



EXPLORING HISTORY, MIGRATION AND SOCIAL EXPERIENCE IN SELECT
POEMS OF EDWARD KAMAU BRATHWAITE

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Abstract

The study examines Edward Kamau Brathwaite's exploration of migration and social experience in his poetry as a vehicle of appraising Caribbean realities. Brathwaite's poems will be interpreted using New Historicism as a literary tool with a view to highlighting the migration/journey motif as fundamental in exploring social realities as well as the human condition in the Caribbean society. The paper is a qualitative and library-based study of Brathwaite's poems as literary art, focussing specifically on interpretation of their content which explores migration and social experience in the Caribbean world. Four selected poems are engaged in the study for their distinction in reflecting core concerns of the Caribbean enclave specifically dealing with social conditions and migration. These four poems are also used to highlight Brathwaite's style to enhance the forcefulness of his message in them.

Keywords: Caribbean literature, poetry, social experience, migration/journey motif

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Introduction

Literature, history and society have often engaged in an interdependent relationship in humanistic studies. Hardly could one discuss any of them in literary discourse without encroaching into the realm of the others (Onwuka, "Postcolonial Interpretation"). These three aspects of human knowledge are often blended in great works of art/literature as evident in extant literary works of great writers like Homer, Shakespeare, Eliot and Yeats, Achebe, Ngugi, Armah, Adichie and many others. Edward Kamau Brathwaite's art aligns with a tradition that seems to privilege the sociological and historical over artistic finesse, a characteristic more noticeable in postcolonial literatures where concerns that are of socio-political and socio-cultural relevance are of prime importance to the artist who bears the burden of contributing positively to help his/her society discover, in Achebe's words, "where the rain began to beat them" (157).

It is a truism that literature and history are inter-reliant because literature in reflecting society often documents historical events even while it teaches and entertains; and history more often than not references literary works as sources of information (Onwuka, Uba, and Fortress "Versifying History"). Though many writers of Caribbean extraction have explored diverse experiences and circumstances of the Caribbean peoples in their works, Edward Kamau Brathwaite (rivalled in our opinion only by V.S. Naipaul) stands out in his consistent depiction of the desolate conditions of displacement and alienation of the Caribbean. He uses history and the journey motif as vehicles to explore these conditions. His profuse experimentation with various creative modes and search for appropriate artistic media to achieve his poetic vision makes him a pathfinder who plots historical trajectories that would define and chart unique identities for his people. Like many before him in the last century (De Liser in *Jane's Career*, 1914; Eric Walrond in *Tropic Death*, 1926; George Lamming in *In the Castle of My Skin*, 1953 and Samuel Selvon in *The Lonely Londoners*, 1956 among others), he foregrounds migration in his works, a significant motif in Caribbean literature especially after the First World War. Thus, using migration and exile as major binding threads for the Caribbean people's struggles, Brathwaite creates in his poems through journeys, movements and incessant motion a feeling of immediacy that shrinks time and space separating the historical past from the present, thereby making the reader feel he/she is a direct witness to the events like viewing them through a window into the past. This study thus highlights Brathwaite's integration of history, the migration motif and social experience into his poetry. It also examines the style he deploys to connect emotionally with his readers thereby creating in them a sense of being participants in the events he explores in his poems. This is one of the hallmarks of his poetry.

Caribbean literature, sometimes called West Indian literature, especially when referring to works originating from the English speaking islands of the region, is an artistic manifesto which Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe believe developed from "the common experience of colonization, displacement, slavery, indenture, emancipation and nationalism" (13). They observe that early Caribbean literature was originally structured after neo-classical traditions of English poetry and the Elizabethan theatrical tradition, which consequently rendered it more derivative and imitative than visionary, thus lacking West-Indian context, perspective or tradition (14).

However King explains that (West Indian) writers eventually charted a fresh path when they became aware that “[they] are held together by a background of trauma and promise which they share with the entire Caribbean community . . . [so] they eventually abandoned their English models and concentrated more on presenting to [their] people what was distinct and worthy of their lives” (29). Brathwaite’s poetry explores some of these distinct aspects of Caribbean historical realities especially the search for a home and identity traceable to the events of The Middle Passage.

Migration in the Caribbean Universe

Basically, migration involves movement of persons across geographical boundaries. However, in the Caribbean universe it is a more complex concept with diverse experiences associated with it depending on the historical period being discussed, the narrative in which it is used and whether it is forced or voluntary as it remains “one of the defining features of the modern Caribbean since colonization, slavery and indentureship” (Nurse 3). Migration is a momentous event in every society because it impacts the individual, the community s/he leaves and where s/he settles down. In Conway’s view, “It is a spatial and therefore geographical process because a displacement movement process occurs; [that is,] migration (the process) and the migrants and non-migrants (the involved people) occur within and because of societal contexts” (91). On its historical significance to the Caribbean society, Ferguson asserts that:

Migration has been a fundamental part of Caribbean life for centuries. The mass movement of people stretches back to the forced migration of the slave trade of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while the social dislocation caused by the Haitian revolution (1791-1804) caused tens of thousands of people to move within the Caribbean. The abolition of slavery in the English speaking Caribbean in the 1830s also led to increased inter-island mobility. But economic and voluntary migration has been a particular feature of the region for the last century. (6)

This historical perspective above suggests that migration has been a recurring phenomenon in Caribbean society, a strong urge among the populace to relocate for one reason or another. Consequently, the earlier negative perception engendered by forced migration in the period of slavery is replaced by an attitude of acceptance that relocation is economically logical and socially desirable as people move in search of work, a better life, and to escape from the small constricting islands. Presently, most Caribbean migrants moving to Europe and North America do so for economic and social-political considerations.

Brathwaite’s poetry often focuses on the forced migration of his people brought about by the Middle Passage, prompting Egudu’s declaration that Brathwaite’s poetry is “an attempt to come to terms with a past that was overwhelming in itself and still remains overwhelming in its undesirable intrusion into the present” (8). His classic, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* has been described as “the most substantial writing of the epic of the long migration [where] the doubly and triply diasporized Caribbean subject is shown as being created through a series of migrations” (Boyce-Davies 509). At the core of that anthology as well as many of his other poems is history, migration and social experience as central motifs alongside the knotty questions of geographical and cultural identity.

New Historicism

New Historicism, according to Stephen Greenblatt, is a textual practice that probes a literary text as a cultural artefact that embodies interplays of discourses and their attendant social meanings. The text itself is also considered a cultural discourse involved in the interaction of discourses because both text and context construct each other. This aspect of New Historicism is vital to the appraisal of Brathwaite's poetry which embodies several discourses relating to the Middle Passage, migration, exile and search for identity, which all contribute to social meaning in the Caribbean universe. By its elimination of the separation of text and context, New Historicism takes social contexts as narrative constructs influenced by dominant power relations, which make it possible for the critic to interrogate the notion of literariness and cultural values the text contains. Romanticists like Jerome McGann and Marilyn Butler, and Renaissance scholars like Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose, are usually labelled practitioners of New Historicism.

This study, however, deploys the perspective of Jerome McGann, who explains that "New historical criticism tries to define what is most peculiar and distinctive in specific works, [and] in specifying these unique features and sets of relationships, it transcends the concept of the-[text] –as-verbal-object to reveal the [text] as a special sort of communication event" (131). Brathwaite's poems are appraised in this paper as the writer's subjective reflections of Caribbean history and are therefore analysed as artistic representations of history in discourse as signposts to understanding the factors that have shaped contemporary Caribbean realities and the future of the society.

Constructing History, Migration and Social Experience in Brathwaite's Poetry

Edward Brathwaite's poetry is unique in its consistent probing of the throbbing quest of the Caribbean man or woman to migrate from his/her indentured 'home'; a home brazenly chosen for him by the invasive European powers that separated him from his ancestral roots in Africa via the harrowing experience of the Middle Passage. It tackles this through diverse explorations of Caribbean history and the labyrinth of migratory paths the people have traversed over many decades of struggle for freedom and search for an alternative land of sojourn to escape the haunting memories of the past. Brathwaite's distinctiveness is further located in the style he deploys in etching his poetic vision on the tapestry of Caribbean literature in his attempt to configure the spatiotemporal realities of the West Indian society and bridge the past and the present. A close appraisal of select poems from his large repertoire would suffice to demonstrate Brathwaite's uniqueness in his exploration of Caribbean realities.

A significant poem in Brathwaite's oeuvre is "South" in his *Rights of Passage* (1967) collection. The poem is a discourse on migration, home and exile. It presents a Caribbean fisherman's perception of his land of nativity after a disappointing mission abroad in the "north". "North" is commonly associated with affluence or better opportunities and lifestyles for people, especially as most of the more developed countries of the world are located in the northern hemisphere. Like a prodigal, the persona returns after his sojourn in exile to re-possess the place of his birth physically and psychologically; which suggests that there had been a rejection in the past that prompted him to move to other climes in his quest for a better life. He uses the term 'recapture' (line 1) to show he had lost it before when he left the Island.

His realisation that his homeland, in spite of its harsh and impoverished economic conditions, offers him better prospects for his overall wellbeing makes him retrace his steps to the land of his birth.

"South" is a poem of admiration and appreciation of one's home in spite of its natural and socio-economic challenges. The returnee's migration abroad is a voluntary one in contrast to the forced relocations of the Middle Passage, which was destructive to the poet's ancestors. The endeavour turns out to be a means of realisation and self-discovery for him. He had to travel far and wide to appreciate what his homeland meant to him spiritually and psychologically. The poem further portrays the Caribbean peoples' condition of poverty and squalor as they struggle to scrape out a living for themselves. This is reflected in the 'thatch of the fishermen's houses' (27) and the ever present 'small urchins combing the beaches' (29) who along with the hawkers by the river seem happy at the returnee's homecoming (30, 34). For the returnee, his overall mood and attitude in the poem shows that he has come to appreciate his homeland far more than he did before he left. The historical element in the poem is its recording of the migratory instinct in the Caribbean psyche and the pains and hardships that have been the West Indians' lot in their journeys all over the world.

Thematically, "South" is about home and exile, migration, poverty, struggle, alienation and survival. The poem shows that migration, whether forced or voluntary, could be occasioned by natural or political displacement of persons, oppression, social unrest, personal conflicts and alienation. There is a sense of nostalgia in the poem reflected in the returnee's recounting with pride and joy his childhood on the island and a longing for home while he was away.

Exploring nature as another fundamental theme in the poem, Brathwaite deploys water as a strong symbol that connects the lives and survival of West Indians to the ocean (2), the sea (4) and the river (12, 19). In other words, the West Indian is inextricably connected to water for its aesthetic appeal (1-2), as means of sustenance (29-30), transportation and commercial activities (32), inspiration and memory of the past (19-24). In the poem the prodigal returnee associates his very existence with the sea: 'By these shores I was born: sound of the sea/ came in at my window, life heaved and breathed in me then/ with the strength of that turbulent soil' (4-6).

Stylistically, "South" begins with a contrary proposition, 'But today I recapture the Islands' (1), implying a psychological reversal of choice and desire, a return or re-possession as the returnee/persona recalls the events of his birth and his experiences both at home and abroad; his decision to travel with the 'river,' even though it is a sad reminder of the Middle Passage that uprooted his ancestors from their ancestral home and brought them to the islands. The perceptible transformation in the persona's worldview when he drops the individualistic personal pronoun 'I' for the communal plural pronoun 'we' and 'us' from the middle of the poem is instructive. It indicates that he has divested himself of both his personal desire that is hedonistic and selfish, and the western mindset that perceives human society mainly in economic terms and advocating capitalist-motivated profiteering. It was the former that lured him away from his homeland into exile in search of an easy life and worldly pleasures; and it was his inability to compete advantageously in the latter that ultimately catapulted him, *sans* choice, back to the land of his birth. The message is that a true-born

Caribbean like the returnee may likely not find rest anywhere outside his homeland no matter what passion or faith drives them. Inevitably, they would roam about the world in a never ending circle of migrations till they purge themselves of misguided desires that are blinding them to appreciate their own. The attraction of better living conditions in the West is what fuels the modern day craze to migrate northwards from the south resulting in the migrant crises that still rage in the west presently.

“Calypso” in *Islands and Exiles* is another significant poem that explores history and migration. It configures the history of the Caribbean, from the coming into being of the islands, not by the spoken word of a divine deity as narrated in the Bible or Quran, but via a cataclysmic eruption initiated by a celestial rock: ‘The stone had skidded arc’d and bloomed into islands. . .’ (line1), to the circumstances that made migration an imperative for the Caribbean man or woman. The title of the poem, Calypso, is one of the dominant music forms in the Caribbean performed with metallic drums called ‘steel pans’ or ‘steel drums’. It is characterized by syncopation and improvisation and often deployed to resist white cultural hegemony. Calypso also reflects the manner of speech of the West Indian which radically differs from conventional English, which is why the poem seems like a disjointed narrative of the historical stages of development of the Caribbean Islands.

“Calypso” is a satiric poem that lampoons the famed economic prosperity of the West Indies brought about by the sugar plantations. The sweetness of the sugar cane is contrasted with the bitterness, suffering and pain that accompanied its production. Ironically also, it was at the height of the successes of the plantations that the darkest days of slavery in the Caribbean were experienced as the sweat and blood of slaves watered the fields. This gory period of Caribbean history is etched in verse in “Calypso” and the poet seems to suggest that migrating from the land of sweetness and sorrow could heal the broken spirit and battered psyche of the Caribbean man and woman.

Structured into four parts, “Calypso” captures vividly the history of the Caribbean. Beginning from the creation of the archipelago known as the Caribbean Islands to the development of its landscape (trees and fruits - botanical metaphors generally), it presents the main industry of the Caribbean, the condition of blacks, the ‘Walcott guys or Walcottians’ (mixed breeds), their westernization, their style of dancing (e.g. limbo), their kind of music (e.g. calypso), their communal character, their tourism and their relationship with the white overlords in their midst. In style, the poem appears disjointed because the poet at times deliberately disregards coherence to reflect the condition of his peoples’ disconnection, metaphorically, from their homeland. For instance while he narrates John’s experience with his colonial ‘boss’ in a conversational manner, he suddenly veers into a description of Caribbean dance styles. A few lines later, he returns to it: ‘o the boss gave our Johnny the sack / though we beg him please / please to take ‘im back’ (53-55). The irregular punctuation regime of the poem reinforces its postmodernist character as meaning is rendered slippery to the lay reader to reflect the state of confusion brought about by the conflicting African and European cultures of the slaves and the slave owners respectively.

Tone-wise, the persona meanders from excitement to sadness and at times self-pity as he presents the West Indian’s state of limbo in their struggles to come to terms with the sweetness of the fruits of the land and the sadness of existence on the islands

on the one hand and the cultural warfare between African and European sensibilities on the other. This cultural hybrid is most exemplified in the 'steel drum' often repeated in the poem (34). Conventionally, African drums are made of animal skins and steel is a product of Euro-western technology; thus, the two elements are forced into a marriage of convenience to produce the 'steel drum' which in the Caribbean is a mode of cultural resistance and identity together. Dominant motifs in "Calypso" include history, colonisation and culture clash, loss of identity, suffering, resistance and migration as imperatives for attaining psychological wellbeing. Migration is specifically explored in the last part of the poem which reads:

O the boss gave our Johnny the sack	though
we beg him please	please to
take 'im back	so now the
boy nigratin' overseas... (53-56).	

Migration becomes an imperative for Johnny for two reasons. First, there are no other jobs outside serving the whiteman on the island, which he can no longer do, having been blacklisted and his servitude terminated. Second, he has to leave to escape the humiliation and stigma he carries as a 'daft' blackman who dared to dream and believe he could escape the lowly existence his society had already conditioned for all blacks, especially the shame of having been '... to school and dreamt of fame' (31). He therefore loses the support of the colonial boss as well as the sympathy of his own people whom he had spurned while he was on good terms with his boss. His people, on the other hand, still make unsuccessful efforts to plead his case with his white boss because they see him as their champion having been to school.

"Limbo" is another poem of historical significance in its depiction of the gory and infamous experiences of black West Indians during their journey from Africa to the New World on slave ships. It is a poetic reminder of how West Indians came to be where they presently call home through forced migration. 'Limbo' is an energetic Caribbean dance popular with tourists where dancers leaning backwards pass under a low horizontally-placed stick. Symbolically, the dance act connotes 'in-between-ness'; that is, that the dancer is in-between two forces, the stick and the earth. The West Indian (citizen) thus finds himself or herself between the force of the stick, the symbol of slavery and oppression, and the force of mother earth, their protector. So, they dance and avoid the stick by moving closer to the earth for protection and hopefully to rediscover their lost roots.

"Limbo" portrays the inhuman conditions under which black West Indians were transported from their ancestral home in Africa to their present home in the Caribbean Islands. In an unforgettable rhythmic, haunting and chantey style that makes the poem very lyrical, the poet graphically recreates the evils of the middle passage centuries before. Stylistically, the poem's diction is mostly of monosyllabic and bi-syllabic words and the poet deploys the call and response mode which makes the rendition of the poem a participatory event for both reader and listeners. It highlights major themes like history, forced migration, slavery, oppression and dehumanization. The resilient and creative characters of the black slaves are also highlighted as they formulate a variety of songs to alleviate the trauma and drudgery of their journey into the unknown. The slaves' sense of being in limbo is echoed in the lines: 'long dark deck and the water surrounding me / long dark deck and the

silence is over me' (16-17). This sense of loss can hardly be severer than what the hapless human cargo experienced floating on a wide expanse of ocean at night with only silence and the groaning of the hungry, the sick and the dying as companions.

Stylistically, the dominant trope in "Limbo" is metaphor in the lines 'And limbo stick is the silence in front of me' (1), 'long dark deck is the silence in front of me' (7) and 'stick is the whip/ and the dark deck is slavery' (20-21) among others. Rhyme and repetition are profusely deployed in the poem. Most of the lines end with 'me' and 'limbo'. The word 'limbo' is repeated eighteen times, 'stick' five times and 'me' eighteen times. 'Stick' carries much significance in the poem. It recalls the pole the slaves were chained to as they rowed the slave ships and also the sticks the slaves were beaten with. Simply put, it is a symbol of the shackles of slavery and oppression; hence the limbo dance that places attention on the stick symbolizes an act of liberation from the shackles of slavery.

"Didn't He Ramble" in *Rights of Passage* (1967) is a narrative poem. It is also a tragic poem. It explores the disruptive and destructive consequences of migration when reality falls far short of personal expectations in one's chosen land of sojourn outside the Caribbean. Unlike the persona of "South" that returned to his glorious homeland to relive life anew, the persona of "Didn't He Rumble," Tom, did not have the opportunity to return like the prodigal; and he paid dearly for it. Tom successfully migrated to the country of his dreams with great hopes and expectations believing that he would finally overcome the bitterness he nursed against his homeland in his new land of sojourn. The opening stanza reflects his state of mind on arrival:

'So to New York London
I finally come
 hope in my belly
hate smothered down
 to the bone
 to suit the part
 I am playing. (1-7)

Having arrived in summer, Tom was not aware that winter existed. He indulged in the pleasures of the west with his summer earnings unaware that the times in his new abode are unlike those in his homeland. When winter finally arrives, it catches him cold; and lacking the resources to sustain his stomach and his health, the weather renders him delirious. Regretfully, he realizes that the West that he migrated to lacks all the gifts of nature in the Caribbean and also the compassion of his own society in his homeland. He then yearns to be brought back to the Caribbean Islands where

 the warm wind
 blows, where the grasses
 sigh, where the sweet
 tongue'd blossom flowers . . .
 where the workers
 rest, where the cotton drifts
 where the rivers are
 and the minstrel sits. (34-37; 42-45)

In addition to all these, Tom discovers that missing also in the west are things taken for granted in the Caribbean such as songs and dances, fanning showers, drifting cottons, rivers, slow guitars and speaking drums. He dies eventually and finds the warmth and comfort he could not get from the society of the West in the grave. But peace he does not find even in death as he worries about what damage those that will come after him would do to his homeland at their return from the West. They would be 'the peoples' choice, the people's politicians' (55) and would corrupt the values at home with the ones they imported from the West. Deceit, falsehood, exploitation of the poor, materialism and other vices of capitalist lifestyle of the West would replace indigenous ones to the detriment of society.

"Didn't He Ramble" thus highlights the negative consequences of migration prompted by a single-mindedness that focuses on economic gains without a consideration of other aspects of the land of sojourn, such as the weather, the laws, the values, ideologies and cultures. These ideologies and cultures often eventually become intrusive and disruptive to the wellbeing of society when the migrants return to their homeland.

The tone of the poem is confessional, nostalgic and remorseful. It is a poem that exposes the dark side of life in the West for Caribbean immigrants living there who often are isolated, homeless and die wretchedly.

Conclusion

This study has examined Edward Brathwaite's exploration of history, migration and social experience, fundamental motifs in Caribbean/West Indian developmental and socio-cultural realities, using a new historical perspective. Like Chinua Achebe, Brathwaite suggests in his poetry that a people's yearning to appreciate fully their circumstances in the scheme of things must begin from a conscious effort to understand their history and how they got to where they are. He explores in his poetry two kinds of migration: forced and voluntary. The first kind is tragic resulting in uprooting of people from their ancestral homes in Africa and elsewhere to the islands. The second kind is voluntary and often precipitated by personal decisions and desires to seek brighter economic prospects abroad, or better living conditions or other psychological or spiritual needs among others. The study concludes that Brathwaite succeeds beyond measure to show that history and migration are inalienably connected to social experience and existence in the Caribbean/West Indian enclave, and understanding their developmental realities.

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