

Negritude: Reclaiming Native Culture and Identity in Aime Cesaire's A Tempest

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Abstract

The paper contends to explore Negritude, the 1950s theoretical and literary movement by leading African intellectuals, which surfaced as a consequence of the hegemonic Western discourse and the misrepresentation of African culture and identity. With the fall of imperialism and formation of new liberated states, the third world writers challenged the Western construct of Africa and contested against European ethnocentric ideology that considered the European culture as the 'centre' thereby relegating all other cultures to the periphery. The African writers realized the values of the 'third world' cultures and emphasized on the glorification of native-identity, culture and beauty in blackness. The central thought of Negritude movement was blacks take pride in all indigenous aspects. The paper explores the virtues of Negro culture and demonstrates the black man's distinct identity as against that of white. The paper also analyses how Aime Cesaire's play A Tempest (1968) reclaimed native culture, identity and gave voice to the devoiced. The play explores the idea of freedom and reflects on the ways to gain the freedom. Cesaire in the play delivers his idea of Negritude through Caliban and Ariel. The cultural context of this play is pertinent to Cesaire because it explores the hierarchical system during slavery based on racial dynamics.

KEYWORDS: Negritude, Colonialism, Third world, Racism.

African culture endured grievous boorishness at the hands of the colonizers. The indigenous social, political, cultural, and religious civilizations were dominated and subjugated by the imposition of colonial rule. The arrival of imperialism in Africa wiped away highly developed ancient cultural practices. Imperial powers glorified the western culture and deliberately marginalized and eventually misrepresented the native culture, religion, tradition, and identity of Africans in their discourse. Edward Said in his book Orientalism(1978) examines the imperial discourse about the non-western 'other'. He writes, "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient"(3).He uses the phrase 'the other' to describe the Western captivation with the Orient and insist that Orient does not exist and has never existed outside the imagination of the West. In this context the orient (East) is represented as irrational, exotic, inferior, backward, intellectually retarded and culturally passive.

The repugnant period of colonialism in Africa affected the people's language, education, culture, religion, and identity. Writers and intellectuals from colonized cultures became aware of the damage caused by the colonial discourse. They wrote back to the Empire to defend, and to counter the political, economic and cultural atrocities the colonizers inflicted on the colonized. They demolished the hegemonic boundaries and the determinants that accomplished binary oppositions such as 'Us' and 'Them'; 'First World' and 'Third World'; 'White' and 'Black', 'Colonizer' and 'Colonized. The African writers and intellectuals thus revolted against the oppression meted out to them and their nation by the Western opportunistic colonial system. They joined forces to erase the stigma attached to the black world and attempted to redefine and re-establish their identity. With the arrival of the colonizer the Africans identity was split in two cultures and the Negritude movement enthusiasts realized the urgency of overcoming the identity crises of being neither African nor European.

The French writer Jean Paul Sartre anticipated in *Black Orpheus* (1959) that Africa required an intellectually stimulating movement to bring forth the true essence of African identity. He wrote, "the Negro cannot deny that he is black nor claim for himself an abstract, colorless humanity: he is black. He picks up the word black that they had thrown at him like a stone; he asserts his blackness, facing the white man with pride" (296). Such an intellectual revolution came about in the 1930s in France, when a group of intellectuals Aime Cesaire of Martinique, Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, and Leon Gontran Damas of French Guiana and other Caribbean and African writers, developed the literary and political ideology of Negritude. These three became the main theorizers of Negritude movement as they were all interested in reclaiming the black identity under French colonial rule. For them Negritude was intended to be a weapon that would overthrow the concept of the 'barbaric Negro'.

The proponents of Negritude movement wanted to combat the ignorant stereotypes of Africa perpetuated by the West. Negritude asserted to Africans all over the world their right to be proud of their origins, ancestry, culture, religion and language. "Negritude is a protest at a very sophisticated level: a protest of men largely assimilated into European culture, but for all that unable to escape from the color of their skins" (Bentley 268). The writers of Negritude emphasized the significance and universal nature of black culture and identity and called for solidarity among the inhabitants of Black Africa in resistance to colonial oppression. To break down the image of Africans as 'dark continent' and to carve themselves an identity, these writers sought to restore the merit and dignity of African civilization, as a source of pride for black people.

Negritude was a self-conscious movement that reconstructed and reconfigured Black's identity that was suppressed, disoriented and fragmented by oppression, slavery and colonial control. It enabled the Africans to break up the notion of blackness as a negative concept and empowered them to struggle for their identity and culture that would be heard, recognized and respected. The movement disrupted the image of racism and symbolized a sense of pride in their ancestry, and the beauty of blackness. Negritude represented "a poetics, a philosophy of existence, a literary, cultural, and intellectual movement [that] signified the birth of a new literature among black Francophone writers, a 'New Negro' from the Francophone world, a metaphorically rich Pan- Africanism in French" (qtd in Niro 140). Ideologically and politically, Negritude can be described as a conscious and constructed response to

colonial oppression and established norms of racial and cultural superiority. The movement was not only to return to the African roots but to eradicate stereotypes that instilled a sense of inferiority in African people. Thus, Negritude emerged as twofold phenomena of racism and colonialism that promoted and affirmed the essence of African culture and reclaimed the derogatory term, 'Niger' in their struggle. The opening up of the African mind to rediscovery of African values and traditions and a rebirth of the African idea of the black self appeared to be in fact the most essential and the most significant element in the literature of Negritude.

Aime Césaire's contribution to the Negritude Movement is commendable, Senghor credits Aime Césaire, with coining the term Negritude in 1932- 1933, as a witty comeback to the derogatory French term 'Niger' or 'Negro'. The word 'Negro' referred to a people of a designated color 'black' and this identity of the African has been a source of ridicule from the West. Aime Césaire in his writing focused on native culture, identity, race and history. Thus his broader definition of Negritude was "simple recognition of the fact of being black people, of our history, and of our culture" (qtd in Vaillant 244) which relied more on a shared history of suffering by African people. Césaire's appropriation of the term Negritude was to celebrate the cultural roots of colonized people and to affirm the unity of black culture and black people within the domain of colonial life. He stated: "I do not in the slightest believe in biological permanence, but I believe in culture. My Negritude has a ground. It is a fact that there is a black culture: it is historical, there is nothing biological about it" (qtd in Arnold 37).

Césaire claimed that in reclaiming their identity the black people were asserting the value of their history, culture and the beauty of blackness. Edmondson says that for Césaire, "Negritude primarily gained international value and reputation as a system of thought which was one of the most important cultural movements for black people's esteem and freedom" (92). Negritude is rooted in 'the African heritage', that is, the historicity of African people. The overarching themes in Aime Césaire's works is the journey to self-enlightenment, self-esteem, beauty in blackness and black pride in black culture, and pride in self. Aime Césaire in his works seeks to glorify the African way of life, African culture, self-identity, pride in one's heritage, and preservation of one's culture. His works illuminate a perception of African culture, heritage, traditional values and dignity of Africa people.

Aime Césaire was amongst first in the francophone sphere to 'write back' to the centre in order to restore and redefine the stereotyped African image projected in the European literature. He asserts that colonization had taken away not only land, but also language, identity and culture. He also claims that colonialism did not civilize the land of colonized, but its results were only advantageous to the colonizers as Europe only exploited the colonized. Césaire in his works refuted the colonialist's argument that blacks are inferior sub-human beings while whites are superior to them. His works explore the zest for proclaiming the values of black world, so that blacks instead of being ashamed of their ethnicity learn to associate blackness with a sense of pride,

The concept of Negritude is the essence of Aime Césaire's play *A Tempest* (1968) wherein Césaire delivers his idea of Negritude by reclaiming African identity and glorifying the native culture and the black world through the character of Caliban and

Ariel.Cesaire's play dramatizes the fundamental tenets of Negritude in inspiring blacks to be conscious of their traditional and cultural legacy.A Tempest (1969)is written as a postcolonial adaptation of Shakespeare's The Tempest (1610-11) and manifests the spirit of rebellion of the oppressed peoples against the European colonization. It was originally written in 1969 in French by AimeCesaire and translated into English in 1985 by Richard Miller. The characters in the play are the same as in Shakespeare's drama except that Prospero is a white master and Ariel is a mulatto and Caliban a black slave. The storyline of Cesaire's play follows along the path of the Shakespeare's play.

AimeCesaire's play exposes the underlying power discourse within an ambit of new vision. The play exposes the issues of racism, identity, decolonization and power relation. With a striking fidelity to Shakespeare's play, Cesaire engages with the racial and class conflicts intrinsic to The Tempest and gives voice to the occluded, colonized and oppressed. Cesaire explores a postcolonial revision of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized from the aspect of 'other' and the colonized who has always been silenced and kept in the background in most European works. Cesaire thus makes colonialism the central focus of his version and consequently Shakespeare's play is rewritten from the perspective of the native writer. Cesaire gives voice to marginalized to talk back to the Empire.

A Tempest opens on a secluded island where Prospero has been exiled, and he raises a violent storm through his magical powers to drive his daughter's ship ashore.The island is however somewhere in the Caribbean. Cesaire describes how Prospero, the Duke of Milan, uses magic to attain absolute power over Caliban and Ariel.The play focuses on the plightof Ariel and Caliban (Colonized) and their struggle to reclaim their native culture and identity and the efforts to free their island from Prospero's (Colonizer) rule. Through the complex relationship between Prospero and Caliban Cesairemakes evident his stand against European powers.Caliban'sresponse to Prospero's acts manifests anticolonial discourse in the play.

A Tempestpresents a colonial perspective towards black identity and the relationship between master and slave. In this counter discourse to Shakespeare'sThe Tempest;Cesaire dispels the colonial representation of Caliban as barbaric, savage, and black. By giving voice to Caliban, Cesaire decentres Prospero by empowering Caliban with a sense of identity. Caliban attempts to authorize his own freedom by answering back Prospero and disregarding his authority. Calibanuses language as a tool to question the authority:

PROSPERO: Since you're so fond of invective, you could at least thank me for having taught you to speak at all. You a savage... a dumb animal, a beast I educated, trained, dragged up from the bestiality that still clings to you.

CALIBAN: In the first place, that's not true. You haven't taught me anything at all! Except to jabber in your own language so that I could understand your orders: chop the wood, wash the dishes, fish for food, plant and vegetables; all because you're far too lazy to do it yourself. And as for your knowledge, did you ever impart any of that to me? You took care not to. All your science you keep for yourself alone, shut up in those big books.

PROSPERO: What would you be without me?

CALIBAN: Without you? I'd be the king, that's what I'd be, the king of the island. The king of the island given me by my mother, Sycorax. (11-12)

Prospero's attitude towards Caliban exemplifies "the white man's burden", though he congratulates himself for teaching Caliban but for him the colonised can never be any better than "ugly ape", "a savage", "a dumb animal"(11). Caliban complains that Prospero taught him language in terms of servitude but not language. Thus Césaire shows how Western civilization looks at Africa-the barbarian/uncivilized world. Also Caliban's words show how the natives were displaced by the colonizers who would otherwise be the owners/kings of their land.

Prospero like any other coloniser thinks that it is legitimate to order and subdue Caliban, thus reducing him to a subordinate position. Prospero attempts to impose his superiority upon Caliban, who is expected to comply with his dictates without any complaint and protest. According to Prospero, Caliban's only function and duty in this world is to serve the needs and orders of Prospero all the time. In other words, Prospero tries to place Caliban into the subservient role determined by the colonial powers.

The struggle of Caliban and Ariel against their master Prospero reflects two voices of freedom movement. They show different layers of resistance, self-representation and urge to return to their own native culture. They fight against the domination of Colonial rule and reject the colonial language. When Ariel says that Prospero had promised him his freedom, Caliban says: "He'll promise you a thousand times and take it back a thousand times. Anyway, tomorrow doesn't interest me. What I want is (shouting) "freedom now!"(21).

Throughout the play Prospero tries to control Caliban by threatening him with punishments. But Caliban resists his authority and to show his resilient attitude he goes on to the extent of refusing to be called Caliban. He expresses his desire to be called X. He tells Prospero: CALIBAN: Call me X. That would be the best. Like a man without a name. Or, to be more precise, a man whose name has been stolen. [...] Every time you summon me it reminds me of a basic fact, the fact that you've stolen everything from me, even my identity! Uhuru! (15). Caliban thinks it is better to be a nameless entity rather than to be a slave. For him choosing to be called X is also an act of freedom. It proves that Caliban too can rebelliously reject the authority of the colonizer. Caliban tells Prospero directly he regrets not being able to regain his freedom and free his land:

PROSPERO: Come here, Caliban. Have you got anything to say in your defence? Take advantage of my good humor. I'm in a forgiving mood today.

CALIBAN: I'm not interested in defending myself. My only regret is that I've failed.

PROSPERO: what are you hoping for?

CALIBAN: To get back my island and regain my freedom. (63)

Cesaire's Caliban, rejects the false image that Prospero has imposed on him and he asserts that he wants to get rid of Prospero and to regain his island and his freedom.

Prospero offers to make peace with him; Caliban refuses to comply and shows his determination by replying: "You know very well that I'm not interested in peace. I'm interested in being free! Free, you hear?" (63). This is the manifestation of the people in the colonized countries for their desire of freedom, and it is also a declaration of violent actions they may take for the purpose of obtaining freedom telling Prospero that he is not interested in peace. Caliban, the representative of the colonized people, is definitely aware of colonizer's intention and shows an attitude towards colonization that the colonizer imposes on the colonized. Cesaire's play is a counter discourse to the European discourse on Africa. Cesaire's Caliban often utters the word "Uhuru" (the Swahili word for freedom). The word Uhuru implies that Caliban wants his own identity, value and culture. He is vocal from the beginning for what he thinks is his right. Caliban says:

CALIBAN: Uhuru!

PROSPERO: What did you say?

CALIBAN: I said, Uhuru!

PROSPERO: Mumbling your native language again! I've already told you, I don't like it. You could be polite, at least; a simple hello wouldn't kill you.

CALIBAN: Oh, I forgot... But make that as froggy, waspish, pustular and dung-filled "hello" as possible. May today hasten by a decade the day when the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth will feast upon your corpse?!

PROSPERO: Gracious as always, you ugly ape! How can anybody be so ugly?

CALIBAN: you think I'm ugly... well, I don't think you're so handsome yourself. With that big hooked nose, you look just like some old vulture... (11)

Towards the end of the play Cesaire leaves the readers/viewers with a sense of rupture and a sense that the struggle for Uhuru will continue. At the close, Caliban is chanting multiple assertions, which reflects that Caliban wants his freedom without Prospero.

"Uhuru!"

"Freedom, high day!

High day, freedom!

Freedom, high day, freedom!"

"LIBERTY, OH-AY! LIBERTY,"

A Tempest contributes to a discourse which seeks to unsettle the Eurocentric bias implicit in Shakespeare's play and to confront the presumed supremacy of Western

cultural values. Césaire Africanizes Caliban through various images and symbols, but none is more important in representing Caliban's transformation than the word with which he enters and repeats throughout the play, "Uhuru". For Caliban Uhuru is hope and forecasts the much awaited freedom from Prospero and his rule. The essence of all native writing can also be realized in the Swahili word Uhuru. The quest reclaiming native identity and freedom is pivotal in Césaire's writings. Rewriting Shakespeare's canon is Césaire's revisionary project and perhaps the best exemplification of Negritude. Through *A Tempest* Césaire gives voice to the subaltern, marginalized and emphasises the need to reclaim the African identity and assert the beauty of blackness.

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