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INTERFUSION OF ENCOUNTER, PERSECUTION, MEMORY AND LONGING IN NEGRITUDE POETRY AS REFLECTED IN DAVID DIOP'S AFRICA AND THE VULTURES

Sreelekshmi S Nair
Research Scholar, Department of English and Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamilnadu

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A locution coined in the 1930s by the Afro-Martinican French poet Aimé Fernand Césaire, the Senegalese poet and politician Léopold Senghor, and Léon Damas of French Guiana, "negritude", implied a reaction against the European colonization of Africa and its legacy of cultural racism. The poets of the Négritude movement sought to examine and uphold the unique aspects of their African cultural roots. Cesaire thought that Negritude is simply one's recognition that one is black, one's culture and existence as black. The movement has also been considered the black colonized people's salvaging of their own identity and consciousness. Concomitantly, a literary and ideological movement, Negritude eschewed European colonization, and expressed an intense pride in "blackness" and traditional African culture and ethics. Cesaire, Senghor and Damas published the journal wholly dedicated to Negritude under the title *L' Etudiant noire* (*The Black Student*) in 1934.

In 1927, David Léon Mandéssi Diop was born near Bordeaux, France, of a Senegalese father and a Cameroonian mother. Diop read the works of Aimé Césaire and debuted as a poet while still at school. Several of his poems were brought out in Léopold Senghor's famous 1948 work *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache* (*Anthology of New Negro and Malagasy Poetry*), which became an important landmark of modern black writing in French. His first book of poems, *Coups de pillon* (1956), called for revolution and critiqued the domination of European culture in Africa. My paper is an unpresuming endeavour to analyse the amalgamation of encounter, persecution, memory and longing in Negritude poetry as seen in Diop's poems, "Africa" and "The Vultures".

O.R. Dathorne, the prominent Guyanese critic, observes that Diop "lived during a time when Negritude was in its infancy" (235). To Diop, poetry is primarily the language of life, and that it should interact with the world through its emotional devices. He finds an inalienable bond between poetry and pedagogy, between the social and political aspects that animate it. He always wants to purvey mother-tongue literature, defying the dominant view of taking the colonizer's language as a sort of boon or tool of expression. . So, unsurprisingly, even Senghor, whose poetry is noted for its accommodating ease, reproved the poet for his "violent expression of an acute racial conscience" (173).

"Africa" opens with an imperfect confession that his knowledge of Africa is not highly empirical. He had to stay away from his motherland. So, he elicits his grandmother who had told him the good old days of African glory and pride. The very first lines merge the feelings of patriotism, loss, distance and memory. They also unveil the emotional bond that the poet has with Africa:

> Africa my Africa
> Africa of proud warriors in ancestral savannahs
> Africa of whom my grandmother sings
> On the banks of the distant river (153)

Though he has not experienced the life in Africa fully, he vehemently takes pride in his African lineage: "…your blood flows in my veins" (153). The next few lines represent Africa as a land made fertile by the assiduousness of the natives, "Your beautiful black blood that irrigates the fields" (153). Diop highlights the harrowing colonial rule that constantly humiliated and hurt the Africans. Through striking verbal imagery, the poet leaves, in the minds of readers, indelible stains of the brutality and slavery to which the natives are subjected to:

> This back trembling with red scars
> And saying no to the whip under the midday sun (153)

However, the poem concludes with a note of hope and aspiration. Diop reminds his fellow citizens not to give up their fight against colonialism, and urges them to be mature and wise, rather than being impulsive. Here, the exercise of the "tree" image becomes highly relevant. The "tree" is indicative of the young and robust native people who, though like the "lone" tree, can withstand the "faded flowers" of the dwindling colonizers, and finally, relish "the bitter taste of liberty".

The poem 'The Vultures' unfurls the British colonisation of Africa and its ramifications on indigenous culture. The colonial regime oppresses and appropriated the indigenous people through violence, education and religion. The Christian missionaries in Africa denied the rudimentary human rights to the natives. The extremely

violent opening of the poem is characteristic of Diop, who hated colonialism, and who outlines here the terrible hypocrisy in which it took place:

When civilization struck with insults
When holy water struck domesticated brows
The vultures built in the shadow of their claws
The bloody monument of the tutelary era (52)

Here, the poet enunciates the inhumane actions of men that have resulted in the inevitable exploitations of native Africans. He voices his ancillary anguish in "the vultures built in the shadow of their claws" (52), where vultures are undoubtedly metaphoric of the colonial administers, who have been in an insidious alliance with both the missionaries and the 'secular culturizers', and their prejudicial discrimination towards the natives. Also, the phrase "holy water" embodies the insincere and insipid rituals that are being manipulated as weapons for psychological leverage.

The grim reality of colonization is further demonstrated in the line," Laughter gasped its last in the metallic hell of roads" (52), where the use of the symbol "metallic hell of roads" depicts a country where weapons strangle its citizens, quelling their joy and laughter. The prayers ("paternosters") offered by the clergy actually camouflages the brutal tales of rape and massacre as exemplified by the phrases "groans on plantations" and "extorted kisses." The promises made to the natives have been "mutilated" by gunshots and bomb-blasts.

The poet's arraignment at the plight of the blacks under the colonial governance shapes to a collective characterization of the latter's inhumanity:

Strange men who were not men
You knew all the books you did not know love
Or the hands that fertilize the womb of the earth (52)

Diop, here, spotlights with sarcasm the total lack of affection and consideration on the part of the colonizers. They may be scholarly and sophisticated, but certainly are devoid of humane considerations. They are also fully unaware of the intrinsic link between the earth and the natives. Moreover, the European colonizers are compared to the scavenging creatures, like "vultures", cling tightly to the disfigured physique of Africa; like the raptorial hyenas in the vast graveyards into which they have turned their colonies into.

Nonetheless, the poem closes with a strain of hope and optimism, "Hope lived in us like a citadel" (52). The "citadel" is the unflinching fortress of longing and faith within the poet. Diop divulges, with a revolutionary zest, that the "spring" of emancipation will soon approach the shores of Africa under the visionary guidance of the Africans including himself.

Contemporary Africa is a postcolonial scenario ushered in by the victory by most countries of the continent in the sixties of the last century of what has been dubbed "flag sovereignty." In this context, some critics argue that the core of the Diopian theses has become obsolete. For instance, Dathorne charges the poet with incessantly cataloguing "the familiar grievances of a colonial" (236). However, the fact still remains beyond this interpretation. Besides being unfazed at the test of time, the poems of Diop, without which, the works of other exiled writers including Mazisi Kunene and Ngugi wa Thiong'O, who have continued their struggle to ensure the legitimization of African languages and literatures, might never have taken the proper trajectory. Hence, the poems of David Diop remind one of, to adapt the words of W.B. Yeats, "artifice of eternity" (407).

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