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## Creation in the Poetic Development of Kamau Brathwaite

*dry stony world-maker, word-breaker,  
creator . . .*

Edward Brathwaite, "Ananse"<sup>1</sup>

By H. H. ANNIAH GOWDA There are not many historians who have distinguished themselves as poets and prose writers, who can recite poetry with rhythm and melody, not many who have endeavored to create "nation language" and make poetry truly native. Kamau Brathwaite, who has now become the Neustadt Prize laureate for 1994, has all these attributes and accomplishments, as well as the great honor of freeing poetry in English from the tyranny of dying of ossified main tradition. In his 1982 lectures at the Centre for Commonwealth Literature and Research in Mysore, India, he emphasized a "true alternative to Prospero's offering." "What happened in Shakespeare," he said, "what happened to Caliban in *The Tempest* was that his alliances were laughable, his alliances were fatal, his alliances were ridiculous. He chose the wrong people to make God. And if he had understood the nature of the somatic norm, it is possible that he would have chosen a different set of allies for his rebellion. So that is the first thing I want to present to you, the notion of the alternative, the image of the alternative, which resides in the figure of Caliban, not the Caliban who is concerned with metaphysical revolt, the revolt of the spirit, the reconstitution of the mind, which is something that becomes much more crucial in the development of the Third World than simple physical revolt."<sup>2</sup> He considered Sycorax, Caliban's mother, "a paradigm for all women of the Third World, who have not yet, despite all the effort, reached that trigger of visibility which is necessary for a whole society" (*CE*, 44).

This is the main theme that underlies the prose and poetry of Brathwaite, a major Caribbean poet with a large reputation and world stature. He insists

on the sense and value of the inheritance of the West Indies and continuity with Africa; he is keen on discovering the West Indian voice in creative arts and emerges a creator of words. He has waged a war against the English language, which had allowed itself to be shackled into a verse system borrowed from the Latin language which did not go in for hammer blows of the West Indian Creole. His legacy was to work in "the English which is so subtly deformed, so subtle a subversion of English." Hence he draws freely on all the riches of the Caribbean multicultural inheritance and has created "the semantic image, where you begin to conceive of the metaphor, also an alternative to that of Prospero." His essays and speeches offer very interesting insights into his own creative writing and the situation of the writer in the Third World and newly independent nations. He has evolved a critical system using critical values different from what one would find in the *Times Literary Supplement*. As a historian, he traces the background to the evolution of West Indian writing and its structural conditions and the diversity of languages in a plural society. He wants the language, the new language, to embody "the syllables, the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience."<sup>3</sup>

The early Walcott, Brathwaite, and others have endeavored to create a nation language and confidently communicate with the audience. They use language in its most intense, rich, nuanced, and vital forms, outgrowing the sophisticated and artificial language of the colonizers. They use dialect and local detail and express the voice of the community. In their hands we see the strangeness of the English language. We are aware of Walcott's use of speech rhythms—"O so Yu is Walcott? / You is Robby brother? / Teacher Alix son?" (*Sea Grapes*, 1976)—but this mission is up to a point in Walcott, who seems alternately ardent and cold in the desire to be *outside* English literature—English literature in a hierarchical sense. The angst of the important poems "The Spoiler's Return" and "North and South" in *The Fortunate Traveller* suggest an American infection. But it is zeal that makes him return to the Caribbean in theme and vocabulary in his epic *Omeros* (1992), which demonstrates his philosophy to "ground with West Indian people." Salman

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Rushdie in 1982 argued that the English language “grows from many roots; and those whom it once colonized are carving out large territories within the language themselves.”<sup>4</sup> It is the genius of the English language that it adapts to strange climates and strange people.

Brathwaite, who has not wavered in his determination, is very close to Indian poets who try to make their content Indian, even while their drapery is English. In his views on “nation language,” exploration and exile, and the drudgery and loneliness of Negro slaves, he seeks and seeks “but finds no one to speak,” and prayers do not go “beyond our gods / or righteousness and mammon.”<sup>5</sup>

Brathwaite, who now rides the tide of literary innovation freeing poetry “from the tyranny of the pentameter,” is distinguished in his use of nation language. He is deeply immersed in writing about the frustration of a West Indian and of his critical experience of the black sage and the New World. In 1970 he said, “The problem of and for West Indian artists and intellectuals within this fragmented culture, they start out in the world without a sense of wholeness.”<sup>6</sup> Having mastered and bent Prospero’s language to suit his purpose, as a poet he concentrates on “Europe coming to the Caribbean,” or what he calls “the after-Renaissance of Europe coming with an altered consciousness” (CE, 52). Therefore his poetry deals with the Maroon, the artist, the Negro slave, the reconstruction of fragments into something much more humane: a vision of a man-world (CE, 61). Brathwaite’s ability lies in discovering the sense of wholeness. He has produced a metaphor for West Indians as a dispossessed people and has tried to invent his own esthetics for representing the Caribbean consciousness.

How does Brathwaite, who feels the need to liberate himself from inherited colonial cultural models, seek to distance his work from the pentameter of Chaucer? By attempting to develop a system that more closely and intimately approaches the experience common to all ex-colonies. He has expanded the treasures of his native talent in adapting and deepening his hold on the English language, making of it an instrument upon which he is able to play to perfection a greater variety of melodies than any other West Indian.

The West Indies, like many Third World countries, has colonial problems, but unlike India, the region does not have a long and rich literary heritage. In spite of many invasions, India retained her cultural riches; she was neither humiliated nor dispossessed even when ruled by foreigners. In the New World, on the contrary, blacks and West Indians had to endure slavery, indentured labor, and also an apparent discontinuity with their native cultures in Africa and India: “We have had a history of slavery and colonialism for the last four hundred

years and very little else” (CE, 43). In such a situation a heavy burden is placed on the writer. He must create not only awareness but a tradition, what Eliot termed “the historical sense-indispensable.” Hence Brathwaite endeavors hard to create a usable past for his fragmented region.

Having lived in Ghana for nine years and felt his stay there to be something of a homecoming, Brathwaite sees “its” culture as continuous with the West Indian diaspora. In order to drive home this important point, he uses the words of a revolutionary and composes poetry characterized first and foremost by its self-conscious and formal lexical contrast to standard English. He uses “music and rhythm” as bases of his verse, and also “kinesis and possession.” *Kinesis* is a term which refers to the use of energy, and it derives here from the African religious culture, where worship is best expressed in kinetic energy. The idea is that the more energy “you can accumulate and express, the nearer you will come to God” (CE, 71). The poet’s heart bleeds at the predicament of the Negro slave in the New World. His prayers are the common prayers of all who underwent imperialism but still possess the “mother’s milk of language to fall back on.”

Brathwaite began his poetic career on the assumption that he was cut off from civilization, that he was in exile. He even gave his earliest poems the suggestive collective title *Other Exiles*.<sup>7</sup> A desire for change in social values is evident there in the juxtaposition of folk images and historical elements: “he watched the seas of noon-dragged aunts and mothers / black galley slaves of prayer // but all his thoughts were chained / which should have sparked and hammered in his brain” (“Journeys”).

In many multilingual countries creation in a foreign language is considered inferior to creation in one’s mother tongue. Unlike India, which possesses a rich cultural heritage and a strong epic tradition, the Caribbean had no alternative to Prospero’s offering. Hence Brathwaite’s attempts to overcome that obstacle, to “leap the saddle” and “reach the moon” (“Journeys”). The medium is English but the subject is Caribbean. Very early the poet discarded the classical meters of English verse as incapable of effectively expressing, for example, the havoc of the hurricane. In “Arrival” he speaks of how his islands inspire him, and he hugs them, “stuffed away in his pockets / the fingers tightly clenched, / around a nervousness.”

Brathwaite conceives of ancestral cultures from the Caribbean perspective—that is, the American culture, the European culture which formed the modern Caribbean beginning in 1492, and the cultures of Africa and Asia which constitute the basis of Caribbean society. One culture impinges on the other. Therefore, he says, “he unpacked the wired apparatus of his eyes // So that he could assess not

only surfaces / but doubts and coils" ("Arrival"). His images are distinct. In one of his early poems, "Cat," he writes that the poet must create with the sensitivity of the cat, an integral element of African history which imparts authenticity to the Caribbean. The sensibility of "Cat" yields to a new type of poetic sensibility which adumbrates the folk culture of the slaves; that folk culture, in turn, contributes a certain continuity to the development of modern-day society. As a historian, Brathwaite asserts that the folk culture of the ex-African slaves still persists in the life of contemporary folk.

*The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*—comprising the earlier collections *Rights of Passage* (1967), *Islands* (1969), and *Masks* (1968)—is an epic which explores the pathos and frustration of a nation on an epic scale. Its opening lines are suggestive:

Drum skin whip  
lash, master sun's  
cutting edge of  
heat, taut  
surfaces of things  
I sing

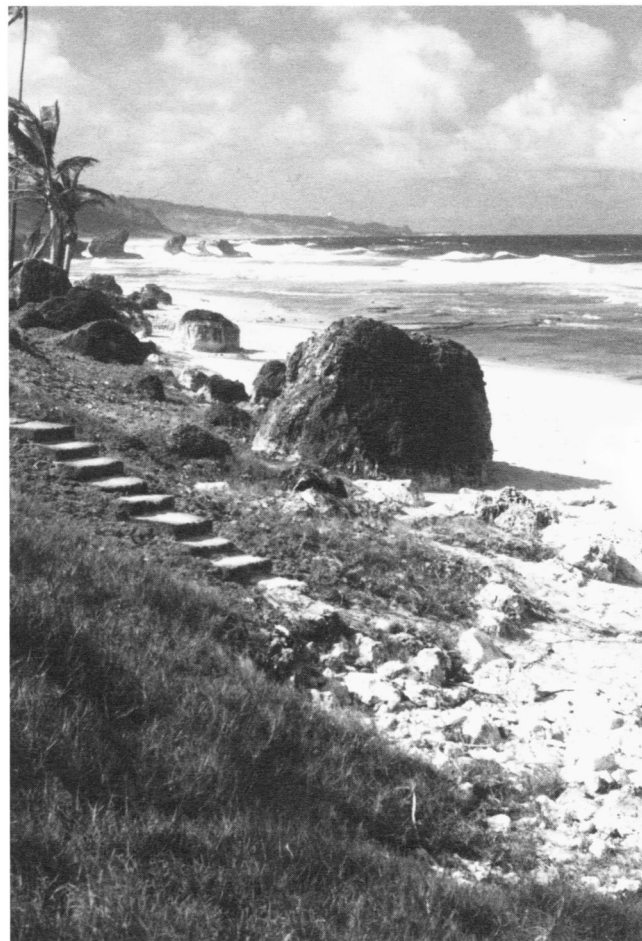
I shout  
I groan  
I dream  
about

Dust glass grit  
the pebbles of the desert (A, 4)

The short lines and strong rhythm express pain and anguish.

African migration to the New World and the consciousness of the slaves become integral elements in the poetry of Kamau Brathwaite. They form the underlying basis of *Rights of Passage*, which is considered an epic of a civilization. "Prelude," whose first twelve lines are cited above, is characteristic of Brathwaite's effort in composing new verse for the consciousness of an ignored soul. That poem continues:

sands shift:  
across the scorched  
world water ceases  
to flow.  
The hot



Courtesy: Joan Dayan

CATTLEWASH ROCK, BATHSHEBA, BARBADOS: "AND THE SEA OVER  
THERE WAS A GIANT OF IRON / A RASTA OF WATER" (*SUN POEM*)



wheel'd caravan's  
carcasses  
rot.  
Camels wrecked  
in their own  
shit  
resurrect butter-  
flies that  
dance in the noon  
without hope  
without hope  
of a morning.

Brathwaite's verse deals with the history of rootlessness, folk aspirations, and exile. Hence it is a kind of an "Iliad for Black People."<sup>8</sup> *Rights of Passage* demonstrates Brathwaite's preoccupations not only with the poetic form but also with content: the experiences of the black diaspora and its links to the new archetypal themes of exile, journey, and exploration of the New World. Of the Maroon he says: "The Maroon is not an antiquity, lost and forgotten, an archeological relic. Maroons are alive and their patterns are still there for us to learn from. You can still learn the art of carving from Maroons. You can still learn the poetry of religious invocation from the Maroons. You can still learn techniques, if we need them, of guerrilla warfare from the Maroons, so that we have a very living alternative culture on which we could draw" (*CE*, 58). Therefore he says in "Tom":

the paths we shall never remember  
again: Atumpan talking and the harvest branches,  
all the tribes of Ashanti dreaming the dream  
of Tutu, Anokye and the Golden Stool, built  
in Heaven for our nation by the work  
of lightning and the brilliant adze: and now nothing  
(13)

This reference to heritage is relevant to all Third World countries where an older or existing civilization is destroyed by imperialism. There is a correspondence between the poet's sense of tradition and his vision which gives *The Arrivants* its epic quality. "Tom" the old slave is a symbol of the continuity of the tradition of the poet as visionary and as representative voice in all oppressed Third World countries.

not green alone  
not Africa alone  
not dark alone  
not fear  
alone  
but Cortez  
and Drake  
Magellan  
and that Ferdinand  
the sailor  
who pierced the salt seas to this land. (16)

The mask is also an important symbol in Brathwaite's poetry. It can conceal the real nature behind it, but it can also act as a bridge. *Masks* (1968) contains elegiac poetry. The adventure of an epic character through "tunnelling termites," "monuments, graves," and "The Making of the Drum" through ruins and cities ends on an interrogative.

So the god,  
mask of dreamers,  
hears lightnings  
stammer, hearts  
rustle their secrets,  
blood shiver like leaves  
on his branches. Will  
the tree, god  
of path-  
ways, still  
guide us? Will  
your wood lips speak  
so we see? (*A*, 131)

The poet's voice and concerns are those of all West Indians. Like most poets of the Commonwealth, Brathwaite seems to have been influenced early by English poets, for several of whom he has expressed clear admiration: "What T. S. Eliot did for Caribbean poetry and Caribbean literature was to introduce the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone" (*HV*, 30). Soon he outgrew this influence, however, and developed his own forms and style of expression. In his 1968 essay "Jazz and the West Indian Novel" he delineated what he saw as a new and more relevant esthetic for the assessment of West Indian writing.<sup>9</sup>

Brathwaite is of the earth, earthy, and creates a history which links the West Indies to Africa. As we read the three constituent parts of *The Arrivants*, we see the Maroons resurrected and given a voice as "the first alternative settlers in the Caribbean, the first successful alternative communities in the Caribbean" (*CE*, 57). We hear of the untold sufferings of the slave, the Maroon, the peasant, and the unemployed; we are taken into the Caribbean past, into West Indian culture as represented by the calypso singer, the Rastafarian, and the black radical. In "Volta" (from *Masks*) we read:

I know, I know.  
Don't you think that I too know  
these things? Want these things?  
Long for these soft things?  
Ever since our city was destroyed  
by dust, by fire; ever since our empire  
fell through weakened thoughts, through  
quarrelling, I have longed for  
markets again, for parks  
where my people may walk,  
for homes where they may sleep,  
for lively arenas  
where they may drum and dance.

Like all of you I have loved  
these things, like you  
I have wanted these things.

But I have not found them yet.  
I have not found them yet.  
Here the land is dry, the bush  
brown. No sweet water flows.

Can you expect us to establish houses here?  
To build a nation here? Where  
will the old men feed their flocks?  
Where will you make your markets? (A, 107–8)

In Brathwaite we find a unique combination of poet, historian, and creator of critical theories. *Mother Poem* (1977), all about “my mother, Barbados,” is an attempt to document his native island in verse and place it in the context of the historical experience of tribal Africa and of the deracinated African in the New World. For Brathwaite the historian, his poetry is to a considerable degree an abstract of racial and historical experience. History seems to reinforce and fulfill the poetry. As he says in the preface to *Mother Poem*, Barbados is the “most English of West Indian islands, but at the same time nearest, as the slaves fly, to Africa. Hence the protestant pentacostalism of its language, interleaved with Catholic bells and kumina.”<sup>10</sup>

Compared to the other islands of the West Indies, Barbados is plain, ordinary, unexotic, even dry. *Mother Poem* begins in the southerly parish, with its wide, bleak, wind-beaten plain; the opening lines of the very first poem, “Alpha,” suggest the mood: “The ancient watercourses of my island / echo of river, trickle, worn stone, / the sunken voice of glitter inching its pattern to the sea, / memory of form, fossil, erased beaches high above the eaten boulders of st philip // my mother is a pool” (M, 3). The poet makes a kind of grim sense of the country when he goes on to speak of his mother’s “grey hairs” and “green love” and her association with nature: “she waits with her back / slowly curving to mountain / from the deeps of her poor soul” (4).

In political terms Brathwaite’s ability to envision a wholeness amid the fragments of postcolonial societies can be clearly seen here. The landscape of Barbados becomes a vehicle of his mood to depict “[slavery’s] effect upon the manscape.” The island’s history is condensed for us in the story of Sam Lord, a kind of English pirate, in lines that echo the Twenty-third Psalm: “The lord is my shepherd / he created my black belly sheep // he maketh me to lie down in green pastures / where the spiders sleep” (8). The images contained in such titles as “Bell,” “Fever,” “Lix,” and “Cherries” evoke the various African cults of the West Indies and their permutations over time, and the poems document the experience and practices of the slaves who kept such traditions alive, often within the confines of their cabins and always in spite of their “unhappiness”

and servitude. In one hymn it is suggested, “let unhappiness come / let unhappiness come / let unhappiness come” (49). The plague of 1854 killed about 20,000 in Barbados alone. To describe the havoc of such events, the poet cleverly uses the image of a black dog “blinding the eye balls” and “prowling past the dripping pit latrines” (80). In such lines and poems Caribbean culture and history are vividly brought to life.

*Mother Poem* is an exhilarating exploration of the land and people of Barbados, in a vocabulary that blends standard English and “Bajan,” but in a larger sense it represents the poet’s continued movement toward a concept of West Indian identity. In almost kinesthetic terms he says, “so she dreams of michael who will bring a sword / ploughing the plimpler black into its fields of stalk, / of flowers on their stilts of future rising / who will stand by the kitchen door and permit no stranger entrancement” (112).

*Sun Poem* (1982) has the ring of authority and the sureness of rhythm of *The Arrivants*. It supplements *Mother Poem*, exploring the male history of Barbados. The opening poem, “Red Rising,” seems to be universal in the broadest sense of that term: “When the earth was made / when the wheels of the sky were being fashioned / when my songs were first heard in the voice of the coot of the owl / hillaby soufriere and kilimanjaro were standing towards me with water with fire.”<sup>11</sup> There is a change in the method here, for the lines can be set to music. The swiftly growing “sun” moves from one generation to the next, from grandfather to father to son, the relationships realized through the imagery of the seven colors of the rainbow. With sprinklings of Barbadian dialect, the clearly fascinated poet describes sunsets and sunrises around the world. *Sun Poem* shows Brathwaite’s ability to recast biography into poetry; it is built principally around his childhood and youth and his relations with his father: “this picture shows him always suited dressed for work hat / on his head no light between his him and me” (S, 87).

The collection has poems in both prose and verse, all suggesting a certain naturalness. On seeing the Krishnaraja Sagar illumination at Mysore, Brathwaite expressed the thought that some civilizations create things for the enjoyment of others whereas some are selfish, money-minded. What strikes one most is how flexible and beautiful Brathwaite’s writing often is, and how different in word and feeling individual pieces are from one another. *Sun Poem* deals with Rastafarianism and Ethiopia, with Yoruba traditions and the black New World God, with landscapes both African and Caribbean. Truly the historian is seen here as a poem of great authenticity. “History, after all,” wrote Carlyle, “is the true poetry. Reality; if rightly interpreted, is greater than Fiction; nay, even in the right interpre-

tation of Reality and History does genuine poetry lie." This statement seems to find a true exponent in Kamau Brathwaite. Neither history nor poetry is repudiated at the cost of the other in his work, as *Sun Poem* amply illustrates.

Brathwaite, who has used the metaphor of Caliban to depict the subjugation of the West Indies, is now like Prospero, whose "charms are all o'er-thrown," supplanted by the sweetness and harmony of "Son," where "my thrill- / dren are coming up coming up coming up / and the sun // new" (S, 97). The later Brathwaite writes a bare kind of poetry, with lines that are austere but images that are real, as in this selection from *Jah Music*, a collection of poems of incomparable music and rhythm:

He grows dizzy  
with altitude  
the sun blares  
he hears  
only the brass  
of his own mood  
if he could fly  
he would be  
an eagle  
he would see  
how the land  
lies softly  
in contours  
how the fields  
lie striped  
how the houses fit into the valleys  
he would see cloud  
lying on water  
moving like the hulls of great ships over the land  
but he is only  
a cock  
he sees<sup>12</sup>

Brathwaite has faced the problem of creating a nation language and has worked steadily to arrive at a solution. The problem is one which has beset many countries as they have thrown off the yoke of English imperialism. Indian poets have moved from Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu to Nissim Ezekiel, Leel Dharma Raj, A. K. Ramanujan, and other moderns whose work is characterized by quick, deft touches and a style that renders native idiom and nuance perfectly. Nissim Ezekiel's hymns are distinctively native. The late Ugandan writer Okot p'Bitek, the unique author of the long dramatic monologue *Song of Lawino*, gave voice to the dispos-

sessed, the urban vagrant prisoner, and the ubiquitous *malaya* (Swahili for prostitute) and became a social reformer in verse. In New Zealand both Maori and Pakeha (white European-descended) poets have searched for a broad "symbolic language" natural to the indigenous people of the land. Thus writers of the new lands have gone beyond the inherited modes of English and modern European poetry and have de-educated themselves, escaping the tyranny of the sonnet in an effort to be more genuine, more true to their medium and milieu. The new poetry of the Commonwealth is no longer the prisoner of the colonizer but instead has found the rhythmic audacity and wherewithal to express local realities and, in so doing, has become a part of world poetry. Kamau Brathwaite, a towering poet, has moved from the margins of language and history, from the peripheral realm of "the other exiles," to the center of civilization, effecting a renaissance of oral poetry and remaking the poetic world.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*, Oxford (Eng.), Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 167. Subsequent citations use the abbreviation *A* where needed for clarity.

<sup>2</sup> Kamau Brathwaite, *The Colonial Encounter: Language Speeches by Kamau Brathwaite*, published as *Power Above Powers 7*, ed. H. H. Anniah Gowda, Mysore (India), Centre for Commonwealth Literature and Research, University of Mysore, 1984, p. 46. Subsequent citations use the abbreviation *CE*.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*, London, New Beacon, 1984, p. 8. Subsequent citations use the abbreviation *HV*.

<sup>4</sup> Salman Rushdie, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 14–20 September 1990.

<sup>5</sup> *Comparative Approaches to Modern African Literature*, ed. S. O. Asein, Ibadan (Nigeria), University of Ibadan, 1985, p. 134.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Brathwaite, writing in *Savacou*, 2 (September 1970), p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Other Exiles*, Oxford (Eng.), Oxford University Press, 1975. The individual poems collected in this volume date as far back as 1950.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon Rohlehr, "Blues and Rebellion: Edward Brathwaite's *Rights of Passage*," in *Caribbean Literature*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1978, p. 63.

<sup>9</sup> Kamau Brathwaite, "Jazz and the West Indian Novel," in his *Roots*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1993, pp. 55–110. *Roots* was originally published in 1986 by Casa de las Américas in Havana.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Mother Poem*, Oxford (Eng.), Oxford University Press, 1977, "Preface," n.p. Subsequent citations use the abbreviation *M*.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Sun Poem*, Oxford (Eng.), Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 1. Subsequent citations use the abbreviation *S*.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Jah Music*, Mona (Kingston, Jamaica), Savacou, 1986, p. 16.