A Far Cry from Africa

A Far Cry from Africa is about both colonial violence and violent nationalism referencing in the process the course of decolonisation and the identity( as well as politics) of the postcolonial writer( especially in the case of a poet like Walcott with a mixed heritage) within such a frame. While specific historical references used in the poem point to Kenya( the Mau Mau rebellion/anti-colonial movement), the use of Africa refer not just to the wider colonisation of Africa but also point to the Afro-Caribbean heritage of Walcott and the people of the West Indies and a pan-African consciousness that was present in many political movements such as the Rastafarian movement in the Caribbean( Jamaica). In the Caribbean the black power movement for the restoration of racial dignity which started in the 1920s/30s but gained strength in the 60s formed a parallel to the civil rights movement in America in the 1960s. The ending of the poem that asserts the creative urgency and political enterprise of the postcolonial writer can be seen against the background of such social and political movements.

Stanza 1.

“A wind is ruffling…paradise”: On the grasslands of Africa, Kikuyu, an ethnic group participated in the Mau Mau rebellion which perpetrated many acts of violence during their campaign. “ Batten…veldt”…to feed or thrive at the expense of one another. The violence of the coloniser is the starting point and the colonial state also deployed extreme violence to curb the rebellion. The use of violence in any context is a problem with Walcott though as the poem moves along the position receives a new articulation. “ Only…cries”…Here the worm is the king, the victor because it feeds on dead flesh. “Waste…dead”… the violence is perpetrated by both parties, the rebels and the colonial authority who seek to suppress it: colonisation harms/oppresses the colonised as well as the coloniser. Violent nationalism as well as ethnic conflict/violence in the postcolonial state is the consequence of colonial policy. Narratives of justification or colonial legitimacy fail to consider the ruthlessness of racial violence or the extremities of the Mau Mau campaign which emerged out of it. Violent campaigns during the colonial period or ethnocentric nationalism that became a pattern in postcolonial states is the result of living under the constraints and excesses inflicted upon the colonised by colonial power and the restructuring of identities under new forms of colonial modernity.1 Narratives of legitimacy are however irrelevant to those who suffer. The analogy between savages( black slaves) and Jews is on account of the displacement and exile experienced by both groups. Note the use of the word “ Savages”( used ironically), which connect to the “ tawny pelt”( yellow skin) of Africa and in the later stanzas to “ carcass” and “gorilla”, and which point to the colonial construction of Africans as brutes or animal like.

Stanza 2.

“ Threshed out…plain”…activity like grain being separated by people while pounding, the rushes( slender plants that grow beside a water body) are crushed to disappear into dust. This could be a reference to the changing landscape of Africa or the imprint of violence on Africa/the geography of Africa. “ In a white dust… plain”…in that dust you can see the ibises in the sky or in that white dust you can see the shape of ibises. “ Whose cries…plain”…, the image here incorporates both visual and aural element, the ibises that have been around since the beginning of civilization. “ The violence…pain”…in nature beasts fight for survival but colonial violence not unlike the brutishness of the natural world is necessitated by power. The struggle for survival of a species is the basis of the natural world, the Darwinian principle is unfitting and barbaric where imperial conquest or power is the objective of violence. “ Delirious as…dead”…animals can turn to violence out of fear or worry, and the Africans are like “worried beasts”, the hunted animals who seek to resist, a weak resistance perhaps. “ His wars…dance to the tightened carcass of a drum”…the response of the Africans is already weak as indicated by the line “ tightened carcass of a drum”. The “ drum” is the African response or war dance. While they seek courage in this struggle, the Africans fear the “ contract” or the “ truce”( via apparent agreement) imposed upon them as much as the military power of the Whites.

Stanza 3

“ Again…superman”…the notion of colonisation as something necessary( “brutish necessity”) and inevitable, the civilising mission undertaken by the white man. The “compassion” that White man thinks due to him because of the civilizing mission is wastefulness or self-indulgence as in relation to Spain—the Spanish conquest of the Caribbean which also initiated the migration of African labour to the Caribbean( name Indies came because Columbus thought he had discovered India). “The gorilla…superman”…reference to the racial construct of the brute versus the White superman. “ I who am poisoned…vein”…reference to Walcott’s mixed identity, and the uneasiness of belonging to such an identity. “ I…love”…the dilemma of the postcolonial writer who has to challenge imperial power/knowledge but who accepts and embraces the English language. “ Betray…give?”…the double identity of the inheritor and the betrayer or inheritor as the betrayer. “Betray…give”…the acceptance of a hybrid identity, the aim to express both his inheritances. The attempt to find a language that is not imitative of any tradition but which yet mobilises both. Such a position also speaks to Walcott’s ambivalence and actual disagreement with ethnocentric nationalist agenda, a significant feature in many anti-colonial movements or agendas of decolonisation. A reference( suggested reading) here can be made to one of Walcott’s significant poems “ The Schooner Flight”: the line in this poem “ either I am nobody or I am a nation” points to the exclusivist notions of identity present in nationalist/ethnic identity politics that also imitate colonial forms of power/knowledge. For the postcolonial writer therefore( according to Walcott) to liberate oneself from colonial subservience is to cast aside cultural mimicry but also to avoid the trap of exclusivist politics. The last two lines convey a note of immediacy as Walcott appears to be confronted with a sense of necessity, a poetic necessity( contrasted with the “ brutish necessity” of the White man’s civilizing mission) to speak of racial violence and subjugation. In the first stanza the poet speaks of the aftermath of colonial violence, the troubling violence involved in campaigns like that of the Mau Mau: the instruments of colonial power harms the oppressor as well as the oppressed. From stanza 2/3 there is a a slight shift: there is a focus on the violence of the colonial project, the legacies of the imperial conquest which makes him question the status of art made by Caribbean/ mixed heritage writers who write in the English language. The revelation comes at the end: to achieve authentic self-expression is not to resort to disavowal or to an ethnocentric vision but to find a poetic language ( artistic as well as political) and identity that speaks about Africa’s subjugation, that history that begins with slavery and racial violence. While “ A Far Cry from Africa” explores the tensions of the postcolonial writer, it attests—as the title of the poem signals—to an attempt to find such a poetic language. The rhetorical questions at the end through which the poet’s revelation is articulated also reverberate the black power movement in the Caribbean as well as the civil rights movement in the US that were strengthening in the period in which the poem was written.

End Notes

1. The issue of ethnic violence in postcolonial states is a subject examined by several contemporary postcolonial writers, for example, Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun. In Achebe’s much later work Anthills of the Savannah an examination is offered of the new forms of domination in newly decolonised states.