

The psycho-political Mobilization of the Mask in Dream on Monkey Mountain by Derek Walcott

Iffat Sayeed

ABSTRACT: *Drawing upon the concept of metaphor as a linguistic expression for the emotional and intellectual response to a situation, this paper looks at the mask as the visual symbol of the psychic state of Makak and Lestrade. The focus of the dissertation is to show how the mask provides a symbolic and metaphorical sub-text that in combination with epigraphs prefaced in the play help to shape and intensify the fundamental conflicts that define the colonial and post colonial experiences of the protagonists of the play.*

With close reference to the text this paper looks at the mask as the most vital and viable element in the play that brings into relief the thematic strands embedded within the complex structure of the play. The paper also explores the manner in which the mask is transposed from one episode to another at eleven points in the play to lend cohesion and shape to the fluid structure of the play. Emphasising the centrality of the mask the link between the mask and the setting and progression of the plot of the play is studied.

Drawing on the post-modern and post-colonial theories the paper explores the way in which the mask functions as an operatic reference that brings into greater prominence the themes of ambivalence, racism, violence and madness embedded in the text.

Key words: extended metaphor, postcolonial, ambivalence, operatic reference, vector, mask, luminal, madness.

Preceded by a ritualistic enactment of a song of lament the play *Dream on a Monkey Mountain* presents Makak – the central protagonist of the play in a jail where he is “caged on a first offence” (P.206)¹ for drunk and disorderly behaviour.

Mooma, mooma,
Your son in de jail a’ready
 Your son in de jail a’ready
 Take a towel and
 Band your belly.
 (213)

On search a white mask with long black sisal hair and a half empty bottle of rum is found in his possession. The bottle of rum could be some incriminating evidence, but, the mask appears to be a gratuitous artefact and one wonders why would an “an old Negro with a jute sack”- a charcoal burner carry the mask that at a later point in the play is referred to as “this cheap stupidity black children putting on?” (240) Even Lestrade, the loquacious, sneering, corporal who carries the search on him does not make a prompt comment on the appearance of the mask and stands silent with the mask in his hand. Given the corporals’ rude, disparaging allusion to Makak as “de King of Africa” and the general overbearing, obnoxious attitude it is a surprise indeed that he chooses to make no comment on finding the mask in Makak’s possession. At this point a distracting commotion ensues as the other two felons imprisoned in the jail, squabble over the bottle of rum and plead in the name of their thirsty, parched selves for a swig. The corporal after helping himself passes the bottle round. Gratified, Tigre and Saurus flatter the Corporal into holding a mock trial to indict Makak. Tigre exhorts the Corporal to exercise his sense of justice being a born “Q.C” (206) - the Queen’s Counsel. Saurus goes a step forward and urges him to put on the wig and the gown – the standard robes of the Queen’s Counsel. A mock trial is set up in the prison.

In the deposition that Makak is allowed to make to the make-belief judges, he pleads that he is not responsible for the conduct for which he is being charged and an apparition in the form of a white goddess holds him enthralled.

¹ All references to Walcott’s play *Dream on Monkey Mountain* will be referred to parenthetically by page number only.

“Sirs, I does catch fits. I fall in a frenzy every full night. I does be possessed. And after that , sir, I am not responsible. I responsible only to God who spoke to me in the form of a woman on Monkey Mountain. (226)

As per stage directions, the white apparition appears and withdraws at this point making itself visible only to Makak. Makak falls in frenzy and lies prostrate for the two felons and the corporal to jibe at him. The play collapses into a dream sequence. A long subliminal reach into the events of the past is journeyed through the two parts of the play to reach the epilogue to the play.

The epilogue brings back in view the prison cell with Souris, Tigre and Makak in conversation with each other. The Corporal is now much softened in his cross examination. It is at this point that he looks at the mask that he recovers from Makak and asks: Now, what is this? (Holds up the mask) Everybody around here have one. Why you must keep it, cut it , talk to it? (323) a little later, Lestrade releases Makak. “Go on. Go home. There, Monkey Mountain. Walk through the quiet village. I will explain everything to Alcindor. Sometimes there is so much of pressure . . . Go on. You are free. It is your first offence” (323).

The questions that are raised by the transformation of Lestrade from an offensive small time authority, who hurls abuses at the entire black race, “Animals, beasts savages, cannibals, niggers” (216) to a person who acquits Makak honourably and in the process attains self knowledge are explored effectively with the help of the study of the mask as an extended metaphor that address the themes of ambivalence, racism and violence embedded in the play. Lestrade is a mullato by origin and his initial silence at the first sight of the mask is broken in the second part of the dream sequence of the play when he stresses upon Makak to let go of the hold that the white woman, in the form of an apparition has over him and rid himself of the white and black mask that symbolises a metaphorical enslavement.

The sight of the hollow mould of the white and black mask with black sissal hair concentrated at the peripheral edges precipitates a change in Lestrade. His stance is reversed. He reads his own misplaced loyalties in Makak's obsession with the white apparition.

What you beheld, my Prince was but an image of your longing.

As inaccessible as snow, as fatal as leprosy . . . destroy her; otherwise. . . You will come out in blotches, you will be what I was, neither one thing nor the other. Kill her! Kill her! (218-219)

Lestrade's acknowledgement of the mask as a kind of mascot or a totem that every one carried around there can be understood with reference to the note on production on the opening page. Derek Walcott writes "the play is a dream, one that exists as much in the given minds of its principal characters as in that of its writer." Initially this psychodrama seems to be located within the consciousness of Makak but as the note on production indicates, it is intended to be a product of the collective consciousness of all the characters in the play, including the playwright himself. In an interview, Derek Walcott refers to the mask as a "verbal metaphor matched by a visual symbol to be read as a symbol of self-deception and false identity. The mask, therefore is not simply a "cheap stupidity black children putting on?" (240) It is a very powerful metaphor for a state of mind as well as a useful prism through which the tensions, contradictions and questions that beset the colonial and the post colonial Caribbean selves represented in the play is refracted. Etched in mutually exclusive categories of black and white the mask is the visual, metaphoric representation of the duality between the white self and the black other, on one hand, and the entrapment of the protagonists of the play within the paradigms of white superiority on the other. Towards the end of the dream sequence, Sauris, infused by the revolutionary zeal of Makak talks of how divinity is also racialized to exercise complete control over the minds of the natives:

When I was a little boy, .- .- .- God was like
a big white man, a big white man I was
afraid of. .- .- .- And that is what they teach
me since I was small. To be black like coal,
and to dream of milk. To love God and
obey the white man. (290)

Within the context of the play the mask is a stereotypical representation of the colonized natives, who, like Makak and Lestrade are either in complete subjugation or wish to transform themselves into whites. One finds oneself in complete concord with Trinh. T. Minha who claims: "to use a stereotype to attack a stereotype is an effective strategy for irony here needs no lengthy explanations and rationalizations." The cultural and psychological factors converge to generate symbolic and

complex layers of meaning and one responds emotionally to the signals of the mask even beyond conscious reasoning. Commenting on the social and political contexts which inform the Caribbean theatre, Elaine Savory writes:

The power of the mask in Caribbean theatre on whatever level begins from the tension, which occurs in Caribbean culture between the African and European idea of masking and moves onto a Caribbean complexity, which is both, and neither while acknowledging a painful history. At root there is a tension, which visits the construction of the self and the ways in which self is manifest in the community. (222)

Savory's comment is very relevant as it looks into the mask as a dramatic device in traditional dramaturgy and also in terms of masking conventions as a means of survival and social mobility in the Caribbean, and, by extension any colonial and post colonial society.

Both Makak and Lestrade manifest themselves as other than their true selves and are metaphorically masked and, therefore, transformed. Since the very etymology of the word transformation suggests a radical chemical change this masking results in the loss and decomposition of the essential characteristics of the two. The mask that Makak carries on him is not simply a grotesque false face worn on carnivals and rituals. It is a paralinguistic projection of a state of mind. Thus we see Makak, initially, reduced to a sub human species. He is produced before the make shift jury as "a being without a mind, a will, a name, a tribe of its own. The corporal "like an animal tamer, cracks out his orders" and orders Makak to perform an iterative tableau and Makak acquiesces- he turns around, drops to his knees and goes through the entire exercise of sitting down, standing up, climbing up a bench, holding hands in and out. (222) A little later Lesrtade justifies this insult to Makak by pleading to the jury that "the exercise, my Lords, prove that he prisoner is capable of reflexes, of obeying orders, therefore of understanding justice. Sound body" (225). This travesty of justice played out by Lestrade is actually a kind of a masking device that Savory speaks of. In affiliating himself with Her Majesty's government, Lestrade moulds himself into the mask

of a compliant subject position that under a “patience of law” (219) has “to perform my duties according to the rules of Her Majesty’s Government” (217).

The physical setting of the opening scene and the psychic state of Makak corresponds literally as well as metaphorically to the mask. Makak is “caged” as well as “locked in a dream” (305). He is imprisoned not only by the “Queen’s” law enforcing agencies but as it has been discussed “The white goddess” - an apparition, holds him captive as well. At one point in the play, Makak, holding out the mask, cries out: “I was a king among shadows. Either the shadows were real, and I was no king, or it was my kingliness that created the shadows. Either way, I am lonely, lost, an old man again”(304). A little later he says: “We are wrapped in black air, we are black, ourselves shadows in the fire light of the white man’s mind.”Derek Walcott, drawing upon the prologue to *The Wretched of the Earth*, quotes Sartre who writes:

Thus in certain psychoses the hallucinated person, tired of always being insulted by his demon, one fine day starts hearing the voice of an angel who pays him compliments but the jeers don’t stop for that; only from then on, they alternate with congratulations. This is a defence, but it is also the end of the story. The self is disassociated and the patient heads for madness.

Sartre: prologue to “The Wretched of the Earth”, Sartre’s observation is relevant to the understanding of the complex, traumatic dichotomies that manifest in makak’s hallucination and Lestrade’s mimickery of the white paradigms. In denouncing Makak, Lestrade’s passionate outbursts are the echoes of his own sub-conscious divided self:

She is the wife of the devil, the white witch. She is the mirror of the moon that this ape look into and find himself unbearable.

. . . She is lime, snow, marble, moonlight, lilies, cloud, foam and bleaching Cream, the mother of civilization, and the confounder of blackness. I too have Longed for her. She is the colour of the law, religion, paper, art, and if you want to discover the beautiful depth of your blackness, nigger. Chop off her head! (319)

Trapped in the “web” of his own obsession, Makak is deluded into believing that the apparition - the white goddess has resurrected him from a self that is “ugly as sin” to a feeling of being “God self” (227). It is important at this point in this study to refer to the concept of the white goddess in the poetry of Robert Graves. The White Goddess for Graves is the embodiment of his poetic muse. In the postscript to the *White Goddess*, Robert Graves writes about “the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites.” But these conflicting emotions are a source of poetic achievement for the British poet only because there is no dichotomy between the poet and the muse. Both are in harmony with each other. Writing about the poetic relation between the goddess and the poet (Robert Graves), D.N.G Carter observes:

The Goddess knew whom she was choosing.
... That sudden overwhelming obsession was
visited upon a mind that was poised in exact
readiness for such a unifying revelation as
was hers to offer. (205)

In the case of colonial subjects, the white goddess or the white culture is an exteriority, which, as Sartre suggests, “usurps or possesses the self in a sinister and permanent manner”. The morbid fascination with the white goddess reduces Makak into a self-torturing schizophrenic. He hates to look at his reflection and confesses before the make shift jury:

I am sixty years old, I have live all my life
Like a wild beast in hiding.
Is thirty years now, I have look in no mirror,
Not a pool of cold water, when I must drink,
I stir my hands first, to break up my image.
(226)

The dominant white in the mask represents colonial supremacy that relegates the colonized to periphery and one can recall the character page in *The Tempest* that prejudices the reader to think of Caliban as a “savage and deformed native of the island”, and therefore deservedly enslaved by Prospero. Makak in *Dream on a Monkey Mountain* is also seen through the European eyes and the image that is given to him is that of a “mange-ridden habitual felon.” (P. 214) The biblical reference to

Esau and Jacob is referred to by Derek Walcott, not only to comment on the black and coarse hands of Makak (222) but also to introduce the concept of dispossession of inheritance. The reference to Makak as the “Lion of Judah,” (217) is significant to the understanding of the play as it alludes to the Ethiopian ruler Ras Tafari, more commonly known as Haile Selassie. Haile Selassie, is viewed by black nationalists as an agent for the restitution of an African heritage. At the end of the play Makak also celebrates to the tune of the chants of the chorus a return to his country of origin (I going home):

Soon after many moons, after many songs, we will see
Africa, the golden sand, the river where lions come
down to drink, lapping at the water with their red
tongues, then the villages, the birds, the sound of flutes.
(291)

So far the mask has been interpreted as the symbol of the complex relationship of the colonised and the coloniser. The next concern of the study is to see the mask as the mediating point between the postmodern critique and the postcolonial discourse. The nature of Makak’s hallucination and Lestrade’s attempts at white face can be understood with reference to the postmodern concepts of ambivalence, desire and derision in the study of postcolonial discourses. Both of them are framed in two simultaneously operative vectors; the vector of continuity and similarity, and the vector of difference and rupture. The colonial subject resents the alien imposition but has to conform to its ideals for survival and social mobility. However, as Homi Bhabha suggests that because the “colonial relationship is always ambivalent; it generates the seeds of its own destruction” (18). Bhabha’s argument is that colonial discourse is compelled to be ambivalent because it never really wants colonial subjects to be the exact replicas of the colonizer, as it would be too threatening. This perspective informs the image of the mask in the play. The native can only attempt at a white face. Even at his best he will remain at the periphery: “A foot licking servant of the marble law.” Lestrade the corporal is an example. He is positioned in authority and projects the biased representation of the Orient. He regards the natives as the inferior “Other” and addresses them in racist terms—“ - - niggers, stop turning this place to a stinking zoo!” (216). One can deconstruct the rhetoric of imperial discourse that Lestrade mouths to read the ambivalence and contradictions and relate them to the “interstitial space” in which he moves. On the one hand he projects into

the natives the evaluative racial characteristics Westerns do not accept as typical of themselves, on the other, veiled behind the mask of official authority he can both indict and exonerate Makak: "I can both accuse and defend this man" (220). A little early he is equally eager to share a bottle of liquor with the felons whom he despises and denigrates: "Now if you apes will behave like gentleman, who knows what could happen? The bottle could go round . . . (217).

He is partly revulsed and partly compelled to help Makak. The mask in the literal sense of a covering is a retreat for Lestrade from self-exposure, but in terms of its metaphorical implications it can be connected with the two toned mask that Makak has in his possession. It is appropriate at this point to quote Girish Karnad who in the translation of *Agni Mattu Male* talks about the power of the mask in terms of the duality of the projected and the real:

This is the mask of Vritra the demon. Now surrender to the mask. Surrender and bring life into it. But remember, once you bring a mask to life you have to keep a tight control over it, otherwise it'll try to take over. It'll begin to dictate terms to you... (52).

Lestrade in representing the colonial administrative community surrenders to this role and brings life to it, but because the colonial enterprise is fraught with inherent contradictions and disparities, this control is weak. In the course of the play the mask slips at many occasions to reveal the fact that the mask of Imperial rhetoric that he has put on is as superficial as the English law that is imposed on the natives.

In part two, while packing his wound with earth, which he receives at the hand of Makak he directs his rage at the moon – "who's there, the moon, the moon, the pork marked moon alone, the syphilitic crone" (299). Since the symbol of the moon in Walcott's work often suggests Whiteness and therefore Europe, thus in deriding the moon he is actually condemning his own complicity with the colonial order. "Too late have I loved thee, Africa of my mind... to cite Saint Augustine who they say was black. I jeered thee because I hated half of myself, my eclipse" (ibid). Tethered between his role as a small time authority and a potential psychic engagement with his black half, Lestrade, in conversation with the market inspector tries to sort out his confused thoughts and misplaced priorities:

The pistol is not to destroy but to protect. You will ask me, to protect who from what, or rather, what from who? (299)

Lestrade's trauma is as painful as the birth into a new consciousness and his silence is broken. In connecting himself to his race, he is able to see the dualities between the "calm blue eye acquiring this empire", and "Mine a tawny yellow." (300)

I return to this earth, my mother . . . I was what I am, but now I am myself.
Now I see a new light . . . let me sing of darkness now! . . . I have become
What I mocked. I always was, I always was, Makak! Makak!
Forgive me, (300).

Christopher B. Balme refers to the mask as a central image in the play *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, and writes that "the mask is situated in a curious liminal space". The treatment of liminal experience in literary studies involves post-modern themes of dislocation, identity/selfhood and transmission of culture, for example, the negotiations of straddling two or more cultural identities or challenging the totalising impulses of dominant culture.

Liminal space therefore has the potential to generate acts of resistance as well as affiliation. Corporal Lestrade - the "straddler" (283) and Makak inhabit the liminal space between the colonial enclosure and the possibility of assumption of a new non-colonial identity. A close reading of Makak's speech in the prologue reveals not only the ambivalence and contradictions he has been struggling with for the last thirty years but also hints at the potential to thwart the hold of the white goddess. He confesses that, "in a confusion of vapour", he sees "this women singing / and my feet grew roots". Roots here signify stasis, fixity and entrapment. In the same speech he speaks of going on his way "to my charcoal pit on the mountain" and coming across:

The web of the spider heavy with diamonds
And when my hand brush it, let the chain break
(226-227).

The web that Makak speaks of is the colonial enclosure and the

chain can be referred to the fetters of servitude. “let the chain break” is a declaration that foreshadows the later developments in the play when Makak will actually take control and move out of the literal and metaphorical chain of slavery. Literal, because he breaks out of the prison, metaphorical because he decides to move on and leave the mask behind. “When the Corporal holds the mask in the epilogue to ask him: ‘you want this?’ (324) Makak shakes his head” and moves on, for the first time without the mask on him.

The play concludes with the rehabilitation of Makak as Felix Hobian who is no more captive to the white goddess. His mind is not paralysed anymore and the play ends on a note of jubilation – “Now, O God, now I am free” (P. 320).

Similarly, the Corporal who “can both accuse and defend” Makak affiliates with his people as he confesses to the market inspector:

And if you know how much I would like to do for these people, my people, you will understand even better. I would like to see them challenge the Law, to show me they are alive (261).

This paper has thus explored the non linear development of the play. The fluid dream like structure of the play corresponds to the growth and evolution of Makak and Lestrade as the two gradually let go of the obsession with white culture that had chained them. The various stages of the evolution of the two protagonists of the play are studied with reference to the mask as an extended metaphor that brings into relief the thematic concerns of the play.

Work Cited

Primary Sources

Walcott, Derek. *Dreamon Monkey Mountain and Other Plays*. London: Jonathon Cape, 1972.

- - -, *What the Twilight Says*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.

- - -, "Mid Summer" in *Collected Poems*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1986.

Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1994.

Secondary Sources

Balme B. Christopher. *Decolonizing the Stage*. New York: Oxford University press, 1999. Print

Bhabha, Homi K. *Of Mimicry and Men: The Ambivalence of colonial Discourse*, NY: Routledge, 1984. Print

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1952. Print

Graves Robert. "A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth" *The White Goddess*. Faber and Faber, 1999. Print

Jonsons Ben. *Plays and Masques*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2001. Print

Karnard, Girish. *The Fire and The Rain*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998. Print

Mincha, Trinh. T. "The Undone Interval" in *The Postcolonial Question*. Chambers, L and Curti, L (eds.) New York: Routledge, 1998. print

Samad. R Daizel. "Cultural Imperatives in Dream on Monkey Mountain." *Postcolonial Literatures*. Parker M and Starkey, R (eds.), London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1995. Print

Savory, Elaine. "Registering Connections: Masking and Gender Issues in

Caribbean Theatre:” *Postcolonial Stages: Critical and Creative Views on Drama, Theatre and Performance*. West Yorkshire: Dangaroo Press, 1999. Print

Soyinka Wole. *The burden of memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*. Oxford University Press, 1999. Print