Bringing it Closer Home: A Close Reading Derek Walcott's *Odyssey*

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Abstract

This article locates and explains the significance of the word and concept of 'home' as the core of Walcott's 'creolization' of a canonical text. It contends that the use of a classic, to which the concept of 'home' is indispensable, allows Derek Walcott to explore a range of possible meaning and intensifies the magnitude and implication of the play in both general and post-colonial terms. Working through the problematic of such an endeavour, this article uses the theoretical concepts of mimicry, camouflage, and *différance* to understand the mechanisms employed by Walcott to reconstruct and claim a European classic. In order to do so, the paper engages in a close-reading of *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*. The traditional Aristotelian framework from the *Poetics* is used to navigate through the plot and structure of the play to aid the close reading.

Keywords: creolization, home, *Odyssey*, *Poetics*, Walcott.

"The harbour of home is what your wanderings mean" (*The Odyssey* 2.6.159).[1]

The primacy of the word and concept of 'home' is the striking *différance* in Derek Walcott's mimicked mimesis of Homer's classic. It is this primacy and its possible import that forms the basis of this article. The structure of the stage version of *The Odyssey* is inextricably linked to the concept of 'home' as the story has for its basis,

[1]. All references to *The Odyssey* are from Walcott, Derek. *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*. Faber and Faber, London: 1993.

Odysseus' journey home after the Fall of Troy. Without 'home', the play is without its 'true north' (1.12.85), lost, journeying without destination. In keeping with the central position it occupies with regard to "end", the concept, "home" is indispensable to all elements of the play's structure. This paper aims to locate and explain the significance of 'home' as the core of Walcott's 'creolization' and contends that the use of a classic, to which the concept of 'home' is indispensable, allows Derek Walcott to explore a range of possible meaning and intensifies the magnitude and implication of the play in both general and post-colonial terms. Seeing "the necessity of lodging oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it" (Derrida qtd. in Young 195), Walcott engineers "the very software" of the epic to include "actual rhythm and syllables" (Brathwaite 9) and create a "*total expression"* (18-19), that allows him to rework the European canon through mimicry, one of the "most elusive and effective strategies" (Bhabha 85), the effect of [which] is camouflage" (Lacan qtd. in Bhabha 85).

The very condition of being 'away' from a particular place embodies within itself that conception of a particularised place and space which allows for the use of the word 'away.' The place with reference to where this word is employed is usually the 'home'. Migration and migratory experience are connected in their entirety with a visualisation of home in all its value-laden import. For Odysseus then, the desire for home is of a man in a condition of forced migration or exile where there is a consistent underlying possibility of the return but no guarantee for it. This very condition allows for all sorts of conceptions to be built around the concept of home. The more time spent away or in quest, distorts and reclaims images of the home within the mind of the one who experiences it. These conceptions form such a dear part of the memory that any threat to

their existence is unacceptable and automatically, a certain amount of nostalgia and fear ensconces itself within the visualisation of home. This makes the entire act of going back both poignant and immediate.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘home’ as:

> The place of one’s dwelling or nurturing, with the conditions, circumstances, and feelings which naturally and properly attach to it, and are associated with it…the mother country as distinguished from the colonies…the result of motion [journey…and] self-possession.

The destination of all journeys is a particular physical or psychological conception of ‘home’. The very notion of the journey that is inseparable from this text, embodies within its fabric the concept and desire for ‘home’ and ‘destination.’ With reference to this article, it is essential to note the use of ‘home’ to distinguish the colony from the homeland in the lexicon. For post-colonial writers, home is a universal concept and must be reclaimed as such. Embodying universal connotations and values, it can be anywhere in the world, Ithaca or the West Indies, it essentially implies security, warmth, love, and hope. This desire for reclaiming both the concept of ‘home’ in general and the ‘homeland’ in particular, cannot be dissociated from post-colonial concerns. All writing fundamentally works to reclaim the ‘homeland’ with its “conditions, circumstances and feelings” as “self definition is also a definition of the community” (D’ Aguiar 162).

Not confined to a particular geographical setting, Walcott, like Odysseus in many ways, calls himself a “homeless satellite” in his poem “Fortune Traveller” (qtd. in D’Aguiar

162). It is for this that D' Aguiar thinks: "[the] covenant with place must be seen as integral to Walcott's sense of owing divided-but-dual loyalty to the two distinct cultural traditions played out historically in one landscape" (162). Walcott's concept of 'home' is essentially related to this 'one landscape'— an abstraction of experiences and life that is rooted in remembrance of those experiences. What then becomes clear is the fact that, for Walcott, identity is very closely intertwined with the concept of 'home'. The concept of 'home', with all its magnitude and meaning, is carried through the course of the play and is ever-present in its undertones. The idea, complete with its connotative and denotative implication, is built into the structures of the play—the plot, character, setting, mood and theme.

The plot essentially determines the reason behind the occurrences within the narrative – the "why" in the story. It allows the reader an insight into the minds of the characters, in order to not only understand, but also sympathise with the choices they make. In *The Odyssey*, the 'why' for things is always the desire for 'home'. There are four main stages in the development of a plot: exposition: the information needed to understand a story; complication: the catalyst that begins the major conflict; climax: the turning point in the story that occurs when characters try to resolve the complication and the resolution: the set of events that bring the story to a close. In Walcott's version of *The Odyssey* all four elements are invariably linked to the concept of 'home'. The exposition is made by Billy Blue who functions as the chorus, informing us of Odysseus' journey back home after the Fall of Troy (1.1.1). The complication, which constitutes the major part of the play, tells us of Odysseus' detention by Circe and Calypso (1.10.72), his adventure with Cyclops (1.8.64), the one-eyed monster whom he blinds incurring the wrath of Cyclops' father

Poseidon, who vows not to let Odysseus return home. The climax occurs when aided by Athena, Odysseus returns home to Ithaca and the resolution, which is prolonged and episodic, occurs when all those who are essential to the completion of his conception of 'home' accept and recognise Odysseus. The first to recognise Odysseus is his dog who "[totters] to him on newborn legs" and dies at his feet (2.4.129), seeing this, Eumaeus, the old swineherd too, recognises Odysseus realising that the "dog saw more than [he] did" (2.4.129). Next in line are Odysseus' old nurse Eurycleia, who recognises him by the scar on his thigh (2.5.136-137) and Telemachus, his son (2.5.138). Odysseus' toil and anguish climax befittingly when Penelope, Odysseus' wife, recognises him through a secret that only the two of them share— "Their bed is rooted. Its base is an olive tree" (2.6.157).

'Home' becomes the single most powerful force that provides impetus for action in the course of the play. Penelope's repetitive action—stitching and unstitching the design with her 'rosy fingers' (1.1.1)—is essentially a desperate attempt at delaying what seemed to be inevitable— one of the 'suitors' sharing with her the bed that symbolises her love for her husband, and by token of that, shattering her idea of 'home'. Telemachus, who has spent his life without the father figure, looks at the return of Odysseus as the only way to achieve 'home'. It is for this that on the insistence of Athena, he journeys to Pylos and Sparta (1.2.12). Last but not least, this voyage that Odysseus undertakes is to find his "true north" (1.12.85) –his home, his wife, his son and his "olive-tree bed" (1.12.83).

The setting of the play, which is provided by the sea, embodies within it the metaphor of journey that can only culminate when those at sea, both literally and figuratively, return home. The nostalgic mood that hovers over the atmosphere of the play can be traced to

the longing for ‘home’. ‘Displacement’ and ‘dislocation’ which constitute a “major feature of post-colonial literatures”, is presented as the main thematic concern in the play (Ashcroft, Griffiths *et al.* 8). This is evident through the fact that all action is related to searching for the anchor that can provide a sense of belonging to the characters that are ‘displaced’ both psychologically and physically. The fact that the play follows a single plot structure is essentially defined by the Homeric model, most appreciated by Aristotle. This is not an aberration as far as Walcott’s reworking of the Homeric epic goes. Walcott, in most part, remains true to the classical form. Walcott does however, add to the universality of the epic in terms of location, the use of native machinery, “a homeless wandering voice” (2.6.151) in place of the traditional Greek chorus and by stressing certain thematic strains like dispossession, dislocation, and place-identity—our primary concern within the concept of ‘home’. This adds to the import of the epic without losing its essentially Greek origin—a point that needs to be very clear if this reworking, or ‘mimicry’ (Boehmer 138-179), is to be valued within post-colonial terms.

Elleke Boehmer defines ‘mimickers’ as those who “[reflect] back to the coloniser a distorted image of his world: [undercutting] his categories of perception” (172-173). Without this ‘mimic effect’, we would only be creating new literature and not purging the current discourses of their imperialist negation of the ‘other’. It has therefore been a tradition not to change the essential structures of the parent work. As Brathwaite notices, ‘the form and the content are very closely connected to European models…aesthetically, there are no unique elements…apart from the *voice* of the poet reciting his own poem (21). To Boehmer, this is integral to the aim of ‘decolonising’ the works and languages of the Empire:

> To disavow dominant colonial myths and languages, the colonised had in the first place to inhabit them. European conceptual traditions in history, philosophy, literature, and so on, which downgraded that which was non-European, had first to be displaced by an act of repetition, even 'slavish' copying. Success lay in the camouflage and subterfuge (171).

The concept of 'home' in Walcott's version is thus disguised within the 'slavish copying' of Homer's epic myth. Boehmer quotes Walcott: "Parroting our master's style and voice, we make his language our own" (211). As language is intrinsically linked to cultural identity, this 'parroting' colonises, as it were, the identity of the Empire, 'remaking English' to fit particular conceptions of 'homeland'. This "*imitation by subversion*" (Boehmer 174), can be viewed as an attempt at absolute 'deconstruction.' An attempt at purging the epic of its "incompleteness, omissions and contradictions" (Belsey 109), bringing out the multiplicity and diversity of meaning. It is thus that any difference that results within the 'copying', giving the sense of "*almost the same but not quite*" (Bhabha 86) is where all meaning resides. As Homi Bhabha puts it, "the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (88). For Walcott, the 'slippage', 'excess' and 'difference' all seem to reside in his repeated mention of, and allusion to home/homeland. The balance between 'slavish copying' and the 'difference' is a delicate one. All meaning and value of the text as a whole new genre which desires a particularized approach and understanding to the nuances it embodies within itself resides in this balance. It is this balance and other factors inextricably linked to post-colonial concerns that add to the poignancy and relevance of the concept of 'home.'

With reference to post-colonial preoccupations and contexts, it is also important to understand the rationale behind the reworking of English cannons to fit both Caribbean and universal paradigms. The use of Billy Blue in place of the Greek chorus (which, in Homer, functions as society) and the inclusion of Caribbean customs like song and dance give the classic a new dimension. The story then has the potential to go beyond the confines of the Empire to include the 'homeland.' For instance, Act I Scene VIII begins with Shango dancers and drummers. It is interesting that Walcott uses Shango which is a religious dance that combines the powerful rhythms and chants from the Santeria and Yoruba traditions that are native to Nigeria and are used by the Cubans to worship their West African ancestors and gods. By doing so "Walcott [lays] claim to a literature some would argue [is] not his own 'since Walcott is usually identified as black'" (King 580). Walcott could 'lay claim' to this literature only through a "beguiling combination of the homely and the epic as [Walcott] veers between witty jive-talk and wondrous imagery to bring the ancient story alive" (*The Daily Express*; qtd. in King 564). It is through this animated style that he manages to 'camouflage' his connotations of 'home' and 'dislocation'. For instance, when Telemachus says, "I'm from where everybody comes from. From my home […] so where are you from?", Odysseus is quick to remark "From home as well" (2.4.129-130). This highlights the fact that 'home' is a concept integral to all those who live in this world and its conception is not limited to particular communities. It is for this reason that illusions to the 'homeland' are expounded within the wider concept of 'home'.

The Odyssey is a stylised West Indian play, using song and dance and a narrator in the text. Doing this must have been a personal success for Walcott who managed to 'West

Indianize' a European classic by adding elements of his homeland to it. This, in my opinion, holds an important place in the context of post-colonial writing, an attempt at 'creolizing' and universalising literatures central to the European experience. In its repetition rather than re-presentation, "the fetish mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorizes them" (91) and "disrupts [their] authority" (Bhabha 88). The 'deauthorization' and 'disruption' work towards placing the colonised "in the foreground of the world, reining his poetic power on the world, 'open to all the breaths of the world.' [Saying] I embrace the world! I am the world!" (Fanon 127). It is an act of rebellion, of reclaim, an act of distortion and appropriation. The inclusion of the homeland from where it had been left out, a demand for recognition, acceptance and rejection, all embodied within a single structure. Various critics have commended "Walcott's extraordinary retelling of this classic tale as 'magnificently visual' with 'the spectacular hues and rhythms of a West Indian carnival'" (King 536). According to Oliver Taplin, "Walcott set the epic in an archipelago that is at once Caribbean and Mediterranean and in a sense universalised beyond locality" (qtd. in King 536). For Brathwaite, this is part of the essential recognition for the "use [of] resources which have always been there, but which have been denied to them—and which they have sometimes themselves denied" (42), "the detonations…have imploded us into new shapes and consciousness of ourselves" (49). Also, just like the chorus functioned as society in Homer's epic, complete in all aspects and situations, the addition of particularised nuances of tone, emotion and vocabulary in Walcott's redoing of Homer's *Odyssey* puts a claim onto the epic through a restructured choral society. In doing so, Walcott fulfils the demands of the oral tradition in that it includes "not only the griot but the audience to complete the community: the

noise and the sounds that the maker makes are responded by the audience and are returned to him. Hence, we have the creation of a continuum where meaning truly resides" (Brathwaite 18-19).

This is evident especially through the use of informal, abusive phrases, "YOU BASTARDS" (2.1.104), colloquialisms, "Mama I'm your son" (1.14.90), Americanisms, "Yeah, but the word 'home' swirls in the caves of your ears" (1.14.90), broken, Caribbean dialect, "People don't credit them now. Them too civilize" (1.2.8) and 'Black accent', "I'm nobody, dude. You're *ugly*, I believe it." (1.2.66-67). Walcott's variations of medium, language, and cultural context recall Peter Sellars' claim that "a classic is a house we're still living in" (2). This metaphor of the "house and the changes made by successive occupants has a particular resonance…as a comment on Odysseus' (and perhaps Walcott's) search for a home where he can renegotiate his life" (2). And it may be thus that "Walcott's 'classic house' not only has new occupants, it has also changed its location" (2). Critics commended Walcott on the way he merged the Aegean with the Caribbean Sea and his mixtures of diction (King 564). Derek Walcott suggests that this refraction of European styles relates to the irony of the writers' 'differential positioning' which offers strengths which are not obtainable elsewhere (qtd. in Boehmer 174). This results from the fact that "the oriental other's only identity comes from its relationship with the West, and not surprisingly turns out to be nothing more than a mirror in which the West sees the rejected and disavowed parts of itself" (Young 200). It is this 'differential positioning' within which mimicry is at work.

The concept of home is the core of Walcott's *Odyssey*, a fact not quite applicable to Homer's version in a similar manner. There are approximately seventy-five instances where the very word 'home' or 'house' is used in the stage version of *The Odyssey* as compared to only forty-eight in Homer's entire epic, which too, is inclusive of all references to 'home' as place and as a concept. It is interesting to note how, in Homer's version, the desire for home is particularised with reference to Odysseus' final destination, and that too, as something particular to him alone:

> But th' end shall crown all; therefore fate will deal So
> well with him, to let him land, and see His
> native earth, friends, house and family (*The Odyssey* 5.58-60).

According to Michael Billington, Walcott's *Odyssey* is essentially a "story of homecoming, reconciliation and rebirth" (qtd. in King 536). The desire for 'home' is not limited to only the main characters; almost all characters say something that represents their notion of 'home'. It is worthwhile to notice here how clear Odysseus is in his visualisation of home. Odysseus' first clear conception of home is presented at the very beginning of the play, "Home to the fig trees shade, the wine press, the farm" (1.1.4) and from then on at regular interval Odysseus reminisces about home. What Odysseus desires is simple, "to reach [his] own bed" (1.12.80), but strong enough for him to decline immortality, for he "longs for his own rock" (1.7.57). The urge to return to his wife to complete the pair (1.9.69) is so great that, at the beginning of Act II, Odysseus has to 'gather strength' even to utter the word 'home':

ODYSSEUS: Bones cracked by the cold, but a long, long—

Sing his song, song a long, long way from…

(Stops, gathering strength for the word—)

Home. (1.99)

And a long—sing the song—

And a long, long way from…

(Weeps)

Home. (1.101)

It is only appropriate that Odysseus' wife, Penelope, reciprocates his emotions and feelings. A true representative of Odysseus' thought, "A woman sobbing under olive-trees, alone" (1.14.95), Penelope is "like some olive-tree waiting for her shadow", kneeling by her "olive-tree bed", praying and praying (1.2.16). The omniscient narrator's (Billy Blue's) repetition of the following lines thrice is a proof of this fact:

I have a wife at home

And she's begging me come And I saving it all for she. (1.12.79-80)

Penelope's song, which Odysseus thinks might break his heart, represents her longing for him:

PENELOPE: Just as the sea's shuttle weaves and unweaves her foam,

He lies lost in a battle with salt weeds around him.

> But she weaves and she prays that he'll one day come home
> As fine as she found him when their vows were one. (2.5.135)

It is befitting that the desire and longing of Odysseus that we have known through the course of his journey is shared by his wife and the two "eyes" without which the vision of 'home' is incomplete become a pair (1.9.69).

Keeping in view the magnitude of Odysseus' desire it is important to note Ajax' curse after he has an argument with Odysseus about Achilles' shield: "Take ten years to reach your coast. Bear it turtle" (1.1.4). This is the worst thing he could do to a man whose priority was to reach "[his] dove, [his] peace, [his] mind" (2.6.158). Ajax realises that not reaching his coast will be sheer torture for Odysseus. It is very interesting to note that the metaphor of turtle is used at various points in the text to refer to Odysseus – "The turtles shell has found its turtle" (2.2.109) and again "You look like a turtle, poking out from that shell" (2.2.111). The turtle is a circumglobal species, found in most oceans around the world. It nests on tropical beaches, and after spending as long as 10 to 15 years at sea, a turtle returns to breed at the same beach where it hatched. Odysseus' desire for 'home' then has a parallel in the turtles' desire to come home in order to breed. Also, just like the turtle's shell, broken and rough (Achebe 99; pt.1, ch.11), Odysseus' skin is peeling and the "map of the world is on [his] back" (1.6.50). A fact that makes him both Odysseus and the universal "human".

It is of significance that the attainment of 'home' is the primary desire of most characters, regardless of their role within the play. In the very first scene of the play, Agamemnon says, "Through the length of war, home was our long desire" to which Menelaus replies,

"It was mine" and Ajax says "And mine"; Thersites is the only one who says "Not mine…No wife, no son, no house" (1.1.2). He regrets the end of war, because that is his only anchor, a time during which he does not long for home. Another point in the text where we see the conception of 'home' as a universal desire is when the sailors describe their images of 'home':

> COSTA: 'Home'! The word that a gull cries over wild waters.
>
> STRATIS: For me, home is a breathing death. Back to the wife.
>
> *(Laughter.)*
>
> ODYSSEUS: These oars multiply the image of what we love.
>
> TASSO: For me, home is grey fields with a ploughman's fire.
>
> COSTA: Sometimes it's a smell. I'm pierced by the scent of clove.
>
> TASSO: A grime-streaked angel gesturing from its spire.
>
> SRATIS: For me, Captain, a reef in the battering serf. (40-41)

Also, when Telemachus goes to see Menelaus, the former asks him, "But isn't home God's bounty great Menelaus?" And Menelaus remarks "No. God's trail. We earn home, like everything else." These lines seem to encompass the toil and the anguish associated with the attainment of home. The diversity of images and feelings related to 'home' signify a universality that is beyond the reaches of time. This is important in the sense that each and everyone, regardless of their role and value in the plot, desires 'home' with similar intensity. Each has their own conception of what 'home' is to them and they want to go back to their desired state.

In effect this is reminiscent of Sigmund Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' (1919). The sense of *heimlich* and *unheimlich* is what this dichotomy of 'being at sea' and 'going back home' implies. In his discussion of the meanings associated with the concept of the uncanny, Freud discusses the words' German roots in *heimlich* ("belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly etc."), all that home is and its opposite *unheimlich* ("eerie, weird, arousing gruesome fear"), all emotion that 'being at sea' ought to bring out (342-5). Throughout the reworking of the epic there is an antithetical play between home and all its opposite connotations and manifestations. This is a factor that gives Walcott immense room for the exploration of the experience of 'homelessness.' It is through this that Walcott brings out a diversity of culture, jargon and approach and builds around the play a significance which is both post-colonial and general. While the addition of Caribbean 'homeland' elements (song, dance, music) to the epic represent the 'creolization' of an English literary canon and limits Walcott's reworking to post-colonialism, the use of Blind Billy Blue, a "homeless wandering voice" (2.6.151) lends a poignancy to 'home' that goes beyond particular contexts. His text is just not a post-colonial text, or a text that treats migration as a subject in itself. It is a redoing that encompasses a new system of negation, of thought and of reclamation. By doing so, Walcott builds "resistance into the attempted uniformity of the system, and locates its breakdown at the point at which it tries to draw its own limits" (Young 194).

In his reworking of *The Odyssey*, Walcott skilfully uses the indispensability of the concept of 'home' to the epics' structure to his advantage at multiple levels and includes various perspectives. As soon as we begin to analyse the use and import of the concept of 'home', there is a realisation that these perspectives go beyond particulars and work to

enhance the connotations of the play in a world that is privy to the migratory experience and post-colonial concerns. In fact, the very act of migrating as it were between genres is important in this context. By changing the nature of 'spectacle' from the epic which is recited and sung by a singular person who holds fourth, into a play which is supposed to be enacted and there is a sense of collective authority, Walcott creates that imperceptible 'slippage' that allows the play to expose and expound its concerns about 'home', 'identity' and 'migration'. As Homi Bhabha comments, "The desire to emerge as 'authentic' through mimicry – through a process of writing and repetition – is the final irony of partial representation" (88). On the whole then, "the word 'home' swirls in the caves of [our] ears", long after it is *heard* no more. This not only supplies Walcott's mimicry with an anchor but provides it with just the right amount of 'irony' to bring his concerns of 'identity', 'dislocation' and 'migrancy' closer *home*.

By way of concluding the argument and opening it up to future studies of this connection, it is helpful to turn to Walcott's comment about his "reinvention of the *Odyssey*, but this time in the Caribbean." He suggests that "what this implies is that geologically, geographically, the Caribbean is secondary to the Aegean" (qtd. in Martyniuk 188). This is representative of an authorial intent to foreground the conception of home and the homeland as referenced through permanent geographical and geological markers on the one hand, and the elusive nature of discourse and politics on the other. In mimicking a mythological plot retold by Homer, the referential and reverential primary 'poet' of the World Canon, Walcott's reworking of the theme of *nostos* also foretells the increasing stress on Homer's borrowings from Near Eastern classics like the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in modern and post-modern literary criticism.

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