

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Rediscovering Identity and Restoring African Values through Cultural Resistance: A Postcolonial Reading of Aimé Césaire's Poem "*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*"

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Abstract

The paper investigates Aimé Césaire's "Notebook of a Return to the Native Land" as a medium of rediscovering the identity and promoting African history, and civilization by means of a cultural revolution. It attempts to evaluate the nature of Césaire's "negritude" and its relevance. Césaire speaks of the necessity of a cultural renaissance and returning to his ancestral roots to end European colonialism and its physical and psychological harms. The study explores the deplorable conditions of the colonies because of the effects of colonial racism, and injustices. It outlines Césaire's stance on what it means to be an African under the tyranny of France and his longing for the glorious past of Africa. It is a qualitative research where the textual analysis method is utilized as the select method and the primary data is collected from "Notebook of a Return to the Native Land" and it is critically explored through the lenses of post-colonialism.

Keywords: Rediscover, identity, restore, African values, cultural resistance, post-colonialism.

Aimé Césaire is a French-speaking Afro-Caribbean writer, poet, politician, philosopher, and an anti-colonial activist from Martinique. He along with Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Léon Damas, is one of the pioneers of the “Negritude Movement” that emerged in the 1930s to raise “Black Consciousness” among the black community and its diaspora and negate colonialism, Eurocentric ideologies, and racism. He is renowned as a prominent figure in postcolonial theory and the boss of other postcolonial critics like Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Edward Said, and Homi K. Bhaba. His poem “Notebook of a Return to the Native Land” is an anti-colonial manifesto in which he chronicles harsh experiences and physical and psychological exploitation of the African natives under colonialism. It is a seminal poem in the field of postcolonialism where he expresses his anti-colonial expressions and attitudes with concrete facts and logical reasoning using one kind of protesting language. It is a critique of French colonialism that robs the Africans of their dignity, pride, cultural heritage, and identities. Aimé Césaire is definitely “a very influential voice in the colonial and postcolonial world” (Figueroa 1006). He wrote this poem in French after his return to Martinique from France in 1939. The original title of the poem is “Cahier d'un retour au pays natal”. Later, it was translated into English in 1983 by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith. It depicts the anti-colonial sentiments, colonial legacies, and their far-reaching impact on the colonies and their inhabitants. Césaire reveals his deep anger, despair, and frustration upon losing his cultural traditions and ancestral identity because of colonialism. Cheryl EcWan defines the term “Postcolonialism” as a condition that “refers to the political, cultural, and economic realities of societies living in the legacies and in the aftermath of colonialism” (21). It deals with the inheritance of colonialism. It disputes the binary relationship between the pre-colonial past and the postcolonial present, the discriminatory relation between the colonized and the colonizers, and their outcomes. Colonialism obliterates the identity, language, and cultural values of the colonized. Decolonization is a very important concept in postcolonial studies. It is the total

dissolution of the colonial agenda and its legacies in the former colonies by surrendering power to the locals. However, it is a process of absolute disorder and violence as it is impossible to bring back pre-colonial cultural purity and traditional values. Yet, it is crucial to resist the forces of colonialism and imperialism.

Aimé Césaire boldly declares his intention to return to his native land, Antilles, at the very beginning of his poem. He describes Antilles as a land of complete chaos, despair, frustration, poverty, fear, and depression. “Notebook of a Return to the Native Land” deals with the themes of colonialism, African identity, and cultural revolution. He expresses a sense of loss for his cultural values and traditions suppressed by colonialism. His native identity is shaped by his personal experiences of displacement, colonial racism, discrimination, and cultural erasure. He also celebrates the beauty of African culture, identity, and civilization that continues to survive despite being oppressed for centuries. There are three sections in the poem. There is a gradual progression from pessimism and chaos to optimism and a cultural uprising in the poem. Césaire depicts the real picture of his native land, its landscape, and the maltreatment of the colonizers in the first section. The second part points out the evils and the ills of colonialism. He outlines the needs of the natives by highlighting the problematic and unequal relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. It further reveals how the natives are treated as animals instead of human beings and are deprived of their rights, liberty, and individuality by the French colonizers. The final part of the poem shows the negative sides of European civilization and his idea of “Negritude” and a cultural revolution to fight back against the colonizers and rediscover their own values and cultural identity. It is the core message of Césaire regarding going back to the root. It is mainly influenced by Harlem Renaissance and inspires the origin of many movements all over the world like “Creolite” in the Caribbean, “Afro-surrealism”, and “Black is Beautiful” in the USA. Frantz Fanon’s “Black Skin, White Masks” is very relevant to the context of this poem. The black become aware of

the superiority of the white when they contact them or receive higher education from European countries. To achieve the status of the colonizers, they attempt to imitate their language and language by denouncing their native culture and identity, and by hating their own race. Fanon asserts that “The black man wants to be white...The white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness” (11). The black want to reduce their blackness by acquiring a foreign language and culture. The mastery of the French language and the reduction of blackness is closely connected. They believe that they should be white to be a real man. On the contrary, the white people give them the impression of being accepted in their culture but in reality, it is a white lie. It results in their mental crises, inferiority complex, and identity dilemma. The only way of getting out of this problem is to acknowledge the cultural heritage of Africa and be loyal to the base of their nativeness. Africa has its own beauty, civilizations, and cultures. The Africans should be loyal to it, feel proud of it, and glorify it without any kind of hesitation or reluctance. Aimé Césaire comes to terms with his own identity in this section and calls for a broader unity and universal brotherhood. He wants to reconnect with his culture with a view to reclaiming his lost glory, pride, and agency.

Aimé Césaire's poem “Notebook of a Return to the Native Land” is an autobiographical piece where he tries to rediscover his authentic self to better understand his identity. He talks about the potentialities and strength of a black man. It is the most prominent work of "negritude". It is described by André Breton as the “greatest lyrical monument of our times” (cited in Snyder 197 and Hasan 86). It is one kind of cultural resistance. It focuses on Césaire’s realization of his own identity, his dilemmas upon returning to Antilles, Martinique, from France, and postcolonial ambivalence. While writing the poem in French, he experiments with the language to protest the colonial structures of the French language instead of blindly following the syntax and structures of the language by incorporating many literary devices such as surrealism, juxtapositions, repetitions, ironies, images, symbols, metaphors,

autobiographical elements, and altering the meanings of words and sentences. Césaire uses the colonizers' language as a powerful arsenal to resist European domination, oppression, racism, discrimination, colonial atrocities, crimes, and injustices in the African colonies. Language is the marker and identity of a culture. He has written this poem after completing his studies in France. He faces several challenges after spending around ten years there. During his stay in France, he was introduced to the French culture, language, their way of liking and so many other things. That means he was born and brought up in Martinique having his native culture, traditions, and language, but in France, he acquired a different type of culture, the culture of the colonizers. Therefore, he finds himself in a limbo state because there is a confrontation between his native cultural identity and the brand-new cultural identity that he acquired in France. This experience forces him to see his past as a swamp of embarrassment and savagery. He tries to keep himself aloof from that past. It results in his identity dilemma, cross-cultural exchange, one kind of existential crisis, and postcolonial ambivalence. He completely disregards the notion that his identity is something static or unmodified. He attempts to go beyond the boundary of his identity and the colonizers' identity for a larger type of humanistic understanding of his native identity by prioritizing its association with the natural world and its ability to resist forces of colonial subjugation and oppression. He believes that identity revolves around the passage of time and the native Africans will raise and fight back to establish their new identity and restore their age-old traditions, and cultural supremacy.

“Notebook of a Return to the Native Land” is an anti-colonial poem. It is a commentary on the pitfalls of French colonization in Martinique, its consequences, and the necessity of mental decolonization of the natives to identify their strengths, overthrow the colonizers from power, and revive the African glorious history, and culture. Césaire shows the real pictures of African colonies that were not developed by the French colonizers but devastated and destroyed by them. He headlines some crucial problems of his native land such as hunger, extreme

poverty, famine, and diseases like smallpox and malaria. They look like skeletons due to starvation. They are mute and have zero knowledge regarding the Ten Commandments of Christianity. Although the priests teach them, they can hardly remember these facts. They also do not have any idea about French history, the French queen, and their religion. His native land is turned into a wasteland because of the colonizers who do not hesitate to kill the natives, catch them and sell them in different countries as slaves. He also points out the nasty things performed by the colonizers in the colonies such as prostitution, spreading lies, propaganda, treason, hypocrisies, and all types of perversions. Césaire questions the logic of the French colonizers to civilize the uncivilized natives of Martinique when they inflict violence upon them and loot their resources by exploiting them. He attacks the basic foundation of their colonial agenda and mentality by showing the long legacy of violence, racism, class division, and discrimination. In the name of civilization, enlightenment, and God-given responsibility, they invade the African countries for their economic benefits. The colonizers believe that “white” is the mark of innocence and good whereas “black” is a sign of evil and defects. However, he considers "whiteness" as a symbol of death, decay, and destruction. He describes himself as an isolated person imprisoned in the shackles of whiteness. He also talks about the influence of the white upon the lives of the Africans. They have the license to kill the natives for the least excuse and use moral reasoning, propaganda, white lies, and the myth of civilization to defend their violence and actions in the colonies. When a country is colonized, its culture is invaded by a foreign or colonial culture, and the potential of the native culture gets lost in the shuffle. The colonizers destroy the forests and natural balances in the name of modernization. Modern civilization is not a symbol of progress but of decay and destruction. Deforestation results in natural disorders and the earth is tortured by the excuse of modernization and civilization. Trees are cut down recklessly, and lands are conquered to make more money, build railroads, explore, and launch new projects to attract foreigners or outsiders.

He gives a deplorable image of Africa. Their existence is miserable in their own country and Aimé Césaire observes fear everywhere. Fear, despair, inferiority complexes, and servitude are injected into the colonized people's veins by the colonizers' mantra of progress, enlightenment, and civilization. He writes:

And the end of daybreak, this inert town and its beyond of lepers,
of consumption, of famines, of fears crouched in the ravines,
fears perched in the trees, fears dug in the ground,
fears adrift in the sky, of piled up fears and their fumaroles of anguish. (5)

There is no sign of justice, equality, and humanity in former African countries. The colonizers reinforce beliefs like inferiority complexes and dependency syndrome in the minds of the Africans by imposing colonial culture, education, and language upon them or through the practice of violence or threats if they are reluctant to accept their authority and supremacy. They find themselves imprisoned in a mental block from which there is no escapade. Aimé Césaire wants to do a resistance against European colonizers. Césaire reaffirms African values, cultural identity, and their relevance. He gives a lot of emphasis on self-awareness as well as self-esteem and self-realization as the fundamental spirit of revolution to put an end to the process of colonization and start a new beginning:

make me into a man for the ending
make me into a man for the beginning
make me into a man of meditation
but also make me into a man of germination. (43)

Aimé Césaire wants to decolonize the minds of the colonized people. However, to decolonize Africa, it is obligatory to decolonize the minds of the Africans at first through cultural revolution and growing awareness in their soul. So, it is very important to be confident, focused, and specific to be a part of such resistance. The aspects of dignity, superiority, self-

esteem, and worth spring from power and consciousness, and power comes from the mind and conscience. Without inner strength and confidence, it is impossible to resist. If their minds remain colonized, there is no way of coming out of that prison. Mind is the source of their rebellious spirit and patriotic zeal. That's why he wants to be a man of meditation to be a man of action and to concentrate solely on his objectives. If he can concentrate, he can be a man of germination and he will be reborn. When he is reborn, he can give rebirth defying all the odds. This type of language and self-celebration is found in the poem.

Aimé Césaire ironically depicts the negative sides of the blacks. At times, he condemns not only the colonizers but also the Africans for their passivity and lack of enthusiasm, and rebellious spirit. He employs literary devices like images, irony, and metaphor, and uses one kind of gloomy atmosphere and pessimistic attitudes to indicate what he wants to mean. He vehemently criticizes the Africans for accepting their fate and servitude. They accept slavery after being defeated. They become more cowardly, less confident, and less profound. They do not fight back for their rights as their minds are colonized. The native culture is uprooted by the colonizers. As a result, their religion is changed, their language is snatched and their identity is lost. Césaire introduces his famous concept of "negritude" which means international black consciousness. It is aimed at raising consciousness among the blacks in Africa and in the Caribbean territories against Western domination, discrimination, racial segregation, enslavement, and colonization of black people. It is conceptually based on universal equality and challenges colonial aggressions, racial discrimination, and the policy of assimilation. He boldly announces in the poem,

my negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against the clamor of the day

my negritude is not leukoma of dead liquid over the earth's dead eye

my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral

it takes root in the red flesh of the soil

it takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky

it breaks through the opaque prostration with its upright patience. (41)

They should be conscious of their blackness and celebrate it. They should be loyal to their roots and aware of the richness of their culture, tradition, history, resources, and achievements. When they become aware of their own identity and accept it, they will become aware of the injustices, murders, tortures, atrocities, and other evil acts done to them in the name of civilization by the colonizers. Akhim Alexis writes that “the notion of recovering one’s black ancestral heritage is trying to understand what it means to be a black person by drawing upon the ideas, values, and traditions of his ancestors” (98). Césaire celebrates this idea of "negritude" and the aspects related to it in the poem. His "negritude" lies in the bounties of nature. Through this poem, he wants to start a cultural revolution by understanding his true identity. It is the ultimate message of the poem.

Césaire makes a stark comparison between the history of French civilization and African civilization by pointing out the hypocrisies and wrongs of French colonialism. The French colonizers do not acknowledge the richness of African civilizations and view them as invalid and worthless in relation to theirs. The Europeans have invented deadly weapons, gunpowder, compasses, dynamite, electricity, and the steam engine, conquered the seas, and gone beyond the limit of the sky by using modern technology. These are the markers of modern civilization and enlightenment. However, they have done more damage to mankind than good. They are used in warfare to cause bloodshed and bring havoc to human civilization. Césaire clarifies that his ancestors have not invented them. Rather, they used to dwell in nature with its bounties. The cluttered darkness of the mind cannot be removed by the so-called light of electricity. He converses with his inner self to comprehend his real identity without any compromise. He reflects that the world will remain beautiful with the black, and without acknowledging the history and cultural legacies of his ancestors, it is impossible. He is not

embarrassed about his country, his ancestors, his culture, and his nativeness. His consciousness lies in nature. He accepts whatever he has, his faults, drawbacks, and imperfections. He accepts deaths, hurricanes, shipwrecks rotted bones, lost puddles, shackled volcanoes, murders, and bitter cries in Antilles. He also accepts the injustices, atrocities, and maltreatment of the colonizers against the black. There is a tone of irony here as he accepts everything in the sense that he is loyal to his negritude. It does not mean that he wants to remain silent in the face of danger considering the repercussions of his choice of words and language against the contemporary French colonial regime.

Césaire expresses his desire to be the voice of the voiceless, the leader of the oppressed, and the beacon of hope for the directionless. As a subaltern in Martinique, he wants to speak on behalf of the Africans, and the subalterns by challenging the old order for a new beginning. He stands for the oppressed and subjugated of races, classes, religions, and countries. He is fearless and a cult hero who has the fire and desire for a new type of resistance at the bottom of his heart and soul.

He wants to destroy the bolts of prison cells of French colonialism by dancing, standing, and raising his voice against the colonizers. He uses many words repetitively such as madness, master, fear, despair, dance, and standing for better connotation and metaphorical purposes. The use of words like standing and dancing is symbolic. They symbolize the strength of the backbone. The Africans should stand up boldly for their rights without any fear. If their backbone or moral courage is weak, they cannot fight back. When they have the ability to dance, they can acquire their freedom. Dance also refers to African culture and nativeness. There is a tone of universality in the poem. It has a great thematic and structural resemblance with Kazi Nazrul Islam's revolutionary poem "The Rebel". He calls for unity. He stands not only for the natives of his own country but also for the oppressed and subjugated people outside the border of his own country. "This epic poem depicts in symbolic imagery the degradation

of black people and describes the rediscovery of an African sense of self” (Wickramasinghe). He wants a complete decolonization in Africa and therefore, protests against colonialism and announces cultural retaliation for freedom. He recognizes the necessity of a broader unity and universal brotherhood to achieve that purpose. It may be a bitter brotherhood because full satisfaction or happiness is not found anywhere. It is one kind of Marxist or communist call. With pain, anguish, feeling of unfulfilled, oppression, and repression, they should march forward with a cultural revolution and declare their own independence from any kind of foreign invasion and domination. He believes that the blacks will fight for their rights against the colonizers and establish their true identity by rediscovering their authentic selves and gaining a better understanding of their nativeness by means of cultural resistance.

“Notebook of a Return to the Native Land” is Aimé Césaire's magnum opus. It reveals the experiences of the colonized or the oppressed all over the world and the loss of their sense of belongingness while celebrating their resilience in an attempt to reconnect with their native cultural heritage to reclaim their real identity and agency. He wants to make Africa, its bounteous culture, and the mindset of the Africans completely free from French colonial aggression, and the dependency syndrome of the natives through this rebellious poem. The Africans should be united, loyal to their root, and confident to overthrow the forces of colonialism and racism. The colonizers try to wipe out native culture, identity, and history by imposing a foreign culture and alien language by means of colonial culture, education, and violence directly or indirectly. Thus, they imprison the souls of the natives and force them to conform to their directives by denouncing their own identity. They destroy Africa morally, physically, culturally, and economically. The natives fail to trace these aspects and become more chicken-hearted to address their problems and fight for their natural rights, and freedom. He not only wants to eradicate the colonizers from the surface of Africa but also awaken them by removing the traces of colonial inheritance from their souls and by standing against them

fearlessly to demonstrate a cultural revolution. He rediscovers his inner self and urges the necessity of a cultural renaissance to break the chain of the European colonizing agenda and servitude. Césaire promotes the restoration and revival of lost African values, language, tradition, culture, achievements, and black identity in his poem “Notebook of a Return to the Native Land” and fosters one kind of international black consciousness among the black folk all over the world.

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