

TOPICS IN
FRANCOPHONE
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Edited by:

CYRIL MOKWENYE

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Editor

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FRANCOPHONE CARIBBEAN LITERATURE: ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION

Ramonu Abiodun **SANUSI**

L'intérêt croissant pour les Antilles comme contributeurs importants à la littérature francophone en dehors de l'Hexagone a généré une attention particulière plus marquée aux écrivains contemporains comme Gisèle Pineau. Mais cet intérêt a également permis de réévaluer les auteurs des générations précédentes dont les œuvres nous permettent de mieux comprendre la nature de cette société.

(Hélène N.Sanko, 2003: 1115)

[The growing interest in West Indies as important contributors to Francophone literature outside of metropolitan France has generated a particular attention that is more striking in contemporary writers such as Gisèle Pineau. But this interest has equally enabled a reappraisal of the authors of preceding generations whose works give us opportunity to better understand the nature of this society.]

Introduction

For the appreciation of a given literature to be objective and reliable, it must pay particular attention to the historical background of the people who own the literature. It is legitimate for all critics and readers of works of literature to know how this literature has germinated. This legitimacy is double in the case of Caribbean literature in the sense that the Caribbean society is not only very diverse, but also highly influenced by several continents, Africa in particular. Several articles, reviews and books accord essential values to the history of this literature. Jack Corzani (1978), Hélène Sanko (2003), Cyril Mokwenye (2006), Genevieve Abravanel (2006), Isabelle Constant (2006), Cheikh Ndiaye (2007), Sanusi and Tijani (2011) among others. Thanks to these works, one understands Caribbean literature better.

In spite of the proliferation of works from the Caribbeans, a gaping void seems to still exist. There seems not to be enough work done in the area of the literary history of these islands. In fact, most literary works often neglect the essentials of the history of Francophone Caribbean literature.

The general belief is that Francophone Caribbean literature starts with the Negritude Movement spearheaded by Aimé Césaire, Léon Gontran Damas and Léopold Sédar Senghor. Yet, long before Negritude, there existed Caribbean literature. Even if it did not have the quality which Aimé Césaire's generation endowed it with, it was already the thought and the mirror of the Caribbean society. It is this gap which often eludes works on Caribbean literature that we wish to address by responding to the following questions: what was the literary situation of the Francophone Caribbean islands before Negritude? How has the literature evolved?

Origin

Caribbean literature of French expression encompasses Francophone literature from the Caribbeans from Guadeloupe and Martinique, but also the verbose Haitian literature, including authors from French Guyana. These islands are the principal places of literary production of Francophone Caribbeans. The history of Francophone Caribbean Literature is divided

into two parts, namely the pre-Columbian era (before Christopher Columbus) and the post-Columbian era which comprises the slavery period and the period after its abolition.

The Pre-Columbian Era (late 15th /early 16th centuries)

According to Moreau Jean-Pierre (1992:17), "it is during the second travel of Christopher Columbus (1493/1496) that the greater part of the Lesser Antilles" were discovered by the Europeans. This means that before the discovery of the Americas or the New World by Christopher Columbus in 1492, very little was known about the inhabitants of the West Indies. But it is generally admitted that these islands were populated by Indians called Arawaks and later by warriors referred to as Caribbeans. Similar to the majority of the countries of the Americas, the aborigines of these Islands lived in small kingdoms, with their traditions and customs. They were mostly animists. They were farmers and hunters. On the technological level, they were not much advanced. This led to their conquest by the Conquistadors from Europe.

The Columbian Era (1492, 1493/1496)

Spanish and Portuguese conquests followed the discovery of the New World. The inhabitants of the islands were not dispersed. They were reduced to slaves, not without having valiantly defended themselves. They were made to undergo forced labour in gold mines, an occupation to which they were not accustomed. Consequently, many of them died of it. The war between the conquerors and the indigenes led to the massacres of West Indians. After this genocide, the colonialists occupied the Islands of the West Indies little by little. The French, the British and the Dutch joined in the dance of conquest. The French conquered the Lesser Antilles in the 17th Century.

Having exterminated the indigenous population which did not want to be enslaved, they devoted themselves to triangular trade which enabled them to bring black slaves from Africa to work for them on the sugarcane plantations. The society then became highly mixed. At the top, there were

the Great White aristocrats who were proprietors of big sugarcane and coffee plantations. Next, were the Lesser Whites who were administrators of these plantations; and finally the black slaves from Africa as well as the mulattos or the biracial (children born of the union between White masters and black female slaves) who worked under very inhuman conditions in sugarcane plantations. It was a society highly characterized by racial inequality because the Whites had the right of life and death on black slaves. These inhuman practices were denounced by Voltaire, the famous French writer of the 18th century, in his work *Candide*, where a Negro (the Blackman of Surinam) had his limbs maimed by his white master.

The atrocities of the white masters were so intense that many slaves died. Those who did not die were dehumanized. In the plantations, slaves took to songs to face the harshness of their miserable existences. Likewise, in the night, the stories and tales which they had brought with them from Africa were transmitted to the young ones. This oral form of Francophone Caribbean literature was put in writing by Raphael Confiant in his *Contes créoles* (1995) and *Les Maîtres de la parole créole* (1995). The folktale is the oldest literary genre of the West Indies.

With the degradation of their living conditions owing to the cruelty of their masters, the slaves started to nourish the idea of liberty and of resistance, especially as their brothers in the Anglophone West Indies enjoyed liberty because slavery had been abolished in the English colonies. Many slaves left the French West Indies to settle in the English West Indies by taking enormous risks because they could be killed if they were caught by their white masters. Some of those who remained in the French West Indies, thanks to the education they received from some white masters, were able to organize themselves to lead a struggle resulting in their independence. The first example is that of Haiti, where, according to Césaire, “Negritude emerged for the first time.” This fierce struggle of the slaves led to a victory which translated itself into the independence of Haiti in 1804. With her independence, Haiti had taken a step ahead of other islands of the Archipelago. This gave rise to a form of literature which given to imitating

French literary models. With Haiti's independence in 1804, many upheavals ensued in Haiti as well as on other islands of the West Indies.

There were slaves who told stories for relaxation at night as a way of overcoming the harshness of life in the sugarcane plantations. This literature was oral. It is in Haiti that a real written literature was to be born, first by the white colonialists and later by the Blacks themselves. The white colonialists were writing for their compatriots in the metropolis. Their works could therefore not reliably represent the problems of the Haitian society. Among these works are "*L'Histoire générale des Antilles habitées par les Français* » (1667-1671) by Père Du Tertre, *Les Nouveaux voyages aux îles de l'Amérique* (1722) by Moreau de Saint-Rémy, among others. All these works do not represent the experience of Haitians but rather the lives of the colonialists and their writings were often filled with praises of their civilization mission.

It was after Haiti's independence in 1804 that a truly indigenous Haitian literature was born. Yet, there again, things were not encouraging. The Haitian elite only aped French literature by adopting literary currents such as classicism, romanticism, etc. Even if the literature developed patriotic themes of a newly independent Haiti, by praising the black race, at the level of form, it was always the language and the rules of preciousness of the metropolis that dominated. The writings of these early indigenous Haitian authors left the reader with the impression that these writers were still assimilated.

Despite this state of affairs, the image of the Black was better represented than it was done by the white writers. The socio-political realities of the new State were central to the works of new Haitian writers. All the genres were represented on the Haitian literary scene of the 19th century: novel, theatre and poetry. The major writers of this period were Antoine Dupré (1782-1816), Juste Chanlatte (1766-1828), François Romain Lhérisson (1798-1859), and Jules Solime Milscent (1778-1842). Of all these literary genres, it was poetry that represented the best works of Haitian literature of the era. The major poets of this period were Ignace Nau (1808-1845), Coriolan

Ardouin (1812-1838), Oswald Durand (1840-1906), and Massillon Coicou (1867-1908).

Haitian literature is therefore the oldest of the Francophone Caribbean literature. Yet, it was not quite fully representative of the problems of other Islands. It was a literature which took its first steps by following those of the master, the Whiteman.

It was the abolition of slavery in the Francophone islands in 1848 that served as catalyst to the emergence of literature in Martinique and Guadeloupe. Yet, the journey remained far and difficult. The abolition of slavery did not mean the end of injustice, oppression and racism. The society remained highly elitist. Consequently, it was very difficult for the Blacks to have access to education, a condition necessary for the production of creative writers. The *Béké* (Whites) still dominated the literary scene even though the freed Blacks (the Mulatos) were deeply assimilated into the French culture.

Among the works of the freemen, one can cite *Adieu foulards, Adieu Madras* (1932) by Emmanuel-Flaisa Léopold. Intellectuals from the lowest and densely populated social class, the newly freed slaves, were almost nonexistent. Yet, the literature did not represent them as it should have. The Blacks were marginalized and prejudices against them had worsened by the day. They waited for a messiah to deliver them from those mendacious works. They obtained not a messiah, but messiahs in the persons of René Maran, Aimé Césaire and Léon Gontran Damas.

Negritude

In reaction against the lethargy and complicity of the black bourgeoisie who assimilated French culture and thought, the Negritude movement sprang up in the 1930s. This movement, whose leaders were Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon Gontran Damas, played a great role on the Caribbean literary scene and far beyond. The writers of this movement accorded major importance to the values of the black world. They wished to rehabilitate the image of the Blacks, an image ridiculed by France and its

political assimilation. Works such as *Pigments* of Léon Gontran Damas and *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* by Aimé Césaire demonstrate the richness and the power of the movement. With the awareness that followed and the number of writers who identified themselves with the movement in the West Indies as well as in Africa, one can easily affirm that Negritude gave letters of nobility to Francophone Caribbean literature. It redefined the role of the Caribbean writer who portrayed the sufferings and the dignity of the Blacks in his work.

This movement lasted from the 1930s to the end of the 1960s. The movement gave rise to many works which became classics of Francophone Caribbean literature. It illustrated itself in all genres. The greatest classics are *Pigments* by Damas, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* and *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* by Césaire, and *La Rue Cases-Nègres* by Joseph Zobel, among others. All these works depict the Caribbean society; they expose the misery of the black man, the evil that assimilation caused him and his misfortune caused by French capitalists and exploiters.

For a period of thirty years, Francophone Caribbean intellectuals engaged themselves in this movement that was questioned in the 1960s, the years during which the greater number of African countries attained independence. The Francophone West Indies were brought under the jurisdiction of the Metropolis (France) while still remaining Overseas Departments. The French speaking Caribbeans were henceforth in search of a new quest for their African origins. It now became very clear to them that they were not Africans and that their attachment to France did not make them French culturally and politically. Henceforth, the definition of their identity took the centre stage in their literary preoccupations. It is in this ambiance of ideas that the term *antillanité* (*antillaninity*) emerged.

Antillaninity/Creolity (Creole Identity)

Antillaninity arose at the end of the 1960s in reaction against the monotony of Negritude which did not seem to respond to the expectations of Francophone West Indians. In fact, the moment was a time of search for a

definition of the West Indies since neither Africa, nor Europe nor America represented them. They are a mixture of all these continents with their histories. Consequently, they felt an intense need to discover and define their real identity and not that which the colonialists had of them and which they had fallaciously presented to the world.

The aftermath of colonization rendered the Caribbean society “sick”. This malaise had to do with identity. The Francophone West Indian had challenges recognizing himself. He lived between two worlds to which he did not belong: Africa and Europe. It was this sickness, which slavery and colonization had successively bequeathed to him, that needed to be cured. Negritude was certainly not the remedy. It was necessary to invent an efficacious remedy. Edouard Glissant was the one to find this remedy in what he called antillanité. Edouard Glissant established the foundations of his thesis in *Le Discours antillais* (1981).

Writers such as Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant pushed the concept further to justify their struggle and proclaim their identity. This is noted in the famous declaration: “Neither Europeans, Africans, nor Asians, we declare ourselves Creoles”. In *Eloges de la créolité*, which appeared in 1989, they established the foundations of creolity in which they espoused the philosophy of the new literary current. These three writers assigned new functions to the Caribbean writer. A new generation of Francophone Caribbean writers such as Gisèle Pineau, Cécile Agnan, Nadia Chonville, Joscelyn Alcindor, Jean-Claude Joseph among others, continues the struggle for freedom in their writings. These writers cry out while recounting with pen the painful past of their history – a history spanning more than three centuries of unthinkable pains and agonies.

Conclusion

In the light of the preceding discussion, it is useful to recognize that Caribbean literature has nothing to envy from other literatures of the Francophone world. It has its language, its history and its place. What was in the beginning a mass of stories in sugarcane plantations is today a celebrated

work around the world. Yet, the path was not easy: from Haiti to Guadeloupe, passing through Martinique and Guyana, with many obstacles, and many trials and errors in the voice of a codified and standardized literature. A Caribbean literary work has its own peculiarity: the mixture of *Creole* with French while themes like cultural alienation, justice, and search of identity, among others are ubiquitous. Even if one often reproaches, rightly or wrongly, the first Haitian writers for having chosen to copy the French literary style and currents in their writings, it would not be true to postulate that they opened the path taken by contemporary Caribbean writers. Haitians were the first Negroes to revolt and to gain independence. Not having other poetic art than that of their colonizers as model, they were left with no other choice than to write with their instruments (French, Surrealism, Romanticism, etc.) but still remaining Blacks. It is from here that Aimé Césaire's conception of Haiti as the ancestral land of Negritude sprang up. Having followed closely the path of their Haitian predecessors, the founders and practitioners of Negritude laid a solid foundation for Francophone Caribbean literature.

With Negritude, Caribbean literature became delocalized from Haiti. It traverses all the islands of the Lesser Antilles and even beyond. Everywhere it passed through, it sang of the pride of the Blackman, it aimed to restore his dignity which the white Masters had taken from him, and gave a new presentation of the West Indian, the Black, to the world. This is a presentation devoid of every sentiment of hatred and of love, an authentic and pure presentation. For the first time ever, the West Indian is not presented as one having his mouth muzzled and hands tied. He can proclaim the wealth of his talent as a writer, militant, historian and teacher to the world. From René Maran to Aimé Césaire, passing through Joseph Zobel, Léon Gontran Damas, etc., negritude gave its letters patent of nobility to Caribbean literature. From the 1930s to the beginning of the 1960s, the Caribbean writer soothed his reading public with the humanist voice of negritude.

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