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Resisting Colonialism, Reclaiming Identity: The Role of Negritude and Pan-Africanism

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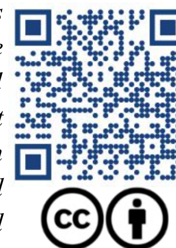

***Abstract*— *This article explores Negritude and Pan-Africanism, two pivotal movements that emerged as responses to colonial oppression and the marginalization of African identity. Negritude, originating in the early 20th century, celebrated black culture and heritage as a form of resistance against colonial assimilation. Pan-Africanism, with its broader political scope, sought to unify people of African descent across the globe, advocating for collective self-reliance, cultural pride, and political independence. Through a comparative analysis, the article examines these movements' historical contexts, key figures, and philosophical underpinnings, highlighting their contributions to the assertion of African identity and resistance against imperialism. The enduring impact of Negritude and Pan-Africanism on contemporary African socio-political landscapes is also discussed, demonstrating their shortcomings and relevance in ongoing struggles for equality and empowerment. This study underscores the importance of these movements in shaping a cohesive narrative of resistance and self-assertion within the African diaspora.*

***Keywords*— Negritude, Pan-Africanism, resistance, colonialism, identity.**

In his seminal work *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon writes, “the primary Manichaeism which governed colonial society is preserved intact during the period of decolonization; that is to say that the settler never ceases to be the enemy, the opponent, the foe that must be overthrown” (39). Animosity between the colonizer and the colonized continued even in the period of decolonization. Colonial domination triggered the emergence of anticolonial-consciousness and the movement of decolonization all across the Third World. Undoubtedly, resistance by the colonized assumed diverse shapes and was marked by one kind of heterogeneity. The movement of colonial subjects from an awareness of injustice to opposition occurred at both a political and intellectual level. Armed resistance was succeeded by ideological and cultural resistance to imperialism. Colonialism not only forcefully redesigned physical territories and social terrains, but it also altered human identities in the colonies. Hence, to pose a challenge to colonial oppressors, the construction of powerful identities was considered highly crucial by the colonized. Recovering authentic precolonial culture and fiercely rejecting imperial culture were key strategies of identity formation among Africans. As movements of protest, rejection, racial recovery, and self-assertion by black people, Pan-Africanism and Negritude manifest some resemblances and disparities.

Pan-Africanism was initiated in the diaspora and had its origins in the New World. It sought to articulate the common cultural features shared by black people belonging to diverse national and regional entities. The inhabitants of Africa, from the middle of the nineteenth century up to the turn of the twentieth century, imbibed the ideas of Pan-Africanism from their studies, mainly in the United States and later in Britain. The emotional impetus of the movement flowed from the sense of loss of dignity, independence, and freedom of a widely dispersed people of African stock who felt themselves dispossessed of their homeland through colonialism, which brought persecution, inferiority,

discrimination, and dependency. The retrieval of dignity was the mainspring of all the actions of Pan-Africanists.

Langston Hughes, one of the prominent exponents of Pan-Africanism, was deeply colour-conscious, and his poems expressed the dominant theme in Pan-Africanism: the race-consciousness born of colour. Black writers associated with the movement extolled their own blackness instead of despising it. Negroes were inspired to be proud of their black skins in both the New World and in Africa. This challenging theme reached its apogee in the works of Aime Cesaire, the outstanding exponent of Negritude. Simultaneously, a demand for rediscovering the lost past of the Negro race became vehemently conspicuous in the writings of poets like Leon Damas, who advocated a distinctive African personality in his poems. Fears grew that uncritical adoption of Western ideas would, in time, perish an African's distinctive personality.

In the Pan-Africanism movement, emotions associated with blackness were intellectualized. As Colin Legum has pointed out, it was a race-conscious movement, not a racialist one: "It is a positive statement in defense of one's race; but it does not seek to elevate that race above other races" (33). Yet there always remains the danger that this race consciousness might lead to racialism. Quite naturally, the literature of Pan-Africanism is full of instances of racialism, though the mainstream ideas of this movement were always undefiled by it. Another characteristic of Pan-Africanist feelings was the ambivalent attitude of the blacks towards the whites, which found expression in their love-hatred relationship with the whites, whom they could not reject wholeheartedly. However, the feeling of deep racial bitterness was matched by a remarkable quality of forgiveness once the dignity of independence and equality had been respected. The nationalist leadership's change of attitude in most of the newly liberated African states bears testimony to this fact. Interestingly, Pan-Africanism never inculcated the desire for vengeance against the white oppressors, and the vengeance sought by the intellectuals of this movement was not physical.

In the early 1930s, Paris became the literary center of the Pan-African movement, whereas London was its political center. Various changes accompanied the shift of Pan-Africanism's activities from its birthplace in the New World to Europe. The development of the movement in two different milieus caused a division between the English-speaking and French-speaking black worlds. The ideas of the Paris circle, which exercised a greater influence on the French-speaking African world than the ideas emanating from the London circle did, later gave way to the Negritude movement. While Negritude was basically represented by the writings of French-speaking black intellectuals, Pan-Africanism was by and large a movement organized by the English-speaking black people living in Britain. "Both these movements articulated pan-national racial solidarity, demanded an end to white supremacy and imperialist domination and positively celebrated blackness, and especially African blackness, as a distinct racial-cultural way of being" (Loomba 176).

Negritude, often identified with the cultural journal *Presence Africaine,* had its earlier beginnings in *Legitime Defense,* a literary journal set up in the early 1930s by the Martiniquan poet Etienne Lero. In the early phase of Negritude, Marxism and surrealism were two distinctive early strands of the movement, and they weakened later on as Marxists were reduced to a minority group in the *Presence Africaine* and surrealism was considered irrelevant. Lero's heir, Aime Cesaire, a fellow Martiniquan who arrived in Paris as a student in 1931, initially expressed happiness at his assimilation but eventually developed discontent. Cesaire's visit to the Dalmatian coast on the request of a Yugoslov student occasioned the origin of his long poem *Cahier dun Retour au Pays Natale* (1939), which enunciated the beginning of a new literary movement based on his own concept of Negritude. Cesaire spoke about his return to his native home and, of course, himself. He declared his acceptance of his own squalid home town with its squalid populace, his own origins, and his own true being – from all of which he had always tried to escape. In a sense, Cesaire's poem embodied the universal theme of the achievement of personal integrity and wholeness. The blackness of Negro skin, for which he has so far always been despised by the rest of the world, now becomes a center of his pride in Cesaire's hands through strong affirmation.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his introductory essay to the *Presence Africaine,* has written a long essay on Negritude, which might be defined as the essence and manifestation of the black soul, present in the writing and outlook of people of Negro origin in the West Indies, the Americas, and Africa. Negritude, as its very name suggests, is not identical with Pan-Africanism and excludes the Arab and non-Negro races, and it is less manifest in West Africa. Negritude lays stress on an apartness, a consciousness of being a Negro. Negritude characterizes the Negro-African poet's attempt to recover for his race a normal sense of self-pride and a lost confidence in himself. He sought to discover the roots and significance of the forgotten values in order to forge a new identity for himself that was distinct from the identity bestowed upon him by the colonizer's culture. They awakened Africans to an awareness of their might and potential. "Emotion is Negro," they declared, "as reason is Greek."

Negritude poetry was indebted for its origin to American Negro poetry, especially the poetry of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance such as Langston Hughes, Claude Mckay, Countee Cullen, etcetera. Both the Francophone émigrés and the Americans, unlike the British-ruled colonials, were citizens, although alienated, second-class citizens of European nations, and this sociological reality was responsible for creating a sense of brotherhood between them. On the African continent, there was a distinct division among its inhabitants: the statutory French citizenry, who were born in the colonies' capital cities and adjoining provinces, and the rest. The educated Francophone moved sooner or later into citizen status, as happened in the case of Leopold Sedar Senghor. But it did not happen in the case of the British subjects, both in Africa and the West Indies. While their Anglophone counterparts, despite their subjugation, faced no crisis of alienated citizenship, the American or Francophone Negroes found themselves trapped in their socio-political bind. The French considered their colonial subjects, most of whom received their childhood education in France, as French citizens, treating the colonies as overseas departments of France itself. In French colonies, secondary education curricula were similar to those in metropolitan France. The French subjects were constrained to imbibe the ideas of a shared ancestry. Conversely, the British made no attempt to establish British citizenship within the colonies.

One kind of literary cross-pollination occurred between the Francophone Caribbean and black Africa on the one hand and Francophone Africa on the other. However, there was no such dimension between the Anglophone Caribbean and black America on the one hand and Anglophone Africa on the other. And the black writers of the United States, though the country was an English-speaking one, moved to develop a deeper creative and intellectual intimacy—via the French Caribbean and Paris—with French Africa than they did with the British. Black Americans found Paris' cosmopolitan flavor extremely congenial.

The political and cultural policies towards the subjects adopted by the French and British colonial powers were responsible for the generation of contradictory attitudes among their subjects towards them. While for the intellectual elite of the French colonial empire, the real home was Paris, the educated British subjects did not consider London their home. The colonial departments of France elected black representatives like Senghor, Cesaire, Damas, etc. to the French assembly. However, the British Parliament's colonial policies kept its subjects at a distance. As a result, British subjects were primarily concerned with the end of colonialism; they were concerned not with cultural emancipation but with political liberation. The Anglophone intellectuals responded to the racial assaults through protests and rejection of nationalist politics, whereas the Francophone intellectuals preferred the creative field for their responses. As Wole Soyinka has put it, "The British colonial was not like the French intellectual rebels, concerned with liberation from another culture, for the simple reason that, in the main, he had no experience of a cultural loss or alienation" (*The Burden* 161–62). As a result, the French intellectuals in the colonies underwent deracination, assimilation into French cosmopolitan culture, and transformation into French men and women. The rebellion against this tendency of the colonial ruler was initiated much later in the safe battleground of culture and artistic creativity, as it was difficult to express it in political action against the ruthless French colonizers. The intellectuals' inspiration for this battle came from their interactions with American writers and intellectuals, as well as the harsh racial discrimination they witnessed in the United States.

The Negritude movement's Negro intellectuals held varying views on the West. Their divided race prevented them from fully participating in Western society, and despite being part of the 'black world', they felt alienated from the lives and cultures of the majority of ordinary people. The editor of *Presence Africaine*, Mr. Alioun Diop, termed this dilemma a crisis of conscience. In his opening address in the First Congress of Negro writers and artists, Diop proclaimed, "However much we may admire and love Western civilization, we do not think any the less about what distinguishes us both from the Europeans and from the (African) populations, which have remained attached to the soil and to their own traditions. . ." (qtd. in Legum 99). Richard Wright1 was aware of his dual existence in two different worlds and expressed his feelings of love-hatred when he said, "My position is a split one. I'm black. I'm a man of the West. . . I see and understand the West, but I also see and understand the non-or anti-Western point of view. . . Yet, I'm not non-Western. I'm no enemy of the west. Neither I'm a Westerner". Jacques Rabemananjara, the exile poet-politician from Madagascar, also shared a similar feeling of hatred and love.

Two conflicting groups, assimilationists and rejectionists, occupied the domain of literary creativity and culture, which the exponents of Negritude appropriated to express their reaction against colonial culture and assert a distinct identity. Senghor was accommodating, but the non-negotiable sector of Negritude entered the cultural and intellectual battleground with a war cry of identity and adopted increasingly belligerent postures. Intellectuals such as Etienne Lero, René Despestre, Jacques Roumain, and others represented the uncompromising sector of Negritude. Lero's Legitime Defense denounced the French Parnassian

tradition of poetry and urged its readers to seek their models of inspiration from the literature of the American Negro Renaissance and surrealism. Leon Damas also belonged to this aggressive group and called for the recovery of the authentic Senegal's national and cultural life from France's colonial clutches. Neither did he look for cultural inspiration from France, nor did he seek the help of any Christian God. He vented his hatred without hesitation. In his poetry, Maunick, one of the leading figures among the second generation of Negritude poets, identified his own humiliation with distant racial assaults. But the most belligerent of all such responses to racial assaults was that of René Depestre, who made use of the Voodoo Gods of his Haitian island as a structure of revenge in his *Epiphanies of the Voodoo Gods*, who make a visitation to an imaginary Alabama family and avenge the humiliation of the black race.

Aime Cesaire, another prominent proponent of Negritude, advocated for borrowing from Western culture, while opposing the notion that such borrowing could result in assimilation. Cesaire[2] envisioned a new culture for the Africans, which will accommodate both modern elements from Western culture and traditional old elements of African culture:

> For our part, and as regards our particular societies, we believe that in the African culture yet to be born, or in the Para-African culture yet to be born, these will be many new elements, modern elements, elements, let us face it borrowed from Europe. But we also believe that many traditional elements will persist in these cultures . . . I refuse to believe that the future African culture can totally and brutally reject the former African culture. In the culture yet to be born, these will be without any doubt both old and new. Which new elements? Which old? Here alone our ignorance begins.

Negro intellectuals were deeply concerned about the significant challenge of selectively adopting elements from both cultures, and they recognized the urgent need to support their fellow countrymen in this endeavor, as they served as the bridge between the Western world and their own cultures. Leopold Senghor was such a bridge person who backed Cesaire on the issue of assimilation, insisting that there must be freedom of choice in matters of assimilation and acknowledging the existence of the newly emerging problem of right choice. For him, Negritude was "the sum of civilized values of the black world; not past values but the values of true culture." Senghor probably swung between assimilation and rejection. Senghor's poems, though written in French, idolize Africa and express his nostalgia and feelings for an imaginary Africa. In matters of language, Senghor chose the language of the colonizer to express his tenets of Negritude in poetry. According to Wole Soyinka, Senghor had his own weakness for the real France, "that expresses the right way so well" and it is the France that has made "these daytime slaves into men of liberty, equality, fraternity" (*The Burden* 97–98). Senghor's pan-humanistic vision, which emphasizes love and forgiveness for adversaries, explains why he struggled to express his vehement hatred towards the French. Senghor's dual identities as a poet of vengeance and a priest of remission triggered his psychic oscillation.

Both in America and Africa, the Negroes used negativity as a weapon in their struggle for self-assertion; it assisted them in understanding their roots, defining themselves, and overcoming the inferiority complex resulting from long centuries of rejection and humiliation by white Europeans. It was fuelled by the Negro's anxieties about submergence and obliteration in a world dominated by Western values, as well as his subsequent protest as a means of asserting his own individuality. Blacks in the United States struggled to integrate into the American way of life, which kept them distinct without sacrificing their individuality. The militant sector of Negritude in Africa advocated for the revival and aggressive assertion of black virtues, rejecting all Western influences, in response to the racial assaults perpetrated by white people. It was actually preaching a reverse type of racism, similar to the racism already practiced by Western colonialism. Negritudinists proposed a totally distinctive African notion of metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics in opposition to European concepts. But the underlying danger of such a proposition was that its structure was derivative and replicatory, and it asserted, rather than proposing any difference, its dependence on the categories and features of the colonizing culture. Negritude poetry romanticized and portrayed Africa as a symbol of innocence, purity, and artless primitiveness, and the black race as the people of intuition, rhythm, and ancestral strength. However, this was merely a distortion of reality and a false pretense, as the proponents of Negritude only presented a partial picture of Africa, resulting in substandard poetry. Literature should reflect the whole man, and not merely the things that are meant to flatter the negro's ego in order to produce a lasting work of art. The Negritude poets, on the other hand, remained complacent, only glorifying their ancestors and the purity and innocence of the black race. It was one kind of self-enslavement or auto-colonization. James Booth has rightly observed that "confronted with the scientific and technological mastery of with civilization Negritude fell

back on the most 'opposite' qualities and labeled them 'Negro'" (9). In their endeavor to celebrate black men's qualities, the Negritude poets sometimes fell into traps and emphasized black men's intellectual inferiority and irrationality in opposition to white men's intellectual superiority and rationality, which was nothing but a travesty of black men's qualities and history. Aime Cesaire was also subjected to criticism when he wrote, "And for those who never invented anything / who never explored anything / who never conquered anything."

Anglophone writers and intellectuals in Africa were not as concerned as their Francophone counterparts with the ideology of Negritude. Due to their rulers' reluctance to significantly damage their culture, a unique aspect of British colonial policy, they retained the essence of their negroness. However, the British disapproved of colonial people who revealed their true exotic nature, imitated their speech and behavior, and assimilated their culture. Besides, the new generation of Anglophone writers was quick to identify the shortcomings and self-contained trap of Negritude, which they believed might lead to self-enslavement or auto-colonisation of Africa. They realized that Negritude, in its militant form, could only lead to a dead end. According to Sembene Ousmane, Negritude had "nothing solid about it." The general reaction of the first generation of Anglophone writers in the 1960s to the older tradition of French Negritude is summed up in Chinua Achebe's comment: "You have all heard of the African personality; of African democracy, of the African way of socialism, of Negritude, and so on. They are all props we have fashioned at different times to help us get on our feet again. Once we are up we shan't need any of them anymore" (qtd. in Booth 11). Among other Nigerian writers, Wole Soyinka was bitter in his criticism of Negritude, as he realized the inherent racial approach of Negritude in its attempt for self-assertion and in its search for African identity, although he himself insisted on the existence of a distinctively African worldview and subsequently acknowledged the pioneering achievement of this movement. However, the validity of Soyinka's objection against Negritude cannot be denied: "It extolled the apparent. Its reference points took too much colouring from European ideas, even while its Messiahs pronounced themselves fanatically African. It not only accepted the dialectical structure of European ideological confrontations but borrowed from the very components of its racist syllogism" (*Myth* 127). Negritude acted in a dialectical progression as the antithesis of the thesis of white man's supremacy. Instead of challenging the pre-supposed thesis of white man's supremacy, negritudists endorsed the theory that Africans lack development and are incapable of analytical thinking and construction. But they failed to realize that the acceptance of such a proposition is absolutely a travesty of truth and contains an inherent insult, as they remain appeased by glorifying the intuitive power of Africans.In the words of Wole Soyinka,

> It accepted one of the most commonplace blasphemies of racism, that the black man has nothing between his ears, and proceeded to subvert the power of poetry to glorify this fabricated justification of European cultural domination. Suddenly, we were exhorted to give a cheer for those who never invented anything, a cheer for those who never explored the oceans. The truth, however, is that there isn't any such creature. (*Myth* 129)

Most of the prime exponents of Negritude were political leaders, and they belonged to the elite class of society. Therefore, this minority group primarily sought a racial identity in urban areas, while the majority of Africans residing in Africa's interior remained unaffected and uninterested in the movement's waves, as they never felt the necessity to declare their African identity. Intellectuals like Soyinka realized that the Negroes need not boast of their negroness, just as a tiger does not proclaim its tigritude because it is natural to him. Unfortunately, philosophies of "African Soul," "African Personality," "Negritude," etc. were all political ploys employed successfully by the nation's governing elite, who stepped into the roles of their colonial masters with independence "to divert attention from their failure to introduce any radical changes in the colonial structure" (Booth 14). According to Ghanaian, Ayi Kewi Armah, Senghor's Negritude and Nkrumah's "African Personality" are "'sloganeering gimmicks' designed to persuade the people that the substitution of black oppressors for white is real liberation" (24).

Despite their shortcomings, Pan-Africanism and the Negritude movement were significant steps in the construction of modern black consciousness. As nativist enterprises, they were the first bold assertions of black cultures in defiance of colonial cultural hegemony and suppression. Their significance lies not only in their political effectiveness, but also in their ability to break the long silence colonialism imposed on the natives. Writings produced by these movements result in the subversion of the authority of colonial culture as well as colonial discourses, which celebrate the superiority of the colonizers and despise the inferior indigenous culture. These movements offered ideological resistance to imperialism and aimed to reconstitute a shattered community through the introduction of reverse discourses. They aimed for the retrieval of self-confidence and the rehabilitation of cultural identity,

preoccupied with a frantic search for authenticity, national origin, and a new set of myths, religions, heroes, and heroines to celebrate. Critics like Benita Parry have come forward to vigorously defend reverse discourses and anti-colonialist writings that manifest nativism. Parry, who emphasizes the value of anticolonial movements like Negritude in providing resistance to colonialism, advocates for "two cheers for nativism." Affirming the significance of such reverse discourses, Parry argues that “anti-colonialist writings did challenge, subvert, and undermine the ruling ideologies, and nowhere more so than in overthrowing the hierarchy of colonizer/colonized, the speech and stance of the colonized refusing a position of subjugation and dispensing with the terms of the colonizer’s definitions (40).

Notes

[1] This assertion appeared in “Tradition and Industrialization”, *Presence Africaine*, Nos 8, 9, 10, (1956).
[2] The quoted statement appeared in “Culture and Colonisation”, *Presence Africaine*, Nos 8, 9, 10, (1956).

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