Paradoxes of Diaspora in the Poetry of Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney

A PhD Thesis

Submitted to

Department of English
Faculty of Al-Alsun
Ain Shams University

By

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Under the Supervision of

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2008-2009

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With deep gratitude I wish to thank professor Mohamed Shebl El-Komy for his enlightening guidance, ceaseless encouragement and fatherly support. Through his elevated poetic taste, philosophic insights, and unshaken belief in the enlightening mission of the academic scholar, professor El-Komy has taught me a new approach not only to poetry but also to life. I am also deeply indebted to professor Hanaa Hassanein whose continuous guidance and unfailing support, throughout the different stages of my academic career, have elucidated my vision and illuminated my path when I was stumbling in the darkness of inexperience. If it had not been for their invaluable assistance, this thesis would have never come into being.

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Abstract

El-Haiawy, Mayy Hassan Sayed. **Paradoxes of Diaspora in the Poetry of Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney**. PhD Thesis. Ain Shams University. Faculty of Al-Alsun. Department of English. 2008-2009.

Living in one place while concurrently remembering or longing for another, trying to assimilate a new culture while keenly preserving an old heritage, and feeling physically connected to a nation while mentally belonging to another are some of the paradoxes of diaspora – the voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands into new regions. In an age void of exclusive identities, limited localities or hindering cultural borders, the entire world turns into a diaspora, where the continuous tension between living and longing, coexistence and belonging, exoticism and togetherness obstructs the diasporans' consciousness of place, time and identity.

Through an ecocritical approach to the paradoxes of homelessness at home, nostalgia for the future and national schizophrenia in the poetry of the two Nobel Laureates, Derek Walcott (1930 -) and Seamus Heaney (1939-), the thesis investigates the homologies between nature and diasporans, explores the ways in which the diaspora poetry addresses intersections between racial oppression and exploitation of nature, and reveals how potentially productive tension between an imposed and an inherited culture can create imaginative forms to articulate the diasporans' cultural in-betweenness.

No matter how far is Walcott's Caribbean island from Heaney's Irish family farm, both poets were born into a world shackled with the chains of colonization, tortured with historical burdens, and plagued with sectarian and racial prejudices. Sharing the aim of unwinding origins, the process of decolonising minds, and the strategy of reclaiming a landscape detached from its inhabitants through centuries of violence and oppression, both poets finally accept the incurable divisions inherent in their consciousness as a potential for artistic creation. They introduce a project of universal syncretism wherein diaspora is apprehended as a common fate shared by all human beings rather than a curse befalling ill-fated races.

Preface

The human self is located at the centre of multiple concentric circles which move through various cycles of familial, ethnic and communal affiliations. The notion of home extends from inhabiting one's own body to the whole web of mutual recognition that we spin around ourselves and that gives us a place in the world. If the web of mutual recognition is torn apart, if place is displaced, and if the self is uprooted from the intimacy of 'us' and thrown into the detachment of 'them', the trauma of diaspora is immediately triggered. In an attempt to highlight the paradoxes haunting diasporans' consciousness in an increasingly intercultural interlocking globe, and to investigate how potentially productive tension between an imposed and an inherited culture can create imaginative forms to articulate the dualities, ironies, and ambiguities of diasporans' cultural in-betweenness, the thesis will locate the poetry of the two Nobel Laureates, Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney, in the context of regional histories, cultural confrontations, and environmental pressures. Through an ecocritical reading of Walcott's and Heaney's poetry, the researcher will attempt to trace and compare their responses to the paradoxes of diaspora which fall into three main categories: paradox of place, paradox of time and paradox of identity.

The **Introduction** of this thesis, which is entitled “Paradoxes of Diaspora: An Overview,” is divided into three sections. The first section, which tackles "Diaspora in a Historical Context," traces the development in human conception of diaspora – the voluntary or forcible movement of people from their

homelands into new regions – through highlighting the classical, modern, postmodern, and post-postmodern definitions of diaspora. The second part of the **Introduction**, which is subtitled "Paradoxes of Diaspora: Place, Time and Identity," investigates how diasporic communities constantly negotiate between here and there, past and present, homeland and hostland, self and other. The final part of the **Introduction** which is entitled "Diaspora from an Ecocritical Perspective," traces the emergence of ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary field in literary and cultural studies. Taking into consideration that all wars are wars against nature, perceiving the dual estimation of culture and nature, and realizing the inseparable relationship between place and diasporans, ecocriticism will serve as the theoretical background for examining the paradoxes of diaspora in the poetry of Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney.

Chapter One aims at investigating the paradox of place in the poetry of Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney. Poems are chosen from different volumes to trace the development of the two poets' responses towards the paradoxes of diaspora. Walcott's dilemma of feeling homeless both at home and at hostland will be addressed through analyzing his poems: "A Far Cry from Africa", "Homecoming: Anse La Raye", and "North and South". While the first poem was written in 1956 and published in Walcott's volume In a Green Night (1962), the second belongs to his collection The Gulf (1969). The third poem was published in his volume The Fortunate Traveller (1981). Heaney's response to the paradox of place will be highlighted through the analysis of his poems: "Digging", "The Tollund Man", and "From the Republic of Conscience". While the first poem belongs to

Heaney's first published volume Death of a Naturalist (1966), the second was published in Wintering Out (1972), and the third in The Haw Lantern (1987).

The aim of **Chapter Two** is to investigate how diasporans are trapped within the boundaries of an undefined time zone among multiple tenses, and to depict their struggle to redeem the distorted past in order to respond to the trauma of the present. Through an ecocritical reading of Derek Walcott's and Seamus Heaney's poems, the chapter also attempts to reveal how the morbid consciousness of time – uncertainty about what happened in the past, or whether the past is over or still replicated in different forms – liberates literary energies and initiates multiple poetic visions. Through comparing the development in Walcott's and Heaney's responses to the paradox of time, the researcher also investigates how historical burdens are tackled within the modernist, postmodernist and post-postmodernist versions of diaspora. For a clarification of Walcott's response to the paradox of time, the thesis will focus on three of his poems: "The Almond Trees" published in The Castaway (1965), "Names" published in Sea Grapes (1976), and the eighth poem in the sequence "Tropic Zone" which appeared in Walcott's volume Midsummer (1984). Developments in Heaney's relation to time will be illustrated through analyzing his poems "Bogland" published in his second volume Door into the Dark (1969), "The Grauballe Man" published in North (1975), and "Tollund" which appeared in The Spirit Level (1996) – Heaney's first published volume after winning the Nobel Prize.

In an attempt to answer the question: How could diasporans finally glue the shattered fragments of their birth, upbringing and education into prodigious oeuvres that have not only brought their native cultures into international recognition, and won them the Nobel Prize in literature, but have also established them as two of the finest writers in the English language, **Chapter Three** will trace the development in Derek Walcott's and Seamus Heaney's responses to the plague of national schizophrenia. The researcher will also investigate the durability of national schizophrenia in diasporans' conception of themselves, their homelands, and the world around them. To highlight the development in Walcott's reaction towards the paradox of identity, the thesis will focus on his poems: "Mass Man", "Earth", and "The Season of Phantasmal Peace". While the first poem was published in his volume The Gulf (1970), the second belongs to Sea Grapes (1976), and the third to The Fortunate Traveller (1982). Stages of Heaney's quest for identity and the symptoms of his national schizophrenia and split identity will be illustrated through analyzing his poems: "The Peninsula" published in his second volume Door into the Dark (1969), "Exposure" published in North (1975), and "From the Frontier of Writing" which appeared in his volume The Haw Lantern (1987).

The **Conclusion** is an attempt to crystallize the paradoxes of diaspora in the poetic works of Walcott and Heaney. Through comparing the two poets' responses to the paradoxes of homelessness at home, nostalgia for the future and national schizophrenia, the **Conclusion** will highlight how dislocation can obstruct the diasporans' conception of place, time and identity, and how nature is manipulated in diaspora poetry as multifaceted

metaphor for the contradictory feelings of alienation and belonging, nostalgia and amnesia, exoticism and metamorphosis. Illustrating the homologies between nature and diasporans, the **Conclusion** will illustrate the creative potentials which may emerge from the clash and interaction of different cultural entities.

Introduction

Paradoxes of Diaspora: An Overview

A) Diaspora in a Historical Context:

Man lives in circles of belonging which may be as narrow as his own body or as wide as the entire planet. The self is "at the centre of a series of concentric circles that move through various cycles of familial, ethnic and communal affiliations to 'the largest one, that of humanity as a whole'" (Bhabha, "Unsatisfied" 41). To be home "is first to inhabit one's own body" (Slicer 113). The notion of home further extends to be the "whole set of connections and affections, the web of mutual recognition that we spin around ourselves and that gives us a place in the world" (O'Toole 136). But what happens if the web of mutual recognition is torn apart, if place is displaced, and if the self is uprooted from the intimacy of 'us' and thrown into the detachment of 'them'? If this takes place, then the trauma of diaspora has just begun.

On the lexical level, the term 'diaspora' – from the Greek meaning 'to disperse' – is originally derived from the Greek verb '*speiro'* (to sow) and the preposition 'dia' (over) ("Diaspora," Oxford). The image of sowing the seeds, which were created by other plants, scattering them in new lands to form new roots and grow again is quite suitable for describing the unique experience of diaspora. Uprooting from homeland and being sown or planted in another is exactly what happens to diasporans. In both the natural and human cases, the experience of "being from one place and of another" (Anthias 565), creates "a third space, an alternate

public space, which includes both identification outside, and permanent living inside the national time-space" (Hickman 9). Another resemblance is the mediating coercion which sows the seeds, and which forces humans to leave their homelands. Despite the fact that the connotations of displacement, detachment, acclimatization, compulsion and oppression have always been connected with the word 'diaspora', the human conception of the meaning and features of diaspora has undergone several stages of development: classical, modern, postmodern and post-postmodern phases.

The term 'diaspora' first occurred in the Greek version of the Old Testament “where the dispersion of the Jews among the nations is foretold as the punishment of their apostasy” (Biesen 1):

> If any of thine be driven out unto the outmost parts of heaven, from thence will the LORD thy God gather thee, and from thence will he fetch thee. (Holy Bible, Deut. 30.4)

The word was also used to imply disdain: "The Jews therefore said among themselves: Whither will he go, that we shall not find him? Will he go unto the dispersed among the Gentiles?" (Holy Bible, John 7.35). Initially, then, the term 'diaspora' described the particularities of the Jewish trauma – "exile of the Jews from the Holy Land and their dispersal throughout several parts of the globe" (Safran 36). After the Babylonians conquered the Kingdom of Judah in 586 BC, "part of the Jewish population was deported into slavery. Although Cyrus the Great, the Persian conqueror of Babylonia, permitted the Jews to return to their homeland in 538 BC, part of the Jewish community voluntarily remained behind"

("Diaspora," Britannica). Historians used the term 'diaspora' to refer to "those settlements inhabited by Jews in all parts of the world outside the state of Israel" ("Diaspora," Americana)". Eventually, the application of the coined term has developed and broadened to include further facets and deeper dimensions.

Ever since the original Jewish diaspora, various diasporic streams have flooded throughout the earth differing not only in timing and direction, but also in impetus, nature and consequences[1]. Nevertheless, for a long time, the phenomenon of diaspora has been studied only in connection with the Jews, and has been mostly ignored by political scientists and historians (Safran 36). Such concentration on the Jewish dispersion and the seclusion of other collective dislocation experiences from the scope of diaspora could not resist the African predicament in the Age of Enlightenment. Despite the fact that the core of the Enlightenment spirit was invocation of human liberty and freedom of thought and action (Wokler 287), it was in the eighteenth century that the largest forced diaspora in human

[1] In the ancient world, diasporic streams were triggered when one man attempted to control other countries through a unified system of control. This is perfectly exemplified in the empire of Alexander the Great (356BC-323BC) who conquered the Persian Empire and "ushered in centuries of Greek settlement and cultural influence over distant areas, a period known as the Hellenistic Age, a combination of Greek and Middle East cultures" ("Alexander the Great"). Another example is the Roman Empire (27BC-476AD) which dominated Western Eurasia and northern Africa. Rome's influence "upon the culture, law, technology, arts, language, religion, government, military, and architecture of Western civilization continues to this day" ("Roman Empire"). During the seventh century, Muslims started to invade various parts of Asia, Africa and Europe to spread the new Islamic culture. The spread of Islam, which diffused "a general resemblance of manners and opinions" (Gibbon 113), was the crucial priority for the Muslim conquests that stretched from "India, across Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, to Iberia and the Pyrenees" ("Muslim Conquest"). Religion was eventually utilized as the camouflaging pretext for the European Crusades (1095-1291), which were initiated to “deliver the Holy Places from Mohammedan tyranny” (Brehier 1), and bring them under Catholic control. Despite the fact that the Crusades finally failed in their religious mission, they utterly succeeded in shaping and prefiguring the subsequent colonial routes into Africa, Asia and the Americas.

history; namely, Negro slave trade reached its peak. Triggered by the Western overseas expansion and restless imperial competitions to invade, violate, and exploit more parts of the world, and fuelled by the demand for human labour in European enterprises in the New World, the transatlantic slave trade would bring millions of Africans to bondage in the Americas (Reynolds 13). Probably six million African slaves were transported annually in the 1780s (Munck 188). In spite of all its evils, slave trade gave birth to "a novel human creation called African Americans or Black Americans" (Hopkins 12), whose legacy of tortures, loss of "kith and kin" (Sherrard 67), endurance, resistance, and involvement has hybridized the First World.

Though slavery was finally outlawed during the nineteenth century, the continued demand for cheap and controlled labour in the plantations gave rise to a new diasporic stream labelled as 'indentured labour' through which "many diasporic groups, notably Indians and Chinese, were transported" to the New World (Ashcroft et. al., Key Concepts 215). The Indo-Caribbean's "story of banishment, exile and displacement and perilous new encounters among strange tribes, the story of fall from grace into a prison-house of misery" (Dabydeen 148), has survived in spite of all forms of colonial brainwashing. With the inclusion of African and Indian dislocation predicaments, the term "diaspora" has moved from the religious sphere of the Jewish trauma to the broader humanitarian realms of colonial brutality, racial discrimination, and cultural resistance. Diaspora has been associated with the stories of races stripped of all human rights; yet, equipped with outstanding inner potentials to survive the