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Awakening a Nation: A Rhetorical Analysis of Derek Walcott's "The Sea Is History" / Akbay, Y.

# 42. Awakening a Nation: A Rhetorical Analysis of Derek Walcott's "The Sea Is History"

**Yakut AKBAY[1]**

## Abstract

This paper analyses Derek Walcott's (1930 – 2017) poem "The Sea Is History" (1979) from a rhetorical perspective. The rhetorical analysis of the poem enables us to uncover the implicit cultural values of Caribbean people and the oppressive discourses of colonialism. Based on the rhetorical reading of the poem, this study questions the traditional notion of history in the postcolonial framework. "The Sea Is History" is from Walcott's collection *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, originally published in 1979. In the poem, the author communicates with the reader by triggering an inner reaction through rhetorical questions. "The Sea Is History" is also notable for the use of metaphor and imagery. Walcott's preoccupation with his nation's notions of the past, culture, and language is expressed in the poet's use of metaphors to call on the Caribbean to awaken from a deep sleep and hold history to account. The author's inclusion of elements of the narrative is underpinned by a strong postcolonial feeling, transforming this narrative poem into the biography of an oppressed nation kept as slaves for centuries. By using allusions to the Bible, Walcott juxtaposes biblical stories with the past and the memory of his nation, hence his rhetorical question: "Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs? Where is your tribal memory?". Moreover, by placing biblical markers on certain passages of the voyage to the Caribbean – Genesis, Exodus, the Ark of the Covenant, and the Song of Solomon – the poet highlights it as a significant event that amounts to a religious text, at the same time pointing out that the events in the Bible are not universally accepted as actual events, whereas the past of his people is a true experience that reflects the colonial history of the Caribbean.

**Keywords**: History, metaphor, postcolonial, rhetoric, Walcott

## Bir Ulusun Uyanışı: Derek Walcott'un "Deniz Tarih'tir" Adlı Eserinin Retorik Analizi

## Öz

Bu makale Derek Walcott'un (1930 – 2017) "Deniz Tarih'tir" (1979) adlı şiirini retorik açıdan incelemektedir. Şiirin retorik analizi, Karayip halkının örtük kültürel değerlerini ve sömürgeciliğin baskıcı söylemlerini ortaya çıkarmamızı sağlar. Şiirin retorik okumasına dayanan bu çalışma, postkolonyal çerçevede geleneksel tarih kavramını sorgulamaktadır. "Deniz Tarih'tir", Walcott'un ilk olarak 1979 yılında yayımlanan Yıldız-Elma Krallığı adlı derlemesinden alınmıştır. Şiirde yazar, retorik sorular aracılığıyla içsel bir tepkiyi tetikleyerek okuyucuyla iletişim kurar. "Deniz Tarih'tir" aynı zamanda imge kullanımıyla da dikkat çeker. Walcott'un ulusunun geçmiş, kültür ve dil kavramlarıyla ilgili kaygısı, şairin Karayipleri derin bir uykudan uyanmaya ve tarihle hesaplaşmaya çağırmak için kullandığı metaforlarla ifade edilmektedir. Yazarın anlatı unsurlarına yer vermesi, bu

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anlatı şiirini yüzyıllar boyunca köle olarak tutulan mazlum bir halkın biyografisine dönüştüren güçlü bir postkolonyal duyguyla desteklenmektedir. Walcott, İncil'e yaptığı göndermelerle İncil'deki hikâyeleri geçmişle ve ulusunun hafızasıyla yan yana getirerek retorik bir soru sorar: "Nerede sizlerin anıtları, muharebeleri, şehitleri? Nerede kabilelerinizin anısı?". Buna ek olarak, Karayipler'e yapılan yolculuğun belirli bölümlerine- Yaratılış, Hicret, Ahit Sandığı ve Süleyman'ın Şarkısı gibi İncil'den atıflarda bulunarak, şair bunu dini bir metin anlamına gelen önemli bir olay olarak vurgular, aynı zamanda İncil'deki olayların evrensel olarak gerçek olaylar olarak kabul edilmediğine, oysa ulusunun geçmişinin Karayipler'in sömürge tarihini yansıtan gerçek bir tecrübe olduğuna işaret eder.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Tarih, metafor, postkolonyal, retorik, Walcott

## 1. Introduction

The desire to rehabilitate indigenous cultures and traditions has been the driving force for many Caribbean writers since the second half of the twentieth century. However, their initial efforts were linked to British colonialism, which played an important role in determining the nature of Caribbean literature. Indeed, the colonial period of Caribbean literature that was "selected for dissemination served the interests of colonial policy" and was thus "ideologically motivated in the very essence of seeming to be devoid of ideology" (Donnell, A., & Welsh, 1996, p. 3). It is also worth noting that many early twentieth-century publications adhered to colonial literary norms in terms of both form and content (p. 4). Therefore, it was inevitable for emerging postcolonial identities "to decolonize and indigenize imaginatively and to claim a voice for a history, a geography and a people which had been dominated by British Victorians—both literally and literarily" (Donnell, A., & Welsh, 1996, p. 3). Derek Walcott (1930 – 2017), one of the representatives of Anglo-Creole writing in the Caribbean, used those literary and linguistic strategies that best reflected the traditional values of the Caribbean people. The blend of cultures as well as the socio-political challenges in the post-independence period, which he describes in his literary works, heightened his people's awareness of their identity and culture. Walcott's main concern in his poems is to develop an authentic narrative that expresses the creative potential inherent in a language of self-identification (Donnell, 2006, p. 23).

The study examines Derek Walcott's poem "The Sea Is History" (1979) from a rhetorical perspective in order to disclose the implicit cultural values of Caribbean people and the oppressive discourses of colonialism. Based on the rhetorical reading of the poem, the research questions the traditional notion of history in the postcolonial framework. This will demonstrate how Walcott's rhetoric, which employs a variety of literary and linguistic strategies, functions within the framework of postcolonialism by illuminating perceptions of Caribbean identity and history. Postcolonialism is concerned with the geographical dissemination of the socio-cultural and political hegemony of colonial authority, whereby different peoples and minorities are exploited, marginalised and silenced. In this context, the significance of the rhetorical reading of Walcott's poem in light of the theory of postcolonialism lies in the re-articulation of the discourse of the nation from the perspective of the authentic Caribbean narrative. In addition, the rhetorical analysis includes the study of the symbolic constructions of Walcott's poetic language and the exploration of the notion of Caribbean aesthetics.

The study draws on Aristotle's treatise about the techne (art) of rhetoric, which was developed as a discipline to persuade a wide audience with probable knowledge. In his treatise on rhetoric, Aristotle states that the central purpose of rhetoric can be discovered by detecting its persuasive aspects (Lawson-Tancred, 1991, p. 38). Apart from this, the universality of rhetoric lies in its affinity with dialectic, a

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formal system of argumentation based on the exchange of logical arguments in order to establish the truth (p. 39). Aristotle furthers his discussion on rhetoric as follows:

> There are only three kinds of proof available to the rhetorician. These three kinds of proof are those achieved by argument, those by character and those by emotion, and this trichotomy dominates much of the work. The division requires, naturally enough, that the orator understand both the principles of argument and the basis of character and emotion: this, of course, is to say that he must be both a logician and a psychologist. Rhetoric can then be seen as precisely a mixture of these two disciplines. (Lawson-Tancred, 1991, p. 39)

Aristotle builds his concept of rhetoric primarily on three aspects: the persuasive, logical and emotional aspects of any subject matter discussed, which he calls ethos, logos and pathos respectively. To prove his point, he goes into the origin of various emotional states and personal qualities such as anger, indignation, fear, revenge, friendship, envy and jealousy. He argues that some of them stem from ethos, others from pathos or pity. Accordingly, by focusing on Aristotelian aspects of rhetoric, this study examines how certain linguistic and literary methods operate in Walcott's "The Sea Is History" to reveal the poetic mood reflected in the elements of the narrative, which is underpinned by a strong postcolonial sentiment that in turn transforms this narrative poem into the biography of an oppressed nation held as slaves for centuries.

## 2. A Rhetorical Analysis of Derek Walcott's "The Sea Is History"

"The Sea Is History" belongs to the Caribbean phase of Walcott's poetry, when the author lived and produced in the Caribbean before settling in the United States. This phase is interpreted as "the revolutionary effort" and "the anticolonial quest for identity" on the one hand, and "Walcott's close attachment to the Western tradition on the other, and the tensions between the two" (Ismond, 2001, p. 2). "The Sea Is History" is from the poet's collection *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, originally published in 1979. Derek Walcott's work must be understood in terms of his relationship with the islands and sea of the Caribbean, the sense of people and places that awakened and shaped his genius, and the social and educational environment in which it evolved (McWatt, 1988, p. 1607). Indeed, throughout his career, Walcott admired the Caribbean Sea and built a complex understanding of the water as a location that rejects dominant notions of place and land. It is also noteworthy that in the title of the poem – "The Sea Is History" – the emphasis is on the capitalized "Is".

"The Sea Is History" (1979) was written in loose terza rima[2], that is, it does not strictly follow a three-line stanza structure with the rhyme scheme aba, bcb, cdc. The poem explores three intertwined themes: references to the Bible, history, and nature. The poet describes the various civilisations and peoples who have sailed the Caribbean Sea, from the indigenous Taino to the European colonisers and African slaves. He uses powerful images and metaphors to convey the immensity and power of the sea and its importance in moulding the history and identity of his nation. "The Sea Is History" opens with a rhetorical question: "Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs? / Where is your tribal memory?" (Walcott, 2007, p. 155, lines 1-2). Walcott's approach is consistent with the orator's task, which is, to identify aspects of the subject that "need to be stressed and that can be used to induce the appropriate emotional state in the listener and to create the appropriate impression of character"

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[2]    Terza rima is "the measure adopted by Dante for his *Divina Commedia* (c. 1308 – c. 1321), consisting of a series of interlocking tercets in which the second line of each one rhymes with the first and third lines of the one succeeding, thus: aba, bcb, cdc" (Cuddon, 2013, p. 715).

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(Lawson-Tancred, 1991, p. 40). This also allows the audience to empathise with the character when it comes to their own colonial experience and history.

In the poem, Walcott delves into the past and calls into question such notions as "monuments", "battles", "martyrs", and "tribal memory" (Walcott, 2007, p. 155, lines 1-2). Walcott's rhetoric creates visual and aural images of the sea serving as a "vault" in which his nation's history is safely stored. The poet's perception of the past lies in the postcolonial discourse expressed in the ethos of the speaker. This postcolonial ethos is situated in the hegemonic historical narrative of racist violence and exploitation. Assmann (2018) argues that "the postcolonial ethos of history creates a 'dialogic memory' in which the experience of the colonized is integrated into the official narrative of the state and supported by self-critical historians" (p. 20). In "The Sea Is History", a 'dialogic memory' emerges in the conversation of the two speakers/characters: one tells the history of his nation and the other asks questions. According to Baugh (2006), "it is not history with which Walcott quarrels, but rather certain ways in which men have tended to use and abuse the idea of history" (p. 12). Moreover, Walcott distinguishes between 'history' and 'History', referring to the latter as an ideological construct that has served the purposes of colonial discourse (Baugh, 2006, p. 12). In one of his interviews, Walcott poetically explains his understanding of history as follows:

> Nothing can be put down in the sea. You can't plant on it, you can't live on it; you can't walk on it. Therefore, the strength of the sea gives you an idea of time that makes history absurd ... And by history, I mean a direction that is progressive and linear. With the sea, you can travel the horizon in any direction, you can go from left to right or from right to left. It doesn't proceed from A to B to C to D and so on ... The sea does not have anything on it that is a memento of man. (as cited in Baugh, 2006. p. 119)

Walcott's ironic attitude is evident in the references to the Judeo-Christian sources with which he questions history in its traditional sense: "First, there was the heaving oil, / heavy as chaos; / then, like a light at the end of a tunnel, / the lantern of a caravel, / and that was Genesis. / Then there were the packed cries, / the shit, the moaning: / Exodus" (Walcott, 2007, p. 155, lines 5-12). Since the early 20th century, various approaches to the concept of history[3] have been explored, one of which is the empirical view of the British historian Edward Carr (1990):

> History consists of a corpus of ascertained facts. The facts are available to the historian in documents, inscriptions and so on, like fish on the fishmonger's slab. The historian collects them, takes them home, and cooks and serves them in whatever style appeals to him. (p. 9)

In "The Sea Is History", Walcott's so-called facts, on which he builds the concept of history, are based on allusions to biblical stories and narrative style, using the words 'first' and 'then' to give the impression of sequence and continuity. The poet's postcolonial rhetoric is implicit in the mimicry he employs as a means of imitation to be temporarily superior to the inferior. This ironic style is maintained throughout the poem in the form of the superior asking for accountability and the subordinate giving account:

> Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs? / Where is your tribal memory? Sirs, / in that grey vault ... but where is your Renaissance? / Sir, it is locked in them sea-sands / out there past the reef's moiling shelf, / where the men-o'-war floated down; / strop on these goggles, I'll guide you there myself. (Walcott, 2007, p. 155, lines 1-3, 33-37)

Walcott's rhetoric quoted above is consistent with the Aristotelian conception of pain and suffering in the management of anger. Aristotle argues that the orator must "speak so as to bring his hearers into a

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3    For more information, see Simkhovitch (1929), Marwick (1995), Jones (1996), Bauman (2010), and Black & MacRaild (2016).

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frame of mind that will dispose them to anger" (Roberts, 2015, p. 75). In "The Sea Is History", this effect is created by pathos in the form of rhetorical questions. Pathos is one of the most effective Aristotelian methods of persuasion to appeal to the emotions of the audience. Walcott pathetically expresses the state of Caribbean history as absent, as there are few monuments or memorials that bear witness to the victories and achievements of the past. The poet's notion of the sea as a metaphor for history is contrasted with the Western perception of history. He describes the timelessness and eternity of Caribbean history as "subtle and submarine", while the Western understanding of history is embodied in books, works and countries (Walcott, 2007, p. 155, line 39).

In his search for the essence of history, Edward Carr (1990) tries to determine "the criterion which distinguishes the facts of history from other facts about the past" (p. 10). He states that "according to common-sense view, there are certain basic facts which are the same for all historians and which form, so to speak, the backbone of history" (p. 10). He argues that accuracy, however, is not an essential function that constitutes history and that even "a mere fact about the past" can be "transformed into a fact of history" (pp. 11-12). According to Walcott, biblical references that are used in "The Sea Is History" such as the Ark of Covenant, Babylonian bondage, the Song of Solomon, Jonah, and Gomorrah are not facts thus "that [is] not History, / that [is] only faith" (Walcott, 2007, pp. 155-157, lines 65-66). Nevertheless, Walcott's use of these references shows his ironic attitude towards his people who are not aware of their own history and, instead, believe the stories that are not based on facts.

Aristotle argues that irony "is more liberal than slapstick; for the one makes humour on one's own account, but the slapsticker at the expense of the adversary" (Lawson-Tancred, 1991, p. 407). In "The Sea Is History", Walcott's irony operates on the same principles, for it is directed at his own nation, as the poet asks his people to consider their own history in the context of colonialism. According to Aristotle, when we use metaphors "to give names to nameless things", we must "draw them not from remote but from kindred and similar things, so that the kinship is clearly perceived" (Roberts, 2015, p. 142). Likewise, the postcolonial narrative of "The Sea Is History" (1979) is performed through the juxtaposition of biblical stories and the colonial history of the Caribbean. By placing them side by side, the poet emphasises the comparison between 'story' and 'history' that arises from the Aristotelian affinity of similar images and elements. At the beginning of the poem, Walcott connects the trip of African slaves brought to the Caribbean coastlines under colonial control to the Exodus of the Jews in the Old Testament in search of the Promised Land. In this respect, it is also noteworthy that the poem has a religious intensity expressed in Walcott's creative use of language and metaphor. His idiosyncratic way of ironically contemplating pain and death mirrors the sufferings of the poet's own people during the colonial period. The condition of the imported enslaved Africans, described as "packed cries, the shit, the moaning", aptly illustrates the humiliation to which the people of the Caribbean were subjected during colonialism (Walcott, 2007, p. 155, lines 10-11). Walcott virtually provokes his people to remember the forgotten colonial past by drawing an analogy between the "rabid maw of the tidal wave swallowing Port Royal" and Jonah being swallowed by a great fish for breaking God's command.

The poet makes frequent reference to drowning, which serves as a leitmotif to express the emotional turmoil of the Caribbean in the face of the colonial experience: "the plangent harps of the Babylonian bondage, / as the white cowries clustered like manacles / on the drowned women, / Then came the men with eyes heavy as anchors / who sank without tombs" (Walcott, 2007, p. 155, lines 19-21, 26-27). Literary depictions of drowning or burial at sea offer fascinating insights into human's often

contradictory relationship with memory. For many postcolonial writers[4], the question of memory is particularly troubling in that postcoloniality itself is described as a condition disturbed by the consequences of self-imposed historical amnesia "since postcolonial nations and individuals often repress the painful memories of colonialism" (Boeninger, 2020, p. 3). Similarly, in "The Sea Is History", it is observed how the poet describes the sea and the landscape not only as a material place but also as a site of memory related to national identity. This is particularly evident towards the end of the poem, when Walcott seamlessly moves on to an aesthetic description of the Caribbean landscape, claiming that what he had previously recounted was "not History" but "only faith" and by bringing Caribbean nature into play as a witness to the colonial past, Walcott argues that a real history began when "every rock broke into its own nation" (2007, pp. 155-157, line 67). Walcott employs both logical and emotional aspects of poetic style to convince the veracity of his postcolonial narrative expressed in the colonial experience of the people of the Caribbean. On the other hand, there is also an ethical aspect reflected in the poet's cultural values, which are metaphorically described in the majesty of nature.

## Conclusion

Walcott's poetic world is rich in metaphors aptly capturing the postcolonial spirit that yearns for liberation from the oppressions of colonialism. In "The Sea Is History", this is summed up by the poet's ideas of history in a narrative of images. "The Sea Is History" (1979) is one of the illustrative works arguing that what Caribbean people experienced under colonialism is real history. In this respect, Aristotelian rhetoric, based on the persuasive, logical and emotional aspects of deductive reasoning, is highly relevant to the analysis of Walcott's postcolonial narrative, expressed in the poem through the vernacular power of the sea, hence the emphasis on the capitalised 'Is' in the poem's title. Furthermore, the poet's revolutionary spirit is reflected in the majesty of the sea, evoking Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" (1820), which sees the west wind as the source of rebirth. Similarly, Walcott promotes the idea of the Caribbean Renaissance through the awakening of his nation. On the other hand, his references to biblical stories serve as a counterpoint to colonialism. The juxtaposition of these stories with colonial history is consistent with the Aristotelian conception of metaphor as the use of related and similar things to convey the author's message to the audience in a more effective way. Clearly, Walcott is the mouthpiece of his nation; what the poet means by a true 'History', however, remains a mystery, thus underpinning Aristotle's definition of metaphor as a good riddle.

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[4]    See Walder (2009), Rothberg (2013), Gandhi (2019), and Göttsche (2019).

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