

Aspects of Postcolonialism: A Study of Derek Walcott's Pantomime

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61165/sk.publisher.v6i3.2>

Abstract: *Derek Walcott's Pantomime (1978) is a critical postcolonial drama that reinterprets colonial power structures through satire, performance, and intertextuality. Set in post-independence Tobago, the play features the complex interactions between Harry Trewe, a white former British actor, and Jackson Phillip, a black Trinidadian performer, as they rehearse a subversive version of Robinson Crusoe. Walcott uses this theatrical premise to explore racial hierarchies, cultural mimicry, and the legacy of imperialism. The play critiques the persistence of colonial attitudes in the postcolonial Caribbean and asserts the agency of the formerly colonized through language, resistance, and humor. By reimagining canonical texts and destabilizing conventional roles, Pantomime becomes a potent metaphor for the re-writing of historical and cultural narratives. This paper examines how Walcott deploys performance, language, and parody to challenge imperial ideologies and articulate a distinctly Caribbean postcolonial identity.*

Keywords: *Postcolonialism, Pantomime, Mimicry, Racial Hierarchy, Caribbean Drama, Language & Identity, Colonial Discourse, Cultural Resistance.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Derek Walcott's *Pantomime* (1978) is a brilliant example of postcolonial drama that reimagines colonial narratives through a Caribbean lens. Set in Tobago, the play stages an intimate interaction between two men—Harry Trewe, a white former British actor turned hotel manager, and Jackson Phillip, a black Trinidadian calypso singer and ex-servant. Through satire, intertextuality, and inversion of colonial tropes, *Pantomime* confronts enduring issues of racial inequality, cultural mimicry, language politics, and the psychological scars left by colonialism.

In this research paper, I argue that *Pantomime* reflects multiple dimensions of the postcolonial condition. Walcott destabilizes colonial power structures by reinterpreting *Robinson Crusoe*, critiques racial roles and performance, and asserts Caribbean identity through language and resistance. The play becomes a metaphorical stage where colonial history is unraveled and re-scripted.

II. REWRITING THE CANON: THE CRUSOE-FRIDAY PARADIGM

At the heart of *Pantomime* is the reimagining of *Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel that epitomizes colonial ideology. In the original text, Crusoe, the European castaway, becomes master over Friday, the "savage" he rescues and civilizes. This master-slave dynamic mirrors the European imperialist project that viewed colonized peoples as needing guidance, civilization, and control. In Walcott's hands, this binary is questioned and reversed.

Jackson suggests to Harry, “Why can’t a black man be Crusoe, eh? Why not? That’s all I want to know” (Walcott 11). His challenge is radical not just in theatrical terms but in ideological ones. By demanding to play Crusoe, Jackson undermines centuries of Eurocentric assumptions embedded in literary and historical narratives. He disrupts the idea that whiteness is synonymous with civilization and authority.

This act of inversion is more than roleplay—it is an assertion of postcolonial agency. Jackson’s refusal to play Friday “bowing and scraping like a blasted fool” (13) rejects the internalized servility once imposed on colonized peoples. In Bhabha’s terms, Jackson reclaims mimicry as subversion, not imitation. As Homi Bhabha writes, “The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (Bhabha 86). Jackson becomes a figure of disruption—refusing to fit into prescribed roles and demanding new definitions of identity.

III. COLONIALISM AS THEATER: PERFORMANCE AND POWER

The structure of *Pantomime*—a play within a play—serves as a metaphor for the theatricality of colonial rule. Colonialism, as Walcott suggests, is itself a pantomime: a scripted performance with clearly assigned roles of master and servant, ruler and ruled. What happens when the actors refuse their roles or improvise their lines?

Jackson’s proposal to stage a parody of *Crusoe* exposes this dynamic. Harry initially imagines the play as a harmless entertainment for tourists, but Jackson sees it as a chance to critique the very narrative the hotel seeks to commodify. When Harry insists on rehearsing the traditional version, Jackson mocks him:

“Yes, sir, Mister Crusoe, sir. Me Friday, sir. Me love you long time, sir” (Walcott 14).

The sarcasm is cutting. Jackson lays bare the racist stereotypes embedded in colonial drama. His exaggerated “coon” performance reveals the grotesque caricatures that once passed for entertainment in British colonial societies.

Theater becomes not just a medium of resistance, but a metaphor for colonial discourse itself. Harry, the former actor, clings to roles that grant him authority. But Jackson’s improvisation turns the stage into a site of rebellion. Edward Said noted that “imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or black, or Western, or Oriental” (Said 336). *Pantomime* challenges these exclusions, forcing its characters—and its audience—to confront the instability of such labels.

IV. LANGUAGE AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTIFY

Language is another major battleground in *Pantomime*. For colonized societies, English has long been both a tool of oppression and a medium of self-expression. Walcott, who was often torn between his Caribbean roots and his Western education, channels this ambivalence through Jackson’s and Harry’s linguistic sparring.

Jackson moves fluidly between Caribbean dialect and standard English, revealing not only his theatrical skill but his cultural hybridity. When Harry questions whether Jackson can perform for a white audience, Jackson retorts, “You think I can’t speak English good enough for your white audience? Man, I could act rings round you” (Walcott 22).

This line is critical. It flips the colonial assumption that the colonized are inherently inferior. Jackson’s command of language—both “Queen’s English” and vernacular—is a form of power. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o argued, “language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (Ngũgĩ 13). Jackson uses English to subvert its colonial baggage and assert his cultural identity.

Furthermore, Jackson reappropriates calypso, a Caribbean musical form with roots in African oral traditions. Calypso becomes another form of resistance. Through rhythmic speech and performance, Jackson connects to a legacy of satirical critique that predates written colonial texts.

V. RACIAL HIERARCHIES AND RESIDUAL COLONIALISM

Although set in post-independence Tobago, *Pantomime* reveals how colonial power structures persist long after formal decolonization. Harry owns a hotel, a symbol of neo colonial tourism economies that continue to marginalize locals. Jackson, though no longer a servant, is still viewed through the lens of his race and background. Their relationship reflects a lingering racial tension that never fully disappears.

Harry's paternalism and unconscious racism become evident in his interactions. At one point, he says, "I'm not a bloody racist. I've always liked you people" (Walcott 30). The phrase "you people" betrays his supposed liberalism. It reveals an essentializing mindset that clings to colonial binaries. Jackson's reactions grow increasingly sharp. He refuses to let Harry off the hook. When Harry offers him a drink to make peace, Jackson responds, "Is that how you pay off history?" (31).

This question goes to the heart of the postcolonial condition. Can the damages of history be undone with gestures of goodwill? Or does true reckoning require deeper confrontation with structural injustice?

The play suggests that reconciliation requires truth, not denial. Jackson's insistence on addressing past wrongs, even if they make Harry uncomfortable, is part of a broader postcolonial effort to reclaim historical narrative. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said writes, "Liberation from imperialism is an intellectual and political task that remains to be achieved" (Said 239). *Pantomime* participates in this task, challenging audiences to rethink the stories they've inherited.

VI. SUBVERSION THROUGH HUMOR AND IRONY

Walcott's use of humor is not incidental. Satire becomes a tool of critique, enabling the play to address painful historical truths without descending into didacticism. The very title *Pantomime* implies something light and entertaining, but beneath the surface lies a serious indictment of colonial and racial hierarchies.

The humor is often bitter, as when Jackson mocks white savior tropes or performs over-the-top servility. Yet it also creates space for dialogue. By making Harry laugh—and then feel ashamed—Jackson destabilizes his certainty. This oscillation between laughter and discomfort mirrors the postcolonial journey of self-examination.

Humor, in Walcott's hands, is not mere relief—it is resistance. As Frantz Fanon observed, colonialism is not just political domination but psychological subjugation (Fanon 14). Through wit and irony, *Pantomime* helps decolonize the mind.

VII. CONCLUSION: RECLAIMING THE NARRATIVE

Derek Walcott's *Pantomime* is not simply a play about two men rehearsing a pantomime. It is itself a pantomime—a performance layered with satire, resistance, and critique. By reimagining *Robinson Crusoe*, Walcott questions who has the right to tell stories, to define roles, and to claim cultural space.

In a broader sense, *Pantomime* offers a vision of postcolonial art that is neither wholly Western nor wholly indigenous, but hybrid—a fusion of influences that resists binary categorization. Jackson and Harry represent different strands of this history, and their struggle on stage mirrors the larger struggles of formerly colonized societies to reclaim dignity, language, and narrative control.

Ultimately, Walcott's work is a call to action. It invites us to revisit the "scripts" of history, question their assumptions, and rewrite them for a future no longer bound by colonial expectations.

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