

Historical Perspectives to Harlem and Negritude Movements in African Nationalism

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Abstract

The paper envisages and inquires about the significance of black philosophy across the Negritude and Harlem periods in colonial and post colonial literature. It visualizes historic framework in situating various experiences incurred in the development of arts, culture and science in order to enhance revolutionary growth in literary world in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

A distinct quality in all great poets does exercise a ghostly influence in other writers, but this need not because for self flagellation. The progression of linked allusions towards an elucidation of the experience of reality is the language of all poets (15).

Soyinka captures the mental and historic picture of the relationship and the coexistence that exist among poets while championing their controlling ideas with reference to the multifarious problems man face in order to capture his polarized society. Every man is a product of history because it has a way in championing and regulating the activities of man as he moves in time and space. This paper concerns itself with the relationship between Harlem Renaissance and Negritude movement. These two movements are historic epoch that shape the sociological and political milieu of the Africans in Diaspora and the Africans at home. The two movements though at separate continents: America and Africa typify the plights of blacks and their quest to making black philosophy a widely acceptable phenomenon. The blacks are products of history, after emancipation, they had to contend with racial and discrimination problem, this led to the plethora of new literature which goes on to develop the African American, the mystique of Africa which focused on the quest of the African American striving for a cultural, spiritual identity and nativity.

The search for cultural, spiritual identity and emancipation from the sinister of the Whiteman and blacks in their respective ghettos were the motivating factors that led to the Harlem Renaissance. African Americans knew that so long as their cultural identity was in question, so long can there be no positive identification with the real demands of their political and economic and historic existence. The Harlem Renaissance in America around the 1920's gave rise to the concept of "Black Aesthetics"- black is beautiful which constitutes the thematic preoccupation of the African American vision in the 1960's. Historically, Harlem Renaissance typifies protest against the existing racist literature that tends to celebrate the superiority complex of the white people. The revolutionary nature of this literature is seen in the words of Aime Cessaire and Rene Depestre during the Havana cultural congress in 1967.

Negritude which emphasizes and underscores "self consciousness" and the elevation of African traditions, cultures, and idiocyncratic norms in Africa by Leopold Sedar Senghor is an offshoot of Harlem revolution. My intention in this work is not to be bogged down by historic evolution of Harlem and Negritude but to examine succinctly using a literary metatext to delineate how Harlem Renaissance and Negritude movement shape their instruments to the understanding of texts. The paper would further explore the relationships that exist between the two movements. However, this would also lead to a cursory study of the poets that write poetry in this epoch. The Harlem poets: Claude McKay, Langston Hughes etc and the Negritude poets: Leopold Senghor, Birago Diop, and David Diop

HARLEM RENAISSANCE

A place of ill-fame

It is a world without spaciousness;

Men live there on top of each other,

And their huts are built one on top of the other.

The native town is a hungry town, starving of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal (it is) a crouching village on its knees (30).

Fanon's submissions above best describe the reason for Harlem renaissance because the blacks were discriminated upon in all ramifications. Violence was instituted in great measure and poetry was used to protest a million psychological miles that exists between the whites and the blacks in America at this time. To further substantiate how the white and the black dichotomy has led to Harlem renaissance, it is imperative to state that such features of discrimination, race conflict etc have led to some other movements which history has recorded

in the world. These include Negritude (Senghor, Césaire and Damas), The Black Aesthetic (Baraka, Sanchez, Magahabuti, Giovanni etc) Haitian Indigenism (Price-Mars, Rourmain) and Afro-cubanism (Guillen).

Prominent among the Harlem writers are Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967) Countee Cullen, Claude Mackay, Bontemps etc. Langston Hughes was deeply rooted in Negro life, this is reflected in his poems: “Brass Spittoons”, “The Negro speaks of River”, “I, Too”, “Mother to Son”, etc. In “Brass Spittoons”, Hughes creates an atmosphere of rejection commonly experienced by the blacks all over America, they were only meant to clean the spittoons in Detroit, Chicago, Atlanta City, Palm Beach just for one dollar or two dollars which could not satisfy the multifarious need of the family. The poem portrays pity, poverty and exposes the inhumane attitudes of the whites in that dispensation. The poem asserts

Clean the spittoons, boy.

Detroit
Chicago,
Atlanta City,
Palm Beach

Clean the spittoons.

The steam in hotel kitchens
And the smoke in hotel lobbies,
And the slime in hotel spittoons,
Part of my life. [Brass Spittoons]

The poem rejects inferiority complex, in “I Too”, Langston Hughes informs the whites that the blacks too are part of America and should not be relegated to the background, just because they are black is not a criteria to suffer rejection in education, good housing, employment, inter-marriage etc. He uses the poem to inform the white audience of their future prospects and asks the blacks to be optimistic in their doings. The poem asserts,

I, too sing America
I am the darker brother,
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong

Tomorrow
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen”,
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed
I, too, am America. [I, too]

From the ongoing, it is observed in the words of Arthur. P. Davies in *From the Dark Tower* that the *New Negro Renaissance* (Harlem Renaissance) represented a new alertness, a new confidence and a new perspective for the black writers who has his dual experience as Negro and as America had much to give to American Letters. It gave the Negro protest writer a new irony, a new kind that could be regarded as a satiric approach in the fight for equality. It gave him a new appreciation for all kinds of folk material. The Harlem renaissance stirred up at least a convectional interest in Africa as the homeland, thereby enhancing to some extent pride in the race “they'll see how beautiful I am and be ashamed”

It broadens the historical and the economic horizon of the blacks, their artistic vision and gave the Negro writer a spirit of cockiness and a sense of fun, gaiety and whimsy.

Claude McKay is also fundamental to the development of Harlem Renaissance, he uses his poems: “If We Must Die”, “The Lynching”, “Like a Strong Tree”, “Tiger”, “America”, “Harlem Shadows”, “Harlem Dancer” etc to delineate hope and new dawn for the blacks in America. In “If We Must Die” Claude McKay strongly advise the blacks to shun inferiority complex, he further advises the blacks to face any situation that arises squarely because history records that nothing lasts forever. The poem asserts:

*If we must die, let it not be like dogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark and mad and hungry dogs,*

Making their mock at our accursed lot.

*If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honour us through dead!*

*O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows dead one dead blow!*

*What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
PRESSED to the wall, dying, but fighting back*

[If We Must Die]

Claude McKay uses a simple language in depicting the problems the blacks undergo in America, he cautions that the blacks should not be subservient to the whites, because history will not forgive them because they look strong, they should not be afraid, they should fight back at all times whenever there is negative confrontation – this is a spirit of the Harlem. The recurring animal imagery deployed such as “dog”, “hunted”, “bark” are intended to show the level of animalistic phenomenon and thinking which have preoccupied some people’s psycho-motor.

Claude McKay uses “The Lynching” to further demonstrate greed, pride and frequent murder of the blacks in cold blood, the poem reports

*“Day dawned, and soon the mixed
Crowd came to view
The ghastly body swaying in the sun”.*

[The Lynching]

In “Like a Strong Tree” McKay likens the black men to “a strong root”, a “strong tree” “fearing no strings” The whites are likened to a mere “string” His makes the whites to be an ordinary lilliputians. “Tiger” castigates the evil intentions of the whites for “The whiteman is a tiger at my throat, drinking my blood as my life ebbs away. “Despite this, he cautions “Is bread for Negroes! Never will I yield”. McKay uses his crop of poetry to fight freedom in the midst of nothingness. In “Harlem Shadows” and “Harlem Dancers”, McKay demonstrates different types of victimizations metted out on the blacks who were armless; the whites constitute the police force and track down the armless blacks in Harlem. In “Harlem Shadows”

*I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass
To bend and barter at desire’s call.
Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet
Go prowling through the night from street
To street! [Harlem shadows]*

Some whites visit Harlem in order to have the beautiful dark girls for their sexual escapade, the situation is highly unfortunate because the black girls were sometimes induced by money to sell their virginity. These black girls in “Harlem Dancers” make themselves prostitutes for the sake of entertainment and pleasure. History is not kind to social subverts because it documents chronologically their behaviours as they move in time and space.

The poem asserts that:

*Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes
And watched led perfect, half-clothed body sway;
Her voice was little the sound of blended flutes
Blown by black player upon a picnic day.
She sang and danced on gracefully and calm,
The light gauze hanging loose about her form;
To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm.*

[Harlem Dancers]

The intention of Claude McKay is to show the blacks that in the midst of insanity there could be sanity. Harlem renaissance therefore is a protest against white domination and different works of fiction like *The Ways of white Folk*, (1934) of Langston Hughes were also used to wage war against various forms of inhumanity in American history.

NEGRITUDE MOVEMENT

Negritude underscores the love for everything African whether the thing is “ugly” or “beautiful”. Thus Leopold Sedar Senghor, the father of this literary ideological movement in Africa defines it as “The awareness, defence and development of African cultural values”. (As quoted by Luke Eyoh in Elimimian, 17). Its original definition however, comes from its first founder Aime Cesaire of Martinique: “the simple recognition of the fact of being black, and the acceptance of this fact, of our destiny as black people, of our history, and our culture (Quoted by Luke Eyoh in Irele 67). Negritude therefore celebrates the cultural, historical, religious and racial pride of the Africans. Negritude movement features prominently in many Africans as Leopold Senghor, Birago Diop and David Diop. Senghor’s “Nuit de Sine” depicts his commitment to Negritude Movement. Here is an extract from the poem:

*Woman, lay on my forehead your perfumed hands,
Hand softens than fur,
Above, the swaying palm trees rustle in the
High night breeze. Hardly at all. No lullaby even.
The rhythmic silence cradles us.
Listen to its song, listen to our dark blood beat,
listen to the deep pulse of African beating
In the mist of forgotten villages
Woman, light the clear the clear oil lamp, where the ancestors gathered around may talk as
parents talk when the children are put to bed.*

[Nuit de Sine]

The poet portrays a black woman an embodiment of his mother, lover and land. The poem powerfully evokes beauty and fragrance of the African land symbolized by the woman used by the poet. According to Senanu and Vincent; the poem

*Is an evocation of the
Soporific beauty and
Fragrance of the African
Night-the stars, the moon,
The trees, the quiet villages... (27).*

The diction, rhythm, sound effect and symbols deployed by the poet leaves the competent reader in no doubt that the poet is in love with Africa, his black beautiful mother and the African history. Similarly, David Diop’s “Africa” evokes a fluid trend in African history and the feelings of Negritude, an extract from the poem would be used in exemplifying this, the poem reports:

*Africa my Africa
Africa of proud warriors in ancestral savannahs
Africa of whom my grandmother sings
On the banks of the distant river
I have never known you
But your blood flows in my veins
Yours beautiful black blood that irrigates the fields
The blood of your sweat
The sweat of your slavery
Africa tell me Africa ... [Africa].*

In this poem, Diop takes a nostalgic trip down the memory lane of Africa’s history, recalling the proud warriors of the precolonial days, the subjugation and humiliation of slavery and colonial period. It is pertinent to note the lyrical tone of the poem. The text is addressed to Africa as if Africa were a person – a mother or a wife. This style makes it both a lyrical and an Ode, commemorating freedom from slavery and colonialism. The diction here sustains the theme. How fitting are such words as “Africa”, “beautiful”, “black”, “blood”, “liberty” which point to Negritude in an elaborate way. It further develops historiography because *Historiography* is writing *about* rather than *of* history. Historiography is meta-analysis of descriptions of the past. The analysis usually focuses on the narrative, interpretations, worldview, use of evidence, or method of presentation of other historians which poets fashion in an elaborate manner. Birago Diop celebrates the beauty of African past in rituals and ancestral worship. His “Viaticum” typifies this:

*with her three fingers red with blood,
with dog’s blood;
with bull’s blood,
with goat’s blood,
mother has touched me three times
she touched my forehead with her thumb*

*with her forefinger my left breast
and my naval with her middle finger.
I have held out my fingers red with blood ...*

[Viaticum]

According to Donatus Nwoga in *West African Verse*, Birago Diop is a poet like Senghor who is conscious of history and the continuing presence of the ancestors, of the symbolic and meaningful expression of their experience which they have left in the elements around us. He has written other poems like “vanity” where a sore feature of a transidental God is buttressed and the experience of consciousness is expressed. In “Viaticum”, there is a warning that if we fail to heed the voice of the ancestors we have lost our hope of protection, of psychological defence against the changing fortunes of life. On a more general level of interpretation, the poet is using the traditional belief in the spirit of the ancestors as a means of reflecting upon the continuity of human experience and suffering. Only our dead have known the whole of life; without their communion, we are pitifully alone (230). Birago Diop’s projections point out to Negritude.

Negritude is not only celebrated by the Francophone poets, it is also visualized in the poetry of some Nigerians when they lend axiomatic credence to the explanation of some certain black consciousness and beauty. The Troika in *Towards The Decolonization of Africa Literature* quoted from the works of Stevenson (1976) to subscribe to this phenomenon:

The common feelings among the Nigerian writers and critics had always been that they can do without the “self- consciousness” of Negritude, which as always seemed to them a foreign concept. But in one poem towards the end of the magazine’s life (“Insomnia”, Viip.i), Irele brings Negritude briefly back. Sent in from Paris, where Irele was carrying on his postgraduates studies, it reads almost like a translation from the French: (A single persistence in the abyss of my white nights. Harrassed by the nightmares of my febleness. Coughed upon the gulf of my dilemma profound tenacious ...) (2002).

A number of African poets have enriched their works with oral forms which point to Negritude: Christopher Okigbo’s “Heavensgate”, Okot p’Bitek’s “Song of Lawino”, Angira’s ‘if’ all treated copious elements in superstition, insult, religious rites, these antecedents illuminate Negritude in an elaborate dimension.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HARLEM RENAISSANCE AND NEGRITUDE MOVEMENT

The rehabilitation of the black man is a common feature in the two movements as discussed above under separate titles. This means that the two movements centre on the black man’s strive for elevation, this idea is expressed by Nnolim in *Approaches to the African Novel* (12), when he posits that the aspect of the African aesthetic in literature is echoed by the Negritude movement elsewhere in the African Diaspora. However, the Negritude aesthetic in literature concerns itself with the rehabilitation of the blackman, it stresses the innate dignity of the African folk culture which, it insisted, was still a reservoir of the African personality; in its turning for inspiration in art and letters to African folk culture which is also an embodiment of lyricism of its poetry. It insists on the “felt” quality of the poetry of all African people.

“Most importantly in its encouragement of the study and appreciation of our African heritage” both the Harlem Renaissance and the Negritude movement have lend credence in an axiomatic way to this direction because the apostles of Harlem literature use poetry to delineate an idea that black colour and philosophy are supreme; also the apostles of Negritude in Africa were inspired by Aime Cesaire of Martinique following the same tradition of black supremacy.

New awareness for consciousness and cry for identity are uppermost in the Harlem Renaissance and Negritude movement. For Harlem Renaissance, identity which would give the white audience an insight into the idea that blacks are also humans-infact, they are their black brothers, this factor is necessitated in the poem of Langston Hughes “I too” when he addressed the white that

*I, too, sing America
I am your darker brother.
.. besides,
they’ll see how beautiful I am
And shall be ashamed.*

[as quoted from Hughes “I Too”]

The same message is also reflected in the poems of Senghor because he demonstrates “black aesthetics in “The Hurricane”, “Nuit de Sine”, “On the appeal from the race of Sheba”, “Prayer for Peace”, “Noliwe”. Although Senghor does not beg the whites, he shows the world that African belief or system, cultural heritage is uppermost. The Harlem renaissance and Negritude movement crave for freedom in thinking like a blackman freedom in exhibiting the black innate syndromes which in songs, folk tales, rhythms, and other cultural antecedents though the black Americans have been alienated in language and culture by slavery and colonialisation they are still independent of other races.

Racial undertones underscore Harlem renaissance and Negritude movement. Most writers of these epochs create literature to this effect and wage wars against existing impressions against the blacks. Chidi Maduka in *The*

Intellectual And The Power Structure quoted from *Give Birth to Brightness* (New York: Dial Press, 1972.p. 58) to highlight the black superiority.

In order to find a Black version of a hero, one must look some place other than the definitions proffered by Western traditions. One can find him in the character types who are immortalized in Black songs and legends, in Black fact and reality. He is the rebel leader who revolts against physical bondage, and the runner who of his hand, the supreme game runner who survives through heart-courage-the power of his rap-conversation-and the bossness of his front-the effectiveness of the various guises which he wears in order to manipulate others, as well as the calmness-the icy cool-with which he faces the always changing fortunes of his life (123).

Previously, the whites had built a strong ideology of superiority complex such as that which led to blacks segregation in all areas, laws were used to destroy the blacks, this led to violence and finally the Harlem spirit which contributes to the development of the blacks views and the black aesthetics of the 1960's that led credence to the development of Negritude feelings in Africa. The relationship between Harlem renaissance and Negritude movement is far beyond colour, it is more sociological, economical and psychological.

CONCLUSION

This paper probes into history and examines the relationship between Harlem renaissance and Negritude movement. The two movements have developed the black man's literature. Harlem renaissance is a protest to the existing literature: Literatures of white domination and segregation. Harlem which preoccupies the early twentieth century lends credence to the cultural and spiritual identity, and the poetry of Langston Hughes, Claude McKay have been demonstrated in these directions. Negritude encapsulates the love for everything Africa whether it is "ugly" or "beautiful" etc. In the words of Irele in Luke Eyoh "the simple recognition of the fact of being black, and the acceptance of this fact, of our destiny as black people, of our history, and our culture". (As quoted above). The relationship between Harlem renaissance and Negritude has been typified in quest for identity, neglect of inferiority complex, promotion of the black man's cultural antecedents and his philosophy of life. These currents have reshaped African cultural and spiritual psyche, it has contributed to a quest in a new beginning in science and technology. History and literature have really created a new consciousness for development in all ramifications.

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SHORT BIOGRAPHY

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