

# Negritude in Anti-colonial African Literature Discourse

by

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## Abstract

This paper argues that Negritude as both a literary and political movement was very instrumental in the liberation of Africa and the Black world from colonial subjugation and racial segregation in the early 1930s through to the 1960s. However, its contribution to both the literary and political world has often been engulfed in a mist, subjecting its relevance to posthumous ambivalence with different literary scholars offering their own insights into their understanding of the movement, and thus, its existence is fundamental in the continued postcolonial struggle against the league of mandarins that replaced the colonial oppressors. Therefore, this work provides an analysis of the rise and fall of Negritude as both a literary and political movement, with focus on a comprehensive understanding of how the movement crumbled.

**Key words:** Africa, colonialism, Negritude, culture.

## Introduction

The term 'Negritude' originates from the term 'negro' referring to a Black person. In pre-independence times, it would indiscriminately refer to all African people regardless of where they lived. With passage of time however, the concept delineated itself from African people residing on the continent and remained a derogatory reference to African people who had gained citizenship in the West, especially the United States of America, through either migration or ancestral belonging to generations of African people that had been forced across the Atlantic in a brutal and dehumanizing trade of humans that lasted four centuries.

This distinction between the Negro and the African which characterized a great part of colonial Africa and racial segregation in the west was insignificant as a concept. This is the case because just as the African was suffering from colonial oppression and cultural denigration on the continent the Black American and other Black people in the Caribbean, the Antilles and various parts of Europe were also in constant struggles against racial discrimination and its accompanying consequences. It was from such struggles – both in and outside Africa - that the concept of Negritude in Africa’s anticolonial literature was conceived.

## **Literature Review**

A lot of scholars have written on Negritude and its impacts in the literary and political world especially in the times of colonialism. The birth of negritude was very relevant as it stood in the way of colonial tendencies of racism and suppression of African cultures and literatures. Souleymane Bachir in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* notes that the concept of Négritude emerged as the expression of a revolt against the historical situation of French colonialism and racism. “The founders of Negritude, Césaire, Damas and Senghor, had individual lived experiences of their feeling of revolt against a world of racism and colonial domination” (Diagne, 2018). This was in their encounters as second class citizens both in their own countries and in diaspora – the earlier in Martinique and Senegal, the latter in France.

As a literary and political movement, Ome (2014) posits that Negritude writers found solidarity in a common Black identity as a rejection of French colonial racism. “They believed that the shared Black heritage of members of the African diaspora was the best tool in fighting against French political and intellectual hegemony and domination” (Ome, 2014). Historically, Ome (2014) argues that Negritude has been perceived as an ideological reaction against French colonialism and a defence of African culture, leading to the strengthening of African identity in the Francophone Black world.

Campbell (2006) considers Negritude as the art of being Black. He cites Lemelle & Kelly (1994: 87) who argue that Senghor’s particular brand of Negritude was largely a “neo-African cultural challenge” in which he equated cultural by-products such as art as a marker of civility. According to Campbell, Negritude has as its objective the revalorization of African culture through reclaiming the identity suppressed by colonialism and structural racism. This is on the pretext of art as activism in agreement with Senghor’s belief that “art is not an isolated or solitary event, but rather a “social activity, a technique of living” which brings all other activities to their fulfilment” (Senghor, 1995, p. 52 in Ome, 2014).

While Aimé Césaire is acknowledged as the first to have used the word Negritude in his 'Notebook of the return to my native country' published in 1939, Warren (1990) notes that Leon Damas was the first to publish poetry demonstrating Negritude. "He published in *Esprit* as early as 1934. In 1937 his collection of poetry, 'Pigments', championed the theory. The collection was later banned by the French government citing fears that it would incite an uprising in the colonies. His poem S.O.S. reveals his political consciousness" (Warren, 1990).

## **Defining Negritude: Multiple Perspectives**

Negritude is both a literary and political movement that was created just after the Second World War by Black francophone writers who included Aimé Césaire from Martinique, Léopold Senghor from Senegal and Leon Gontran Damas from Guyana among others (Mabana, 2006). The three were all students in Paris, France, with the poetry in between them tempting literary scholars and political analysts into reimagining their literary semblance as holding key to the birth of the movement. The three men were influenced by surrealism (Kunda, 2010), a twentieth century literary and artistic movement which used fantastic images and incongruous juxtapositions in order to represent unconscious thoughts and dreams.

The concept of Negritude has been defined differently by various scholars and literary figures, each emanating from their varying perspectives in understanding the assumed roles of Negritude. One of the movement's founders Aimé Césaire regards Negritude as the conscious of being Black, a realisation which directly translates into acceptance and the siege of a Black person's own destiny and culture (Campbell, 2006). Campbell sums up the concept as a philosophical movement to revive Black pride. He posits that Negritude is often considered as having been conceived out of another relevant ideology, Pan-Africanism. Campbell (2006) posits that the actual concept of Negritude might have emerged from Edward W. Blyden who "is said to have called for African people in all parts of the world to reclaim their African heritage and by doing so, reclaim their pride", while admitting that the most popular rendition of Negritude conceptually evolved in the 1930s from a triad of diasporan African people living in France: Aimé Césaire, Leon Damas and Léopold Senghor (Campbell, 2006).

Another of the founding fathers of Negritude, Senghor, defines the concept of Negritude simply as the collection of cultural values of Africa (Mabana, 2006). According to him, Negritude is in fact a culture. It is a collection of economic, political, intellectual, moral, artistic and social values of the African people and Black minorities in America, Asia and Oceania (Mabana, 2006). The idea behind the inclusion of Black people from all over the world resonates well with the common struggle of the people of African descent in every society around the world where they have been subjected to racial discrimination and other forms of oppression.

The discrimination and prejudice have been a result of both cultural and racial ignorance emanating from lack of exposure to diversity of human species. This is due to systemic suppression of curiosity in some political settings among other reasons and a superiority complex emanating from the entrapment of victims ignorance's various forms in its vicious cycle. As such, Senghor's understanding of the very concept he gave rise to permeates the need to reclaim Black pride which has often been low resulting from both the colonial and neo-colonial traumatic experiences encountered by people of African descent around the world.

Negritude is without doubt a literary movement because its engineers deployed poetry, folklore and other forms of literature to realise their goals. The literary works themed around Negritude adopted another concept that was to become popular in postcolonial Africa: art as activism. In an almost time-travel literary encounter, referring to the death of the mother to Nigerian Afrobeat pioneer Fela Kuta and the protests he staged physically and – significant to this discourse – musically, Mark LeVine posits that art is the weapon of the future in the struggle against violent, corrupt and repressive regimes (LeVine, 2015). However, with Negritude, we have already lived in this future, where art has been used in activism against colonial oppression. LeVine (2015) argues that:

His (Kuta's protest) was a seminal late 20<sup>th</sup> century example of how art both serves as a vehicle and creates spaces for subcultures to become countercultures—how groups of (usually) marginalized young people, drawn together by common cultural tastes (in music, modes of dress, styles of speech, etc.) and performances, gradually articulate a powerful oppositional political vision that challenges authoritarian state power (Pp1277-1278).

The concept of art as a form of activism transcends into the second conception of Negritude as a political movement. It is often regarded as a political movement because it was founded on the principles of revolt against white supremacy that had existed for so long in Black life, feeding into the notion of art as activism. Negritude literary endeavours were one of the many possible and convenient ways African people had under racist and colonial repression and suppression for protestation and revolt. Interconnecting activism and art vis-à-vis politics and literature, a Negritude writer therefore rejects certain ways of life, a state imposed on Black people, uses Negritude as a weapon in the struggle as well as in revalorisation of his own Black culture and sometimes as a weapon of reconciliation between the different races that have for so long eyed each other sceptically (Oke & Ojo, 2000).

## The Power of Negritude as a Literary and Political Movement

The rise of Negritude as a powerful literary and political movement in colonial Africa has been the subject in literary discourses on the contribution of art to the independence struggle. Such discourses have often brought into the limelight how literary aesthetics were successfully used to combat the ills of colonial administration. First, the Negritude voice reflected the lugubrious state as well as hope of a people that had for so long been whipped with laps of all sorts of the earth's trouble without showing any form of resistance. It denounced the western imperial ethnocentrism. Members of the movement protested against the oppressive dominion by the West on an African man. In one of his works, Yves-Emmanuel Dogbé wrote about a Black revolt that led to his real emancipation from the chains of slavery, then independence and the granting of his birth right upon acquisition and full control of his ancestors' land (Oke & Ojo, 2000). One can easily realise that Negritude is a protest against the colonial tendency ingrained in the inhumane deliberate acts of ignoring Black reality and the existence of a Black person as being at par with a white person.

The fight against colonialism and imperial hegemony imbued in the movement did not end with the attainment of independence. In the earliest postcolonial days, there was still a continuation of one of the basic principles of Negritude, the restoration of Black culture and pride. This Negritude element can be pointed out in some of the poems in the collection *French African Verse* where in a poem titled 'I thank you God' by the Ivorian poet and novelist Benard Dadié, the persona thanks God for having created him Black despite all the incomprehensible racial tantrums accompanying his Blackness which he satirizes through the celebration of his skin pigment. In the first stanza of his poem, Dadié writes:

*I thank you God for creating me Black,  
For making of me  
Porter of all sorrows,  
Setting on my head  
The World.  
I wear the Centaur's hide  
And I have carried the World since the first morning* (Reed & Wake, 1972)

As can be noted in the poem, the movement's power lay in the ability to neutralize the pain and psychological discomfort that was prevalent during colonialism and had remained in the postcolonial times, tormenting the self-esteem of African people in their new free world. After political independence was granted to African people, colonial culture of subjugation of the native transformed into a psychological reality that kept on devouring African self-esteem through culture and traditions.

However, with Negritude, Black people were driven into new consciousness of pride in their creation – the basis for Black Consciousness that would be born in the 1960s in South Africa’s anti-apartheid struggle.

The success of negritude also emanates from its careful and artistic manipulation so that most of its works never explore differences among the oppressed peoples of the world. For example, contrary to historical narratives that lay bare realities of volatility among tribal kingdoms in pre-colonial Africa, Negritude works assume oblivion to the fact that the tribal differences led to tribal warfare which sometimes destabilized whole regions as was the *Mfecane* in Southern Africa (Mfecane refers to “turbulent migrations of the peoples that violently tore apart most of the pre-colonial societies of southern Africa and reached as far away as East Africa resulting from widespread warfare, devastation, and the formation by conquest or incorporation of newly militarized and centralized states” (Laband, 2011). This omission of the dark side of pre-colonial life is deliberate as it is mostly irrelevant in light of the thematic concerns of the movement’s works. The focus in Negritude was unity of the oppressed, and this could not have been attained through an unnecessary digression to pre-colonial vices – suffice to say every society has its own social ills. The oppressed realised the commonality of their suffering, a factor that brought them together in the fight against the common enemy (McLeod, 2000).

To illustrate the unity conceived out of the common suffering of diverse peoples, Negritude propagated for the liberation of oppressed people from all over the world – not just African people. Aside Africa, Negritude also fought for the liberation of other colonized and occupied territories around the globe at the time the movement was in its prime. For example, in David Diop’s poetry, especially in his poem ‘Waves’, he speaks of the Suez dock and the coolie of Hanoi, the earlier in Egypt, also referred to as a Middle-Eastern or Arab country in mainstream media and the latter, relating to a city in Vietnam, the Far East, Asia (lines 3-4) (Diop, 1973). The poem therefore explores independence movements in Africa as well as the Far-East, with a snippet of imperialism’s consequence in the Middle East. Another of Diop’s poems, ‘The agony of chains’, also touches on emancipation of the occupied territories as well as oppressed people. It contains some moments of pain to the oppressed where it speaks of the Vietnamese spending nights in the fields, a possible allusion to the devastating Vietnam War, and the Congolese being lynched in faraway western lands, specifically in the USA (Diop, 1973). It becomes explicit understanding that the poem’s experience is loaded with the suffering of natives in Asia whose lands have been occupied in a brutal war resulting from ideological differences as well as racial segregation encountered by Negroes in America. Since there were several states colonised by France in Africa, the Antilles, the Caribbean and Asia as well as immigrants in America, co-operation of the oppressed – the empire – in the fight against the centre – the imperialists in postcolonial theory – became inevitable and significant. Therefore, Negritude injected some energy in its struggle against imperialism and colonialism because of the unification of the oppressed peoples.

In addition, Negritude bolsters a re-imagination of an almost reverent mythical Africa of pre-colonial times which breeds nostalgia. Negritude works create the impression of a tranquil, harmonious and satisfying past – a feeling of an ancient golden age of Africa, way back before the scramble for Africa saw the dawn of imperial inhumanness. For example, in the poem ‘To my mother’ by *David Diop* again, he engages the audience in a time traveller’s experience by dragging them back into an ancient Africa that basked in glory of peace and tranquillity. This is noted right from the very first few lines where he speaks of good moments in the distant past (Diop, 1973), and according to the movement, it was necessary for African people to strive towards attainment of the peace, tranquillity and several other good moments of ancient Africa. This was a very significant element that allowed Negritude to command a large following at the time when they were all feeling the pinch of an Africa that was coerced into obeying foreign powers through the western-propagated legal system of colonialism. In such difficult times, Negritude managed to comfort African people by denigrating the colonial representations of the African’s own history and culture.

The last of Negritude’s strengths is that it laid foundations for the creation of several other anti-oppression movements (Mabana, 2006). The formation of movements such as *Créolité*, *Antillanité*, and *African Identity* in the Antilles, Caribbean and the United States is a direct response to the aims of Negritude. *Antillanité* was founded by Edouard Glissant following an appeal by Aimé Césaire in the sixties. It was a literary movement in the Antilles born upon realisation of the fact that ‘the Antilles community was sick because it had been successfully paralysed by colonial policy’ (Boulafrad & Benaouda, 2009). The only notable difference between this movement and Negritude was that *Glissant* wanted a multi-racial Antilles compared to the latter who only admitted and valorised anything African – anything unAfrican had to be erased from the picture (Boulafrad & Benaouda, 2009). According to Glissant, *Antillanité* was for every other oppressed human, be it Asian, Indian and even reconciliatory or moderate whites. This idea was redeployed in the late eighties by Patrick Chamoiseau and friends, founders of yet another movement, *Creolité*. Also, although there is no direct link, the birth of the Black Consciousness in the Republic of South Africa as pioneered by Steve Biko might have drawn its inspiration from Negritude as its (Black Consciousness) existence preceded the South African movement.

## **Hypocrisy?**

Negritude as a political and literary movement drew – and continues to draw- criticism from scholars, analysts and literary figures because of some paradoxes which marked its existence. To begin with, the Negritude writers themselves failed to reach a consensus on the extent of their extremism in the anti-colonial struggle. Senghor always propagated for a reconciliatory approach between Black people and White people. Such an approach can be inferred even from his works, for example, ‘To New York’, a poem in which he urges the whites of Manhattan, a bourgeoisie outskirts predominantly occupied by whites of New York, to live like the Black people of Harlem, an outskirts with a Black majority.

Senghor, with his pacification, demonstrates even hope of a New York life that would take after Harlem (Senghor, 1998). Contrary to Senghor, Césaire had the thoughts of Black people uniting against White people, with no middle ground. His thoughts come out clear in his very long poem ‘Notebook of the return to my native country’ where the persona encourages Black people to revolt against White people (Césaire, 1983). He believed Black people had to partake relentlessly in the struggle against dominion by the imperial and colonial oppressor (Oke & Ojo, 2000).

David Diop’s poetry resonates more with Césaire’s perspectives that his works drew criticism for extremism portrayed in the tone and denigrating diction he used to describe colonialists and imperialists. Such a derogatory tone and diction can be noted in the poem ‘Waves’ where he refers to whites as *terrifying beasts*. The imagery born out of such powerful language relegates the power of dialogue as it expresses the impression Diop had of the white imperialists – terrific and without conscience as a beast. This strong and derogatory tone reappears in his other poetic masterpiece, ‘Vultures’, where the title is an allusion to the white supremacists again (Diop, 1973:4). However, his critics disagree with this approach, understanding it as fighting fire with fire by deploying the same primitive colonial tactics in dealing with a different race. This impeded progress in the movement’s targeted goals and objectives.

The other controversy with Negritude is that some notable critics often take it as an acceptance of an inferiority complex. For example, Ezekiel Mphahlele, a South African poet, writer and activist, described Negritude as a notion which had its roots in an inherent inferiority complex (Warren, 1990). According to Mphahlele, this inferiority forms an integral part of Black people. The notion of inferiority appeared in one of Senghor’s philosophical expressions of Negritude in which he said: “emotion is negro, just as reason is Hellenic”. Critics saw this expression as the acceptance of an ethnological discussion of the Levy-Bruhlian which distinguishes between the West and its rationality and the colonised countries which are considered as inferior, under the primitive mentality. According to Mphahlele, Negritude is an inferiority complex because it was born out of frustration from rejection of Black culture by the colonialists (Campbell, 2006).

The hypocrisy in the Negritude writers manifests itself more clearly in the fact that most of the writers were themselves assimilated. Consequently, they were to a significant extent alienated from their own societies. The implication this had on their ideologies was that their assertions were rendered just as ideal, artificial, unrealistic and practically implausible. Léopold Senghor was born in Senegal but he got a scholarship from the colonial administration and left for France when he was only twenty-two where he eventually became a student at Sorbonne. In a review of one of Senghor’s works, Barbara Celarent notes that “a combination of French assimilationism, astounding talent, and amazing luck took Senghor through various schools to the top of the French educational system” (Celarent, 2013). For example, he attended the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* where he met Georges Pompidou, the man who would later become president of France. As if that was not enough, Senghor went on to marry a white woman despite having exalted the Black woman in his poetry.



Aimé Césaire and Damas were also Black students in France. Birago Diop, another Negritude poet and writer, did his tertiary education in Toulouse and Paris, France again. For David Diop, he was born and raised right there in the France, in the city of Bordeaux. Notably, almost all those who propagated for Negritude demonstrate hybridity and deeper connections with France. As such, the critics fault the sincerity of activism from writers who were themselves beneficiaries of the French education system, recognizing the power of education on human thought.

The hypocrisy in the character of Negritude writers also reveals itself in the activists' post-independence exploits. When the colonial struggle was over in most of Africa, most of the writers joined frontline politics. However, immediately after their rise to power, they started acting as the colonialists themselves. A famous Senegalese writer, Sembene Ousmane, has captured this theme well in his novel 'The last of the empire' which has the experience of a failed post-colonial regime culminating into a military coup. The Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah also captures the same theme in 'The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born' which bemoans the tragedy of postcolonial politics in Africa. Aimé Césaire became a deputy in the French parliament representing Martinique. In his position, he played a critical role in facilitating the departmentalization of former French colonies in 1946. However, even some of the principal figures of Negritude faulted Césaire's optimism that departmentalization would be the proper path for the old colonies in their struggle for decolonization (Nesbitt, 2007). Léopold Senghor eventually became the first president of independent Senegal. Senghor's poetry from the mid-fifties to his very last days in power digressed from the initial Negritude themes to what critics thought were politically motivated themes, pointing to the digression that followed the Negritude writers' joining frontline politics (Fraser, 1986:53).

Some critics have also faulted Negritude for deploying racist tactics in its approach of revolt against white supremacy. Marcien Towa, a Cameroonian professor and philosopher, in his critique noted that Negritude, especially of Senghor, is too racist. In an interview with David Ndachi Tagne which took place in Yaoundé in 1968 on his essay *Negritude or Servitude? Towa* said "some sections are ten times more irrational than Negritude. The irrationality which was in *Senghorian* Negritude had something racist, colonial. It was unbearable..." (Mphahlele, 1980) For example, in the poem 'In Memoriam', Senghor depicts whites as wearing stony faces. This, to some critics, is a generalization that transcends the middle ground failing to capture moderate whites – those who never approved of colonialism and imperialism but their voice was submerged in the strong structures of the imperial west. Such angry sentiments are also visible in the works of David Diop in which he deploys a derogatory and angry tone. This works against the concept of two wrongs never make one right – a popular adage imbued in Africa's humanism principles.

The last main problem with Negritude is that it presents Africa as a land free of social, economic and political squabbles before colonisation, as opposed to the depiction of the west as a restless society that thrives on violence and racism against Black people.

For example, there is a juxtaposition between Harlem, a New York outskirt with a lot of Black people, and Manhattan, a predominantly bourgeoisie white suburb of New York in Senghor's poem *In New York*. In the poem, Senghor depicts Harlem, a predominantly Black population suburb as a very lively place full of joviality compared to a Manhattan that does not know happiness. Pertaining to this idealism, Ezekiel Mphahlele says: "I do not agree with the manner in which poetry inspired by Negritude romanticizes Africa – as a symbol of innocence and purity. It is insulting to me to say that Africa is not a violent continent like the others" (Mphahlele, 1980). According to him, Negritude is in the wrong depicting Africa as a continent that knows nothing but peace. There are a lot of problems in Africa which are omitted in Negritude works. Mphahlele argues that "the image of Africa which simply shows pride in our ancestors and celebrates our purity and innocence is an image propagated by liars" (Mphahlele, 1980). To a significant extent, this is true. Ethnic tensions existed even throughout the colonial period, although this can be taken away when considering that most of the tensions resulted from artificial border creations that resulted from the infamous Scramble for Africa.

## **Understanding Negritude in the Colonial Period**

The criticism levelled against Negritude, much as it contains grains of truth, has to take into account the times and circumstances that birthed the movement. To begin with, for a successful revolt, colonial education was a necessary evil for a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of the colonial government system independent African leaders were about to inherit. It was vital to know and understand the enemy well before engaging him in any successful confrontation. At least, after they got the education from France – and had the option to become French as the assimilated, they still opted to lead their people in rebellion against French rule and supremacy in their own countries.

Further, the derogatory angry tone marking some of the work such as that of David Diop is a form of protest. In protest literature, pacifism would not have suited the aims and objectives of the very establishment of the literary and political movement that Negritude was. The anger was out of frustration with the cruelty of colonial governments in their own countries. Peaceful resistance, even in writing, would not equal the force Negritude was countering. The energy that came with the anger was on point in the success of the liberation struggle.

However, lack of moral support from Anglophone writers for the movement remains a big setback considering the nobility behind Negritude's establishment. Observing the criticism, it would appear that the contention surrounding Negritude was fuelled by ethnolinguistic warfare more than it was with reason. While most of Negritude's famous figures are from Francophone Africa and the Caribbean as well as the Antilles – a factor that can be attributed to the movement's very origins – except when the origins are traced to the very beginning with William du Bois being a key figure, Negritude's most powerful critics are notable writers such as Wole Soyinka and Ezekiel Mphahlele among others, most of who belong to the Anglophone writers block.

The criticism however holds water when it comes to analysis of the Negritude writers' post-colonial exploits in politics. As noted, when most of the Negritude writers joined politics, it became apparent that they had simply replaced the old colonisers with themselves, ready to pounce on their own people the same way colonialism had done. They transformed themselves into a league of mandarins, exploiting the people and public resources alike. This would be an extension of Franz Fanon's theoretical positing of black skin white mask with a reproduction of colonial culture by the new elites. Senghor only retired from the presidency after serving for twenty consecutive years. Césaire, immediately after joining politics, became a centre of controversy for his role in departmentalization of the former French colonies.

## Conclusion

To sum up, it is noticeable that Negritude is a term that has a lot of definitions. Ironically, the diversity in the definitions comes from the very founders of the movement. Negritude comes out as both a political and literary movement, with its activists torn between art and politics; elitism and populism. In between the art and politics rose a lot of critics of the movement, especially those from the Anglophone African writers' block. However, the movement also had its strong points which led to the success of Negritude as both a political and literary movement. All in all, much as it had the critics, Negritude played a critical role in the liberation struggles of Black people around the world because it opened a door for enlightenment and a great path in the liberation struggles of Africa against colonial dominion.

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