in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

Omeros is an epic poem published in 1990 by Derek Walcott. The poem is written in the epic form in about 8,500 lines and divided into seven books and sixty-four chapters. The poem is a narrative and has affinities with the epics of Homer and Dante. The title of the poem is derived from the Greek name of Homer. *Omeros* is written in a largely poetic and obscure language and has St. Lucia, Africa, North America, and Europe as its settings. There are four major intertwining plot sequences and they are based around; the relationship between Helen, Achille and Hector, Major Plunkett and his wife, Maud, Philoctete and his association with Ma Kilman; and Walcott himself as a narrator of his personal experiences.

Grant Patten believes that *Omeros* is "about the desire to get back to pure originality; to the point of not being possessed by or based on anybody else's culture, however impossible that may seem. It is about wanting to get back to one's "roots"" (2). The complexity of narration and the structure of the poem all come together to create a formidable epic poem which is described by Oliver Taplin as a celebration of the Caribbean through the present and for its past (214).

Omeros essentially bothers on the life of Achille who duels with Hector over Helen. Achille goes on a spiritual journal to Africa where he learns of his real name and hears his family's original language. This experience changes him and makes him appreciate life by the seaside unlike Hector who migrates to the city in order to be a taxi driver. Philoctete also undergoes a spiritual healing at the hands of the psychic, Ma Kilman, while Major Plunkett arrives the Caribbean with his wife, Maud, and takes an interest in Helen, who is called "The Helen of the West Indies". Plunkett is filled with guilt at being a member of the white class that ruined the West Indies and he writes a military history of the Caribbean with the Helenic metaphor. He eventually loses Maud, his wife, to cancer and ends up indigenized in the Caribbean. Walcott finally takes over the narrative by unveiling his meeting with his father's ghost in which he is told to travel and write about his people. In his travels, he meets Antigone, Weldon and eventually Omeros who helps him find redemption and his inner sight. This encounter becomes the eventual muse for his poetry.

The poem is replete with several themes. A study of all the themes that can be found in this poetic masterpiece cannot be completed within the scope of this work. However, we have narrowed down the themes specifically to those that bother on the Caribbean experience and how it has been woven in the poem. Some of the themes that are addressed in this work are well known themes common to Caribbean literature. However, what is exciting about them is the way in which Walcott has presented them peculiarly.

One of the central and most important themes that run across the poem is that of identity. Identity is a major thematic thrust in West Indian literature. The West Indies has grown time to accommodate people of various descents. Some of its inhabitants are descended from Africa, East India, Europe, the Americas, and Asia. There is no singular Caribbean identity that can encompass the total amount of people that are present in the Isles. This phenomenon is what Julia Udofia refers to when she articulates that the West Indies is called "an artificially created society" (57). Many of the inhabitants of the West Indies have lost touch of their original roots and are constantly in search of their identity. This manifests in various forms in West Indian literature. In the poetry of Walcott, identity is a recurrent theme. The first issue that bother upon identity in the Caribbean is the loss of original identity and Walcott thematises this in the poem. Achille, the central character, losses his original

name, Afolabe, as part of the loss of identity. Walcott stresses the importance of name(s) in the construction of identity. The very title of the poem, Omeros, is the true Greek form of the name, Homer, much like Afolabe is the true name of Achille. Walcott's view of identity is shown is reflected in the poem when the poet persona says: "... Men take their colours / as do trees do from the native soil of their birth, / and once they are moved elsewhere, entire cultures / lose the art of mimicry, and then, where the trees were, / the fir, the palm, the olive, the cedar, a desert place widens in the heart" (208). In the extracted verses, one can see the premium that Walcott places on identity. He believes that a man is rooted in his land of descent and when a transplant occurs, as is the case of most of the West Indians, identities are lost. The loss of identity is intertwined with the loss of history. This is the point that Derek Walcott makes when the poet persona asserts, "Helen needed a history, / that was the pity that Plunkett felt towards her. / Not his, but her story. Not theirs, but Helen's war" (30). This verse is drawn from Major Plunkett's fascination with the reconstruction of Helen's history. This fascination is hinged on his belief that Helen has no history and consequently no identity. Major Plunkett, at the end of the poem, also embraces the Caribbean identity as he settles into the indigenous way of life of the people. Achille battles between his African and Caribbean identities. After his transcendental experience with his father, he eventually embraces his identity and this is realised in the poem when the poet persona says, "Today he was African, his own epitaph / his own resurrection" (273). He eventually reconciles his identity by finding "someplace, / some cove he could settle like another Aeneas, / founding not Rome but home" (301).

The theme of rootlessness is closely tied to the theme of identity. Rootlessness is caused by a lack of identity. The West Indians are often confronted with the dilemma of choosing between their African roots and their Caribbean identity and most never fit fully into either. This presents the problem of rootlessness. Africans in the Caribbean have been cut off from their roots physically, spiritually, psychologically and emotionally and the debilitating effect of this is the overwhelming feeling of exclusion and alienation. In *Omeros*, the poet persona hampers upon the point when he asserts that, "... He hacked every root at the heel. / 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). In this extract, the poet compares the West Indian with yams whose roots have been cut off. Philoctete is the one who cuts off the yam's roots in a vengeful rage in order to express frustration at his rootlessness. This scene has been aptly described by Ogaga Ifowodo thus: "while the scene highlights quite touchingly Philoctete's personal crisis of identity to the point of total self dissolution into the temporary madness of self destruction by way of the willful destruction of his means of his sustenance, it also evokes the race-wide history that caused

the conflict in the first place" (117). Achille expresses the frustration faced by the average West Indian at the loss of their history and culture in the scene where he converses with his father. He asserts: "Everything was forgotten. You also. I do not know. / The deaf sea has changed around every name that you gave / us; trees, men, we yearn for a sound that is missing" (137). This transcendental experience echoes the rootlessness of the West Indian in a world that has changed his name and his identity and reconstructed it with alien customs and worldviews. Afolabe ultimately surmises the effect of rootlessness when he refers to Achille as only "the ghost of a name" (138). The loss of identity is reverberated by Achille in line with slavery when he asserts that in the West Indies, they accept whatever name they were called and completely cut all ties with their previous identities (138).

The theme of colonisation and slavery is also predominant in *Omeros.* The history of the Caribbean cannot be discussed without recourse to its slavery and colonial past. The trans-atlantic slave trade that lasted for about 400 years saw the influx of millions of Africans into the Caribbean as slaves. These slaves forged their own identities and created their distinct ways of life. Theirs was a heritage of pain, chains, and neglect. When they were eventually freed from slavery, colonialism in the Caribbean was officially in progress. Western cultural hegemony threatened the order the newly freed Caribbean were accustomed to and a split-consciousness evolved. The themes that bother on the slave and colonial past and its legacy are replete in Caribbean literature. Walcott's *Omeros* examines the twin issues of slavery and colonialism. In the poem, slavery is thematised generally through the ancestry of the major characters; Achille, Hectos, Helen and Philoctete. Achille, in particular, suffers the brunt of slavery as obviated in his loss of identity and name. In his psychic projection to Africa, he experiences bits of the trans-atlantic slave trade as his briefly regains from his amnesia blow. The poet persona describes, "A skeletal warrior / stood up straight in the stern and guided his shoulders, / clamped his neck in cold iron, and altered the oar. / Achille wanted to scream, he wanted the brown water to harden into a road, but the river widened ahead / and closed behind him" (133). This brief experience above, coupled with the encounter with his father in which he tells of his loss of name, inform just a minute fraction of the horrors of slavery. Slavery is also thematised in the poem in the description of Philoctete's wounds. The wound is believed to be caused by "...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). In the light of the above, it is believed that Philoctete's wound is reminiscent of the period of slavery and thus is a wound to the psyche and not to the body. Colonisation is a tempered theme in the poem. It is largely thematised in the character of Major Plunkett, a Briton. Most of the West Indies

were colonised by Great Britain and are thus members of the Commonwealth. Colonisation, however, brought its own set of problems on the already divided psyche of the Caribbean. Plunkett aligns with the British imperial forces when he asserts, "We helped ourselves / to these green islands like olives from a saucer, / munched on the pith, then spat their sucked stones on a plate, / like a melon's black seeds" (25). The verses above show the exploitation and imperialism of the Caribbean by the British in the guise of colonialism. This is further exacerbated at the point where Major Plunkett believes Helen, who represents the Caribbean, is hopeless and must be redeemed; much like the British believed their colonial governments was a charitable deed. This is expressed when the poet personal asserts that Plunkett: "...felt a duty / towards what he perceives as her hopelessness, / something to redress" (30) and to this end, he insists "Helen needed a history" in order to make her story legitimate. Plunkett's erotic desire for Helen is an expression of the British desire for imperialism through the agency of colonialism. The poet persona aptly surmises the cataclysmic effects of colonialism in the Caribbean in a sarcastic tone when he asserts that:

> Everything that was once theirs
> was given to us now to ruin it as we chose,
> but in the bugle of twilight also, something unexpected.
> A government that made no difference to Philoctete,
> to Achille. That did not buy a bottle of white kerosene
> from Ma Kilman, a dusk that had no historical regret
> for the fishermen beating mackerel in their seine,
> only for Plunkett, in the pale orange glow of the wharf […]
> this town he had come to love
> (119-120).

Walcott also preaches the theme of acceptance and reconciliation in this poem. Walcott has often been described as the poet of reconciliation as opposed to the appellation given to V.S. Naipaul as a pessimist. Walcott's argument is that the West Indian man has to make do with his condition for better or for worse and this message is frequently preached through the agency of the "Crusoe" and "Adam" motifs which are recurrent in most of his poems. In *Omeros*, Walcott casts a shadow of himself in Philoctete who suffers from a severe wound and falls into a deep existential crisis. Eventually, he reflects on the dilemma of the West Indians and preaches reconciliation by asserting: "Why couldn't they love the place, same way, together, / the way he always loved her, even with his sore? / Love Helen like a wife in good and bad weather, / in sickness and health, its beauty in being poor?" (108). "Helen" here symbolises the West Indies that has provided unbiased habitation for the West Indians. Ma Kilman's healing of Philoctete's wounds represents the healing of the pains and bitterness of

the past as the West Indian moves forward in conceiving the future without the brunt of slavery and colonisation as baggage. In describing this healing, the poet persona asserts, "The yoke of the wrong name lifted from his shoulders" (247). The ultimate integration of Achille and Major Plunkett into the West Indian society represents reconciliation and an acceptance of the new Caribbean identity that has evolved. Achille eventually idealises a "new world... / wide enough for a new Eden / of various Adams" (181). Achille is compared with Aeneas on his search for home in the Caribbean while Plunkett recognises his "own complicity in continually exploiting the island and its black inhabitants, [and] lets go of his need to control, historicise and classicise the island" (Jacqueline Rice 59).

The theme of migration is also rooted deep in Walcott's *Omeros*. Migration is a common theme in West Indian literature and it is a product of various realities in actuality. Kamau Braithwaite is renowned for his poems that examine the issue of immigration and emigration in the Caribbean. In the earliest history of the Caribbean Isles, Europeans, Asians, Indians, and even Americans migrated to the Caribbean Isles in search of better economic opportunities. In the post-emancipation Caribbean, the quality was life was low; there were few or no basic amenities and economic opportunities were almost non-existent so people started to migrate to bigger cities in the Caribbean or to other places in Europe and North America in search for better opportunities. All these culminate into a formidable consciousness of migration in the mind of the Caribbean man. In literature, this manifests thematically. Walcott's *Omeros* treats this theme using the characters of Hector and Major Plunkett. Major Plunkett represents the class of white persons who migrate to the Caribbean Isles. However, unlike White migrants of the pre-emancipation period, he was not in search of economic opportunities but of rediscovery and healing. Hector represents the migration of West Indians to urban areas in search of better economic opportunities. In the poem, Hector obtains "The Comet, a sixteen seater passenger-van" and heads to become a taxi driver in the city, far from the ambience of the riverside (117). His migration is further described by the poet person as a movement that is "sliding into two worlds without switching gears, One, atavistic [...] / and the other world that shot them / to an Icarian future they could not control" (117). The contrast here between the rustic and humble background and the social mobility of the city informs the crux of the theme of migration in this poem. Migration is also thematised in the travels of Walcott himself, as a narrator in the poem, in search for self-discovery and identity. His journey is akin to that of Plunkett who goes to the Caribbean. Walcott reaches the United States and identifies with the plight of the Native American who have been dispossessed of their lands (175), he further visits European countries like Portugal, Spain and Britain and finally returns to St. Lucia with a sense of commitment, maturity, and redemption. The persona asserts, having completed his travels,: "Once you have seen

everything and gone everywhere, / cherish our island for its green simplicities, / enthrone yourself, if your sheet is a barber-chair" (187).

The Homerian Style of Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

The preceding has attempted to examine some of the major themes in Walcott's *Omeros*. A literary study cannot be complete with an examination of style. This poem has often been described as Homerian with regards to its structure and form. It is not a common style found in Caribbean literature and thus adds to the critical attention that Walcott receives. In examining the style of this poem, we constrain ourselves to the form and structure of the poem, the language of the poem and some foregrounded stylistic devices that culminate in making the poem a masterpiece.

The first obvious and key aspect of Homerian style in this poem is the epic form in which the poem is written. An epic is a long narrative poem about heroic deeds and experiences. The title of the poem is taken from Homer, probably the most acknowledged writer of the epic in the Western canon. However, in a radical shift from the classical epic form, Walcott's poem lacks the heroic candour of *The Odyssey* or *The Iliad* but it takes up the life of low Caribbean characters as they struggle to make sense of their society. The epical journey of heroic characters into the underworld as seen in the epics of Dante mutates in this poem into the psychic journey of Achille to Africa where he meets with his mother, like Odysseus, and ultimately his father, Afolabe (133-143). This descent to the underworld is the turning point for the roundness of the hero in the epic form. In *Omeros*, this experience has the effect of changing Achille's psyche and making him understand the concept of reconciliation.

In the traditional epic form, there is usually an opening statement of theme that introduces the writer's vision. This opening remark is important in understanding the direction of the poem and its philosophical hinge. In *Omeros*, like in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the statement of theme comes at the end. Even though this is a modification to the known Homerian style, it is a Homerian style nonetheless. In the poem, the statement of theme is rendered thus:

> I sang of quiet Achille, Afolabe's son,
> who never ascended in an elevators,
> who had no passport, since the horizon needs none,
> never begged nor borrowed, was nobody's waiter,
> whose end, when it comes, will be a death by water [...]
> I sang of our wide country, the Caribbean Sea.
> Who hated shoes, whose soles were as cracked as a stone,

who was gentle with ropes, who had one suit alone,
whom no man dared insult and who insulted no one,
whose grin was a white breaker cresting, but whose frown
was a growing thunderheads...
(320).

Another aspect of style implemented in the poem is the use of the tercet and terza rima form. The terza rima is a rhyming pattern in which three rhyming verses are alternated and the second verse forms the rhyming sound of the next verse, which also begins an alternation. This sequence continues all through the poem although Walcott separates the terzine into stanzas. His rhyming scheme follows the *aba bcb* pattern found in the true terza rima. The use of the hexameter is to make the work conform to the true Homerian verbal style which hints that the work is meant to be sung. These styles add slightly Homerian and Danterian touches to the poem. The following verses best describe the use of the terza rima style:

the dogs trotted, then paused, angling their muzzles *a*
sideways to gnaw on trembling legs, then lift a nose *b*
at more scavengers. A triumphant Achilles, *a*

his hands gloved in blood, moved to the other canoes *b*
whose hulls were thumping with fishes. In the spread seine *c*
the silvery mackerel multiplied the noise *b*
(324).

The language of the poem is another aspect of style that deserves consideration. The poem is written in English as the basic language. However, Walcott frequently uses Patois and French in order to paint the speech pattern and multilingual nature of the West Indies. While the narrator of the poem mainly maintains English, the characters often delve into Patois and French and sometimes in a style full of humour. Below is an extract:

"Touchez-i, encore: N'ai fender choux-ous-u, salope!""Touch it again, and I'll split your arse, you bitch!" "Moi j'a dire—'ous pas prêter un rien. 'Ous ni shallope,
'ous ni seine, 'ous croire 'ous ni choueur campêche?"
(16).

The extract above shows the resourcefulness of Walcott in imbibing the speech patterns of the Caribbean people into the poem. Even though the English reader may not be able to access what is written here, it is still a point of stylistic fascination nonetheless. The use of Patois, which is a codemixed language of English, French and some other Caribbean languages, can also be seen when the DJ in No Pain Cafe says: “This here is Gros Îlet’s /

night, United Force, garçon, we go rock this village / till cock wake up!" (110). One can see the linguistic resourcefulness of Walcott's poem in light of these.

The poem is also replete with imagery of all forms. Most notably is the poet's use of visual imagery to paint vivid scenes and create a certain form of realism in the poem. A masterly display of imagery is what makes a great poet. Walcott has done this in several dimensions. Most notably is the scene when he is transported to Africa. Walcott relies largely on visual imagery to recreate the African experience. This is also what obtains in Homer's epics. Since the epic is largely a poetic form, imagery is needed to enhance the narrative effect. The following is an extract of the visual imagery created masterly by Walcott: "those images that flickered into real mirages: / naked mangroves walking beside him, knotted logs / wriggling into the water, the wet, yawning boulders / of oven-mouthed hippopotami. A skeletal warrior / stood up straight in the stern and guided his shoulders, / clamped his neck in cold iron, and altered the oar" (133). One can see the richness of the visual imagery of Africa and its flora and fauna as created by Walcott in the extract above. In the poem, the images of a canoe, the sea swift, the iguana, and the almond tree, among others, recur and add thematic unity in the poem.

The final aspect of style that can be examined within the scope of this work is the use of symbolism. Poets usually deploy symbols in order to convey deeper meanings to the poem. Some symbols become so by repetition, others by virtue of what they are and others by what they represent. Symbolism forms a crucial part of Homerian style. In *Omeros*, Walcott has deployed symbols across the whole length and breadth of the poem. One of the common symbols in the poem is the sea, which represents the life of the Caribbean people. In the poem, the sea features greatly as the route by which the Caribbean people were brought to the Isles as well as where they get their sustenance from. Beyond this, the poet compares the tides and waves of the sea with the people when he says "I could hear the crumpling parchment of the sea in / the wind's hand, a silence without emphasis, / but I saw no shadow underline my being" (282). The symbolism the sea takes here is of helplessness in the face of fate and this is what the poet believes to constitute the Caribbean life. Another symbol in the poem is ants, which are used to symbolise the Caribbean people and their helplessness as shown in the following lines: "There, like ants or angels, they see their native town, / unknown, raw, insignificant" (75). The symbol of the ant also recurs in the poem where the poet enhances his comparison of the Caribbean people to ants by saying:

Her hair sprung free as the moss. Ants scurried
through the wiry curls, barring, then passing each other

the same message with scribbling fingers and forehead

touching forehead. Ma Kilman bent hers forward,
and as her lips moved with the ants, her mossed skull heard

the ants talking the language of her great-grandmother
(244).

In the lines above, the symbolism of the ants is realised through their transmission of the language of Ma Kilman's ancestors. In this vein, they symbolise the lost heritage of the Caribbean people. Other symbols in the poem include the sea-swift, which symbolises healing and reconciliation, and the frigate bird, which symbolises the restoration of dignity for the common Caribbean man.

Derek Walcott's Vision in *Omeros*

Simply put, Derek Walcott's ultimate aim in *Omeros* is to preach the message of reconciliation and adaptation. Derek Walcott is known for his largely reconciliatory stand as opposed to the other writers of the Caribbean who often times relish in the memory and experiences of the past. In order to preach this message in the poem, he calls upon the memory of the past through Achille's experience with Afolabe. After examining the past, he evaluates the present circumstances of suffering, pain, poverty, and neglect and finally makes do with the condition with the hope of building a better life. In doing this, he alludes to Aeneas and hopes to make the Caribbean his home. This is often called the Adamic or Crusoe vision of Derek Walcott. Apart from reconciliation, Walcott also attempts to break the barriers of conformity and norm and establish the unique Caribbean identity through the mending and breaking of the epic genre to suit his taste and message. This innovativeness marks off Caribbean style from any style it may have been appendaged to in the past. Derek Walcott's vision is summed up by the Nobel Committee when he was awarded the Nobel Prize thus: "for a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment" (par. 1).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to examine Derek Walcott's *Omeros* in light of the Caribbean experience in which it is concerned with and the Homerian style in which it is written. While this study lays no claim to being wholesome and final, it is hoped that the main points have been conveyed adequately. This work has examined the themes of slavery/colonialism, identity, rootlessness, reconciliation, and migration in the poem and these themes are common to Caribbean literature as a whole. This study has also examined some of the aspects of Homerian style such as the epic form, the terza rima style, the use of symbolism, imagery, and language in the poem. In all, it has been realised that the work is

truly a rewriting of the Caribbean total experience using the peculiar Homerian style. It is a work that deserves more critical attention and accolades.

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