

Asian Resonance

Exploring 'Africaine' Identity The Poetry of David Diop and Wole Soyinka

Abstract

The paper proposes to explore African Identity in the Poetry of David Diop and Wole Soyinka. The history of the African People, their colonization by the Europeans is also explicitly seen in the poetry of these poets. How did the Africans emerge free of this process is explored in the paper to establish their identity.

Keywords: Negritude Movement, Collective Identity, Colonization, Colonized

Many literary studies have contributed to the theorizing of identity which is a major critical concern of the late 20th century. Racial identity was originally imposed on the blacks from without. It was not an internally developed identification, but a classification developed by the European colonizers.

African writers have experimented with different ways of communicating in European languages. They have successfully translated their experiences of colonization and their traditional culture. Their works evince distinctive emotional and ideological patterns. Negritude, a literary and ideological movement was developed by black intellectual, writers and politicians in France in the 1930's - Senghor, poet Aime Cesaire, and Leon Damas. The Negritude writers found solidarity in common black identity as a rejection of French colonial racism. They believed that the shared black heritage of the members of the black diaspora was the best tool in fighting against French political and intellectual domination. They found Marxist ideas in this movement.

The paper aims to explore the effect of the colonizing process on the black people. This is discernible in the writings of the native African poets which is significant in exploring their identity shared memories, shared heritage, appearance, landscape, bind the people into an experiential community with common hopes and fears." (Kapil Kapoor, 14) Religion language, festivals, and superstitions frame one's identity. The appearance and physical constitution of the African people give them an 'individual' as well as a 'collective' identity. "Identity thus is constituted in the consciousness of the individual and the mass of individuals." (Kapoor, 12)

Bernard B. Dadie, in his poem, "I thank you God for creating me Black" highlights the contentment on the part of the African for being black. The poet uses a series of images to signify suppression and subjugation of the Africans by the European colonisers. This can be interpreted as an identity marker, i.e. the 'self'. Bernard's poem is a scathing attack on the 'other' who is responsible for this situation of the black people but the 'other' also makes the 'self' realize his own identity. The poet says :

I thank you God for creating me black

For making of me

Porter of all sorrows

Setting on my head

The world

The repeated imagery of the black and the white, 'night & day' is significant.

White is the colour for special occasions.

Black the colour of every day.

And I have carried the world since the dawn of time.

And my laugh over the world through the night creates the Day.

I thank you God for creating me black.

(Anthology of Commonwealth Poetry, 121-22)

David Mandessi Diop (1927-1960), a revolutionary African poet, born in France, with parents of African descent tries to search his African



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roots in his well-known poem 'Africa'. He lived an uprooted life, moving between France and West Africa. In Paris, he joined the Negritude literary movement which celebrated the uniqueness of black experience and heritage and protested against French colonialism. Diop's work reflects his hatred for colonial rulers and his hope for an independent Africa. His views were published in 'Presence Africaine' in 1956. In his poem 'Africa' Diop reflects on his affinity with the land, and its landscape although he had not lived there during his childhood. He emphasizes on his African heritage :

Africa of whom my grandmother sings
on the banks of the distant river
I have never known you.

(Anthology, 153)

The choice of the words like 'distant' symbolise how far he is from his homeland, a feeling based on his life in the present, as he lives in France. He continues to say that he has never known Africa. Despite the distance, he cannot deny how much it is a part of him. This is noticeable when he realizes how his beautiful black blood and the sweat', irrigate the fields of his native land.

The poet's hatred for the colonial rulers is visible in the lines:

Africa tell me Africa
Is this you this back that is bent
This back that breaks under the weight of humiliation
This back trembling with red scars
And saying yes to the whip under the midday sun.

(Anthology, 153)

The way the black people were exploited and enslaved by the Europeans to profit from their hard labour is highlighted here.

Further in the poem, Diop urges the black people to stand up to the pain and humiliation they have suffered in their own land. He reminds them of their strength and pride through which they can resist the whip of the coloniser. The 'tree' symbolises the young and the strong African people who although alone like this 'lone' tree, can overcome the colonisers and gain liberty.

Gabriel Okara (1921-) is the first significant black African poet to write in English and the first Nigerian 'negritudist' to be a link between colonial poetry and modern writing which appeared in Nigeria around the time of national independence in 1960. His poem 'The Call of the River Nun' appeared in *Black Orpheus* and won a literary prize at Nigerian Festival of Arts. The poet's narration expresses nostalgia for the river. Another poem by Okara 'Once Upon a Time' expresses this concern over the influence of the Western World on the age-old African customs. It projects the lost identity of an African at the hands of the Western materialistic world and a desire to retrieve that lost African identity. The poem is an attack on the European world which moulds the African people to fulfill their economic needs. The poem is written in the form of an address to the son by a father; a desire on the part of the father to be what he was in the past.

But believe me, son

I want to be what I used to be

When I was like you, I want to unlearn all these
muting things most of all, I want to unlearn
how to laugh, for my laugh in the mirror shows only
my teeth like snake's bare fangs.

So show me, son how to laugh, show me how
I used to laugh and smile Once upon a time, when I
was like you.

(Anthology 130)

Through this conversation, Okara very significantly projects the formation of a new identity of the native African when he comes in contact with the 'other'. The tone is satiric and reveals the conflict between that past which was full of emotions and the present where the native has fallen a prey to materialism at the hands of the Europeans.

In the poem, 'The Mystic Drum' Okara highlights the superstitions of the African community. The drum stands for the spiritual pulse of traditional African life. The poet asserts that as the drum beats inside him, the outside world of nature dances to its beat. The girl, who stands behind the tree smiling is the western imperialism, 'the other', who seems to ridicule the African culture. The rhythm of the drum symbolizes a longing for an ideal state of harmony. The African culture is so much in tune with nature that the mystic drum can invoke the sun, the moon and river gods. As the drum stops beating, life becomes mechanical and the speaker at the end is left in 'belching darkness', completely cut off from his culture. The poem explores the belief in African cultural traditions.

Telephone conversation written by Wole Soyinka (1935-) is written in the first person narrative point of view. It is a satire on 'racism' in the modern western society. The poet reveals a telephone conversation between a person seeking for a rented accommodation and an English landlady, who completely changes her attitude towards him as soon as the black African identity is revealed to her. The poem begins with a pleasant atmosphere and a satisfaction for having found a suitable house.

The price seemed reasonable, location indifferent.
The man seems to be happy about the privacy that he would enjoy, for the landlady swore she lived/off premises.

The conversation however, moves towards an unpleasant situation as the 'man' reveals his identity 'madam', I warned
'I hate a wasted journey — I am — African.'
(Anthology 149)

A sudden unexpected silence is strengthened to emphasize the impact of the African identity being revealed to the landlady. The poet's use of the word 'confession' to describe the ethnic identity is sarcastic in that, being an African seems to be a sin, which the man has committed and which he has to atone for.

Tension mounts with the explicit racial discrimination when the lady asks :

'How Dark?' and later, 'Are you Light or very Dark?' reinforcing the racist overtone in the English society.

The man takes a firm control over the conversation, defending the dignity and integrity of his ethnic identity from the ruthless onslaught of the racist lady. The poet, then juxtaposes various major European hair colors in a deliberately confusing manner, suggesting that an African is too different from any European. The poem ends on a note of humour but there is an inherent satire on the western racist society. He shows how an African is able to confront the racial discrimination and retaliates by outwitting the European landlady. The poem is very rich in its exploration of African identity.

The African poets, thus, interrogate their uprooted identities and emphasize the indigenous cultural values and aesthetics in their poems. They offer perspectives on how their physical and cultural identities were attacked by the European colonizers. The writings of these African poets give a voice to their agony. On the one hand, the process provided a medium to articulate inner pain and sufferings, on the other, it facilitated the passing over of their experiences from one generation to another. The writings, however, have not to be narrowed down to subjectivity. They witnessed dynamic growth, assimilating artistic components in their formulation. By exploring the African roots and traditions, the writings impart an aesthetic value to the cumulative black experience.

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