

# Messianic Power in Walcott's *The Dream on Monkey Mountain*

**Dipendra Raj Regmi**

Department of English, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara, Nepal

**Article History:** Submitted 05 Nov. 2024; Reviewed 30 Nov. 2024; Accepted 06 Dec. 2024

**Corresponding Author:** Dipendra Raj Regmi, **Email:** [regmi789@gmail.com](mailto:regmi789@gmail.com)

**DOI :** <https://doi.org/10.3126/kdk.v5i1.73645>



Copyright 2025 © the Author(s) and the Publisher

## Abstract

*This paper explores messianic power in Derek Walcott's *The Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1970), through the philosophical concept of history. In the play, Makak, the protagonist, dreams of a white Goddess figure, and believes he is a redeemer of his race. His claim reminds the narrative of Moses and the Jews. At the same time, the performance of a self-proclaimed Messiah in a drunken frenzy surprises the audience. Makak's impression and his belief sound contradictory. This study applies Walter Benjamin's philosophical concept of history and Michel Foucault's concept of power as a framework for qualitative applied research. The focus lies on Benjamin's idea of 'historical materialism' and the urgency of a 'messianic power' to rewrite history. Therefore, Makak's claim restores the Black culture of the Caribbean island because he possesses messianic power when he dreams of a white Goddess figure. Makak's imagination of a white Goddess figure represents the folklore of Africa. The shimmering Goddess figure confers divine power to Makak to defend against European colonizers. Later, he identifies himself with African culture and liberates Blacks from years of oppression. Makak's dream aims to break the cycle of colonization on the Caribbean island. Black culture and identity became a new discourse of Caribbean islands in the 20th century.*

**Keywords:** Colonized, colonizers, intercultural, power, restore

## Introduction

Derek Walcott sets the play *The Dream on Monkey Mountain* on a West Indian island to expound the kind of power colonizers and the colonized long for. Walcott projects the redeeming power of imagination through the incredible performance of a drunkard in the play. Makak, a drunkard, claims to be the redeemer of his race, with the apparition of a white Goddess figure. In addition, he asserts possessing messianic power despite the

general impression of being a drunkard. Messianic power is the kind of power attributed to a savior or Messiah. His assertions remind the narrative of Moses and the Jews. Corporal Lestrade and the judges, the representatives of colonial rule, deny the cultural values of Africans in the play. They lack intercultural sensitivity in a true sense. On the other hand, Makak's emphasis on the dream is symbolic because he connects his dream with the lost Black culture. He initiates the responsibility of liberating the colonized people of the Caribbean island from the Europeans in his dream. His obsession with the white color implies a settlement of mind in a state of peace from a brutal historical fact. Makak enjoyed his dream when the colonizers intended to expand their European political power. He relies on messianic power to restore Black culture and history in the Caribbean island. Therefore, Walcott's play caught the attention of most writers and critics in response to Makak's dream after the first performance on 12th August 1967.

### Statement of the Problem

Walcott projects the splendid power of imagination in *The Dream on Monkey Mountain*. Makak, a drunkard, claims himself the redeemer of his race because black people on the Caribbean island suffer from colonial rule. His claims contradict to his impressions. Thus, this paper attempts to answer the following research questions:

### Research Questions

- a) How does Makak's dream reflect messianic power?
- b) Why is Makak obsessed with the white color?
- c) Why did Makak connect himself with the history of Black people?

### Objectives

- a) To find how messianic power is reflected in *The Dream on Monkey Mountain*.
- b) To change the impression of a drunkard as reflected in the play.
- c) To display how Black culture is restored in the exotic performance of a drunkard.

### Review of Literature

Walcott's *The Dream on Monkey Mountain* introduces a short note on production, at the beginning of the play. He admits, "This play is a dream, one that exists not even so much in the given minds of its principal characters as in that of its writer, and as such, it is illogical, derivative, contradictory" (111). Walcott declares that his play is a complex dream because it looks irrational and conflicting. Makak's fantasy draws the attention of reviewers from multiple perspectives. Robert E. Morsberger and Katherine M. Morsberger assert, "In *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, Makak, a solitary, drunken old charcoal burner, draws the other characters into his majestic fantasy in which he is the descendent of African kings and the savior of his race" (172). Makak's connection with the royal family to redeem his race sounds fictional. In the same way, William S. Haney II interprets Makak's dream as a way of redeeming himself from abroad values to revive his origin (82). Makak begins to rediscover his ancestry against the backdrop of foreign values. The search for individual identity lies even in the dream—the dreamer dreams of a painful history of the voiceless Black people.

Numerous scholars interpret Makak's dream as a strategy of Walcott to convey his underlying intention. Uhrbach asserts "Dreams are often dependent upon imagery, puns, extended associations, and symbolism, and Walcott avails himself of all these to convey his message" (578). Walcott's technique of communicating his purpose through the dream is symbolic. Similarly, Scott Crossley postulates, "Makak and the characters of *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, as symbols of West Indian culture, suffer from a loss of identity and that this loss of identity is related to the influences of the governing Western European culture" (19). Makak's identity crisis ensures the implication of Europe's cultural hegemony. Patrick Colm Hogan comprehends that "...oppressive ideologies undermine personal identity and even lead to madness" (103). People often suffer from madness if their identity is hurt through cruel creeds. Makak's dream implies the process of identity formation which lacks true names, heritage, and tradition. The process of rewriting the history of Blacks sounds urgent. Therefore, this study explores the messianic power that restores Black cultural values in Walcott's artistic play to fill the gap in the study.

### **Methodology**

This study has applied the qualitative approach to research with interpretive design. The paper primarily draws on ideas of the philosophical concept of history by Walter Benjamin. His concept of 'historical materialism' and 'messianic power' serves as a tool to interpret Walcott's play. In addition, Michel Foucault's ideas of power and the opinions of other scholars have been incorporated to substantiate the argument.

### **Delimitation**

This article explores how messianic power restores Black culture in Walcott's drama through the imagination of Makak. Thus, this study is limited to a single play of Walcott and sharply differs from the previous mythic, subaltern, and psychological readings. The researcher does not discuss the other aspects of the novel.

### **Philosophical Concept of History**

Benjamin introduces his theses on the philosophy of history with the concept of 'historical materialism'. He prefers an alliance between historical materialism and theology in his thesis. Historical materialism must be guided by theology for a win. The philosophy of history, according to Benjamin, is a mere shadow. Benjamin advocates that justice can be rendered to the sufferers through a messianic power. "Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim" (Benjamin 254). Benjamin believes that messianic power is conferred to every generation on the earth. Messianic power provides ways to dismantle the chains of colonization so that blacks can enjoy freedom in life. Benjamin's friend Gershom Scholem comprehends his theses in a similar vein. "The secret core of the theses is in fact, for Scholem, the hope of a leap into transcendence" (qtd. in Beiner 423). Scholem understands Benjamin's theses regarding redemption, which ultimately provides celestial joy. In this regard, Karl Ivan Solibakke also agrees

with Benjamin and explains that messianic forces "...offset the injustices wrought by centuries of cultural exploitation" (65). Messianic power, according to Solibakke, settles cultural exploitation of ages. This is why people crave power if we look at history. Foucault also believes that "power produces knowledge" (27). Knowledge of the past comes with the desire for power or power and expertise needs to conjoin to explore history. These theoretical insights are used to explore messianic power in Walcott's *The Dream on Monkey Mountain*.

### Restoration of Black Culture

European colonizers intruded into the Caribbean island's ecology, politics, and social affairs in the 15th century. Black culture has been under the shadow of European rule for years and years. Black people admit that their culture and identity revolve around crisis. They feel as if they are rootless. Walcott aims to explore the history and culture of black people through the archetype of a drunkard, Makak. He claims to possess messianic power to redeem his Black race. His immense faith in divine power characterizes his artistic performance, which signals the living conditions of the colonized people of the Caribbean island. Yet his dream is powerful enough to restore the lost Black culture of the Caribbean island.

Walcott's *The Dream on Monkey Mountain* begins with a prologue wherein Makak dreams of a white Goddess figure, which implants in him a belief that he must be a redeemer of his race and lead them back to Africa. Makak's performance of the messianic act intends to liberate his race from the colonial influence of Europe. Benjamin postulates, "To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past –which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all moments" (254). Redemption is essential for mankind to comprehend the totality of the past, contends Benjamin. Makak's redemption begins with the identification of the moon with the African culture:

*A spotlight warms the white disc of an African drum until it glows like the round moon above it. Below the moon is the stark silhouette of a volcanic mountain. Reversed, the moon becomes the sun. A dancer enters and sits astride the drum. From the opposite side of the stage a top-hatted, frock-coated figure with white gloves, his face halved by white make-up like the figure of Baron Samedi enters and crouches behind the dancer. As the lament begins, dancer and figure wave their arms slowly, sinuously, with a spidery motion. The figure rises during the lament and touches the disc of the moon. The drummer rises, dancing as if in slow motion, indicating, as their areas grow distinct, two prison cages on either side of the stage. In one cell, TIGRE and SOURIS, two half-naked felons are squabbling. The Figure strides off slowly, the Conteur and Chorous, off stage, increase the volume of their lament. (Walcott 112)*

Walcott's play draws the attention of the audience through the prologue. The moon looks like the dominant image in the play. It begins from the epigraph's title page, connecting Makak to a shimmering Goddess figure that used to appear in his fantasy. She becomes his

mentor at times of difficulty. The moon provides a leap of hope to the colonized people of the Caribbean island. For instance, the transformation of the moon to the sun indicates the redemption of Blacks. The yearnings of Black people are a restored behavior in the words of Richard Schechner. In short, the image of the moon, dance, music, and chorus restore the carnival culture of Blacks.

Makak argues with Corporal Lestrade to release him from jail so he can go home. He identifies himself with the King of Africa. Makak's desire to go home is to figure out the historical facts of the Caribbean island. Chryssoula Kambas et al. explains Benjamin's concept of "fulfilled time" as the remembrance of past time ... in order to complete "the task of liberation in the name of generations of downtrodden..." (90). Remembrance of past times plays a key role in raising the voices of oppressed people. Makak's conversation with Corporal Lestrade highlights the condition of colonized people:

CORPORAL. What is your name?

MAKAK. I forget.

CORPORAL. What is your race?

MAKAK. I am tired. (Walcott 115)

The above conversation between Corporal and Makak reflects the condition of colonizers and the colonized of the Caribbean island. Corporal, the representative of the colonial rule, is an ethnocentric. In contrast, Makak has suffered from rootlessness for hundreds of years. Their racial as well as religious identity is in deep crisis because colonizers subjugate them. Makak connects himself with the Messiah to release his generations from colonial rule. He must return to his African ancestral land to rewrite history. In essence, Makak's craving for messianic power implies his desire for historical knowledge because Foucault also admits that power is the source of knowledge.

Makak's trial begins in court as soon as he is arrested for drunkenness and misconduct. He defends the judge through his powerful visionary experience in the presence of Corporal Lestrade. His religious beliefs drive him to debate with the judges. "In Benjamin's figure, the constellation posits a form of knowledge, theology, on which he draws in order to defeat all human criteria" (Bullock 518). Bullock regards Benjamin's faith in theology as a strategy for conquering victory. But Makak finds him helpless because Corporal Lestrade's attitude and behavior display his disregard for intercultural sensitivity. He reflects the identity of the oppressed Black people in this way:

MAKAK. I am an old man. Send me home, Corporal.

I suffer from madness. I does see things.

Spirits does talk to me. All I have is my dreams

And they don't trouble your soul. (Walcott 118)

Makak strongly desires to return to his native home. Black identity fundamentally matters to him. His insanity is the beginning of creative possibilities. Makak's performance signifies his messianic power as he communicates with spirits and can perceive the invisible. Above all, Makak's conversation with the spirits is a sign of connection to the messianic force.

Similarly, Makak recounts his dream when a white Goddess appears to him and then vanishes. Corporal Lestrade, the representative of colonial rule, looks like an ethnocentric. He lacks intercultural sensitivity to accept Makak's claim. But Solibakke argues, "...Benjamin's messianic thought presages the point at which theology and politics are indelibly intertwined" (65). The alliance of theology and politics signals Benjamin's idea of messianic power. Makak's messianic power is invisible to Corporal Lestrade:

MAKAK. You don't see her? Look, I see her! She standing right there.

*(he points nothing)*

Like the moon had climbed down the steps of heaven, and was standing in front me.

CORPORAL. I can see nothing. *(to the judges)* What do you see?

JUDGES. Nothing. Nothing. (Walcott 119-20)

Makak's performance appears lively due to his body movements. The scene of the shimmering Goddess figure descending from heaven is a picture of messianic force. Unlike Makak, Corporal Lestrade and the judges cannot comprehend this power because they lack intercultural sensitivity. Therefore, the metaphor of the moon again inspires him in his journey. Makak connects himself with the invisible power of the divine to restore the lost Black culture.

Similarly, Makak's claim of a Goddess figure is visible to the other victims of colonization. Yet Corporal Lestrade refuses it and calls him mad. But, Makak reflects his power through the metaphor of a lion. Solibakke clarifies, "...memory projects into the past to redeem the future..." through the messianic forces (65). Redemption from any injustice requires the memory of the past to secure the future. Makak's projection reads like this:

MAKAK *(on his knees)*. Lady in heaven, is your black warrior,

The king of Ashanti, Dahomey, Guines,

Is this old cracked face you kiss in his sleep.

Appear to my enemies, tell me what to do?

Put on my rage, the rage of the lion? (Walcott 120)

Makak identifies himself as a black warrior and his fight with the colonizers signals Benjamin's view of history as an eternal battlefield. Neither the Corporal nor the judge is ready to accept his racial identity. Makak finds himself in the company of his enemies and he memorizes the past to dig out his selfhood. The metaphor of the moon and the lion assists Makak in inventing his real history.

History flashes to Makak when he discovers the mask in his hut. The play flashes back to the time before Makak's arrest and his partner Moustique encourages him to continue their business of selling coal. Benjamin believes that memory flashes at the time of difficulty (255). The difficult situation is the outcome of remembrance. Moustique reminds Makak of his past:

*(Makak remains on the ground, the mask near him. We hear a cry far off, echoing.*

*Moustique, a little man with a limp, a jute bag over his shoulder, comes into the morning light around the hut, puffing with exhaustion).*

MOUSTIQUE. Makak, Makak, wake up. Is me, Moustique. You didn't hear me calling you from the throat of the gully? I bring a next crocus bag from Alcindor café. Today is market day, and time and tide wait for no man. I tie Berthilla to a gommier tree by the ravine.

*(Makak has stirred)* (Walcott 121)

Makak's discovery of the mask connects the visible with the invisible. He again identifies himself with the African trading culture that is under the influence of colonial rule.

Moustique and Makak's business highlights their living condition. Thus, Blacks need to rewrite their history again to appease their ancestor's soul. This is why Makak longs for power even in a drunken frenzy.

The convergence of the moon to a woman has a symbolic significance in the play. Makak glorifies the moon from the very beginning of the play. Later, Makak uses it to suggest the shadowing effect that whiteness has on Black culture and identity. Benjamin observes, "Not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge" (260). The historical information remains intact in the memoirs of the victims. Makak explains in this way:

MAKAK. ...Make a white mist in the mind; make that mist hang like cloth from the dress of a woman. . . and I walking through it on my way to the charcoal pit on the mountain. . . . As I reach to this spot, I see this woman singing, And my feet grow roots; I could move no more. A million silver needles prickle my blood. . . and I behold this woman, the loveliest thing on this earth, floating towards me, just like the moon, like the moon walking along her own road. (Walcott 122-23)

Makak's subaltern identity reflects his conscious mind. His feet march ahead in search of his ancestral roots because he feels rootlessness on the Caribbean island. It sounds inevitable to restore Black culture and identity to pacify his forefathers' souls. At the same time, Makak suffers from the painful history of the Blacks and he experiences strange sensations in his body. Therefore, Makak must activate his historical knowledge to restore Black culture and identity.

Makak's conflict ends when he identifies himself with the African cultural heritage. The discovery of a white mask under the bench rejuvenates his painful history. The clouding effect of the European culture needs to be abolished to restore Black culture and identity. It requires action rather than ideas. Again, Benjamin contends, "Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well" (262). According to Benjamin, thinking means capturing history by digging it properly rather than letting it flow like a river. Makak attempts to seize the history of Black people by studying signs. He again proclaims:

MAKAK. She say I will see signs.

MOUSTIQUE. Yes, every damned full moon.

MAKAK. I must do what she say, which is. . .

MOUSTIQUE. Which is to sell coals! Now, where the next sack? *(he searches under the bench and withdraws a white mask with long coarse hair)*. This is she? eh? This cheap stupidity black children putting on? *(he puts it on, wiggles and*

*dances*) (Walcott 125)

Makak reflects his messianic power when he argues that he could see signs. This power is unavoidable to recover the history of Black people because the painful subaltern history needs to be transformed at any cost. The discovery of a white mask under the bench reveals the conflict between the blacks and the whites. Moustique even parodies the Western culture by putting it on the face and then dancing. By doing this, the sufferers of the Caribbean island reach their ancestral roots.

At last, Makak sets out to his ancestral land Africa with his friend Moustique. Makak initiates his journey when he realizes she is not the same figure who speaks with him in his dream. He breaks the shackles of discrimination with astounding joy. "In other words, our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption" (Benjamin 254). Restoration of the cultural identity is the source of happiness. Makak articulates his pleasure in this expression:

MAKAK. Non. To Africa!

MOUSTIQUE. Oho! Africa? Why you didn't tell me? We walking?

*(he stands in the doorway; Makak hurls him away)* (Walcott 126)

Makak's journey to Africa reinforces the history of Black people and parallels the story of Moses and the Jews. The narrative explains how Moses led the Jews to break the shackles of slavery in Egypt. Similarly, Makak's vision makes it possible to break the road of segregation and discrimination in the history of the Caribbean island. The painful history of the Blacks transforms with Makak's new name and identity. He liberates himself from the years of slavery. Makak's liberation creates the foundation of West Indian identity. Here begins the latest discourse in the domain of art and literature of the Caribbean island.

## Conclusion

Makak's artistic performance exposes a messianic power in Walcott's play *The Dream on Monkey Mountain*. Messianic power flashes in the form of signs, symbols, and images in Walcott's drama. Makak's imagination of a white Goddess figure restores the folklore of Africa. Carnival culture resonates with drums, music, and chorus in the prologue. The redemption of Blacks on the Caribbean island sounds urgent because they need to preserve their art, culture, and tradition. In this sense, Makak justifies his craving for messianic power because he intends to restore Black culture and identity, unlike colonizers who wish to expand political influence. Corporal Lestrade and the judge, the representative of the Whites, ignore Black cultural values because they lack intercultural sensitivity. Makak's generation suffers from rootlessness and identity crisis when Whites keep on expanding their political influence on the Caribbean island. Makak succeeds in discovering his ancestral roots when he identifies himself as African. The discovery of the mask reiterates how Walcott preserves Black culture and identity. Makak's success justifies that history can be rewritten by providing justice to the victims of the past in the words of Benjamin. His attempt to preserve the memory ensures a better future for the next generation. The play ends with Makak's self-realization, independence from Western culture, and escape from the



role of Messiah figure, transforming the impression of a drunkard and breaking the chain of colonization. Makak's journey to Africa sparks a new historical discussion among Caribbean island researchers. So, young researchers need to study their sovereignty.

### Works Cited

- Beiner, Ronald. "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History." *Political Theory*, vol. 12, no. 3, Aug. 1984, pp. 423-34. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/191516>.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, 1968, pp. 253-64.
- Bullock, Marcus. "A Weak Messianic Power: Figures of a Time to Come in Benjamin, Derrida, and Clean." *Monatshefte*, vol. 107, no. 3, September 2015, pp. 516-19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3368/m.107.3.516>.
- Crossley, Scott. "Metaphors and the Reclamation of Blackness in Derek Walcott's 'Dream on Monkey Mountain.'" *Journal of Caribbean Literature*, vol. 7, no. 1, Spring 2011, pp. 15-32. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41939264>.
- Foucault, Michel. "The Body of the Condemned." Translated by Alan Sheridan. *Discipline And Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd ed., Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 3-31.
- Haney II, William S. "Hybridity and Visionary Experience: Derek Walcott's Dream on Monkey Mountain." *Mystics Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 3/4, September/December 2005, pp. 81-108. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20716508>.
- Hogan, Patrick Colm. "Mimeticism, Reactionary Nativism, and the Possibility of Postcolonial Identity in Derek Walcott's 'Dream on Monkey Mountain.'" *Research in African Literature*, vol. 25, no. 2, Summer 1994, pp. 103-19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4618266>.
- Josephs, Kelly Baker. "Dreams, Delirium, and Decolonization in Derek Walcott's Dream on Monkey Mountain." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, vol. 14, June 2010, pp. 1-16. DOI: 10.1215/07990537-2010-002.
- Kambas, Chryssoula, et al. "Politische Aktualitat: Walter Benjamin's Concept of History and the Failure of the French Popular Front." *New German Critique*, no. 39, Autumn 1986, pp. 87-98. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/488121>.
- Morsberger, Robert E. and Katharine M. Morsberger. "Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays by Derek Walcott." *Books Abroad*, vol. 46, no. 1, Winter 1972, pp. 172-73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40126066>.
- Solibakke, Karl Ivan. "Divine Justice and Profane Power: Benjamin's and Kafka's Approach to Messianism." *Symposium*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2011, pp. 63-76. DOI: 10.1080/00397709.2011.552850.
- Uhrbach, Jan R. "A Note on Language and Naming in Dream on Monkey Mountain." *Callaloo*, no. 29, Autumn, 1986, pp. 578-582. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930916>.
- Walcott, Derek. "The Dream on Monkey Mountain." *Caribbean Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 1/2 March-June 1968, pp. 110-26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40653063>.