



## Leopold Sédar Senghor As A Negritude Poet

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### ABSTRACT :

This paper intends to study Senghor as a Negritude poet through the analysis of his four selected poems *Night in Sine*, *Black Woman*, *Prayer to Masks* and *To The Negro- American Soldiers*. Leopold Sédar Senghor was the first president of Senegal. Besides his successful political career he is he is well known as a poet. He believed in the concept of universal civilization could embrace all traditions and cultures despite their differences. Senghor was also a major proponent of the Negritude movement. Negritude was a literary as well as an ideological movement initiated by French speaking Negro intellectuals. The movement was initiated by Aimé Césaire. It depicts the black man's predicament at being uprooted from his native culture and being thrown in a completely new cultural and social set up with which he cannot identify. Senghor used poetry as a voice to celebrate black culture and identity.

**Keywords:** negritude, identity, black culture, colonialism

### Leopold Sédar Snghor- Biography :

Leopold Sédar Senghor (1906-2001) was the first president of Senegal. Besides his successful political career, he is he is well known as a poet. He is fondly referred to as "the poet president of Africa". His love for his native land is evident his poetry. Senghor was also a major proponent of the Negritude movement (Britannica).

Leopold Sedar Senghor was a poet, philosopher and the first President of the Republic of Senegal. Senghor, is considered one of the most prominent figures in the field of literature of Africa in the 20th century. He was also the first African man elected to the Académie Française.

Senghor began his studies in Senegal and in 1928 and at the age 22 went to France to pursue further studies. With this he began, as he himself refers to it as "sixteen years of wandering". He first studied at the Sorbonne and later went to the Louis-le-Grand High School, here he prepared for the entrance exam to the École Normale Supérieure. At École Normale Supérieure studied with Paul Guth, Henri Queffélec, Robert Verdier, and Georges Pompidou. It was here that he met Aimé Césaire. On September 12, 1946, Senghor married Ginette Éboué (1923–1992), who was the Parliamentary Attachée for the Office of the Ministry of Overseas Departments and Territories of France. She was the daughter of Félix Éboué, former General Governor of French Equatorial Africa. He an999d Ginette Éboué had two sons (Presidency).

Senghor became Communist post war. He held the position of the Chair of Linguistics at the French National School for Overseas Departments and Territories, and continued in that post until Senegal became independent in 1960. While he was on one of his research trips on Serere poetry in Senegal, the local Socialist leader, Lamine Gueye, suggested he consider becoming a candidate for a Parliament seat. Senghor contested the election and was selected as the Representative of the Senegal-Mauritania region at the French National Assembly, where the colonies had newly acquired the right to be represented. Senghor was one of the greatest champions of the black identity. He endeavoured through his literary works, and as a statesman, to prove that democracy and stability was achievable in post-colonial Africa (The Presidency).

He believed in the concept of universal civilization could embrace all traditions and cultures despite their differences. "His primarily symbolist poetry, created from the chanting of the incantational voice, which would earn him the nickname "the Poet President," was founded on this belief of oneness of all cultures. He took the concept of "négritude" introduced by Aimé Césaire, to new depths (The Presidency).

The Theory of Negritude

Negritude was a literary as well as an ideological movement initiated by French speaking Negro intellectuals. (Coetzee and Roux 38) The movement was initiated by Aimé Césaire during 1930s and 1940s. He first used the term in one of his poems, stating, "my negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against the clamour of the day" (Micklin).

The literature of Negritude is an assertion of the black culture and identity. It reveals the predicament of the native of the native African who was forced because of historical and social circumstances to become dependent and subordinate to the imperial rulers. It is a movement gives voice to the black writers' consciousness who writes as a part of the minority group and is dominated by a more powerful group of the political and social set up (Coetzee and Roux 38).

### Features of the Negritude Literature

Theme of Alienation- This theme is specific to the French Speaking Negro intellectuals. It depicts the black man's predicament at being uprooted from his native culture and being thrown in a completely new cultural and social set up with which he cannot identify (Coetzee and Roux 39).

Black intellectuals were far superior to their non or less educated counterparts of native Africa as far as economic and social conditions were concerned. Yet, they were unable to relate to their white counterparts. They could not assimilate into the white intellectual community of the coloniser as they could never ignore the gross injustices of the colonial rulers.

Their literary works thus become a testimony against the atrocities committed by the colonial power over the African people. Protests, threats, accusations and criticism become the major themes of the negritude literature (Coetzee and Roux 42, 43, 44).

The Negritude writers reject the dominance and superiority of the western civilisation. It leads the African writer in search of self-discovery and "self-affirmation". The African writer tries to free himself from the influence of the colonial culture and assert his cultural traditions. He begins to take pride in his own culture and overcomes the shame which the colonisers associated with it (Coetzee and Roux 46).

The non-fiction writers of negritude formulated their ideas in the form of essays, books, articles and speeches. In these they directly attacked and criticised the colonial rule (Coetzee and Roux 50).

The African people were made to believe by the colonisers that they had no significant contribution in the world history and development. The writers made an attempt to rediscover the ancient past of Africa and reassert its contribution in the world history (Coetzee and Roux 51).

#### Senghor and the Theory of Negritude

For Senghor, Negritude is a "defence of the African cultural expression". He defines Negritude as "the sum total of African cultural values" (Coetzee and Roux 54) and also as "Négritude is the simple acknowledgment and acceptance of the fact of being black, of our destiny as Black people, of our History, and of our Culture." (Presidency).

Living in a French Imperialist colony bearing the racist attitude, Senghor used poetry (and later other literary tools) as a voice to celebrate black culture and identity. "Negritude was an assertion of distinctive African aesthetics and characteristics; a nostalgia for the traditions of the past and a champion of Pan-African values." In his early works such as *Prière des Masks*, Senghor highlights the ancestral traditions of the African culture and asserting that the "men of the dance" can "teach rhythm to the world" (Holloway).

The negritude movement was not an outright rejection of the colonial culture or superiority. It aimed at raising the self-esteem of the native African by reinforcing his pride in his culture and traditions. This movement glorified the African culture and elated the native's confidence which set the tone for the independence movement (Holloway).

In *Femme Noire* he represents Senegal (Africa) as a 'black woman' that caressed and nurtured him. In one of his most famous poems, *Dear White Brother* (*Poème à mon frère blanc*), he speaks about the issue of colour thus:

When I was born, I was black, /When I grew up, I was black, /When in the sun, I am black, /When I am ill, I am black, / When I die, I will be black.//  
Whereas you, white man, / When you were born, you were pink, / When you grew up, you were white, / When you're in the sun, you are red, / When you are cold, you are blue, / When in fear, you are green, / When you are ill, you are yellow, / When you die, you will be grey.// So, between you and me, / Who is the coloured one? (qtd. in Stanard141).

His poetry neither demeans nor rejects European culture but aims to regain pride in the African culture. His sense of the attributes of Africa is often exaggerated but it indicates the need of the time. Described as "anti-racist racism" by Jean-Paul Sartre, Senghor's poetry was 'pro-black,' but not necessarily 'anti-white'. (Holloway).

While defining the distinct characteristics of the African culture, Senghor juxtaposes them to the Western culture. He tries to elate those concepts which have been mocked or looked down upon by the Western culture (Coetzee and Roux 54).

He also says that the classical European thinking process is analytical and reasoned and is concerned with the object. Whereas, in the African mode of reasoning the thinker becomes one with the object (Coetzee and Roux 55).

"The heritage of suffering" forms an integral part of the African thought of Negritude. The consciousness of a past which was inflicted by colonization and brutal practices like slavery is always present in the literary expression (Ba 27).

Moreover the theme of exile is also explored in the Negritude poetry. Exile is not only in the form of physical alienation but detachment from the basic human dignity which they were denied (Ba 27).

This paper intends to study Senghor as a Negritude poet through the analysis of his four selected poems, *Night in Sine*, *Black Woman*, *Prayer to Masks* and *To The Negro- American Soldiers*.

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## Night in Sine :

*Night in sine* by Senghor is a poem depicting his love for his native land Africa.

In the poem, "Night in Sine", Senghor looks at the cultural intricacies of Africa and personifies them in the image of womanhood, with soft hands, singing a song, which is certainly not quite a lullaby. Throughout the poem, Senghor highlights the existence of darkness around, in blood, the night that caresses him, in the smoke-filled hut and in the great depths of sleep. However, he interprets darkness in a positive way, emphasising, that what is dark may also be good. He reveals affection for Africa in his articulation of the magnificence of Negritude (Postcolonial Literatures). Darkness is used as a metaphor for the African native.

Senghor uses repetition as a device to focus on particular imagery. He emphasises on the activity of 'listening' and how 'rhythmic silence' cradles one to sleep. This is for the reason that they have been gradually transformed in their subjugation –"to not fight back, to accept, and to go on within the circle of life". However, Senghor never loses hope. In his poetry he highlights how despite continuous attempts to demean them by crushing their spirits have been made, yet, the musical rhythm of Africa runs in their 'dark blood', egging them on in the face of hopelessness. He employs clear and vivid imagery to engage the senses. The poem is not a factual description of the African landscape but a clear and picturesque one. Such an imagery paints a picture in the mind's eye. The 'weary moon' and its 'slack seabed', reinforce the pattern of repetition and routine. The poet talks of how even the storyteller, who is always enthusiastic is lulled into sleep at the mother's benign touch (Postcolonial Literatures).

Senghor effectively uses the image of a woman putting the child to sleep. Senghor has used this image of mother figure in other poems too like, 'Black woman'. The mother figure is a metaphor for warmth and nurturing.

The poem gives a very vivid sensory experience, appealing not only to the vision through colourful imagery but also to the other senses. Senses of smell, hearing are aroused with words and phrases like 'sour and sweet smell', 'odour of our Dead', and sound effects like, 'rustling' and incoherent sounds like rhythmic silence, beat of dark blood, pulse of Africa and sounds of laughter. This feature is typical of the negritude poetry where the thinker becomes one with the object.

There are references to African culture and way of life. The syntax of the poem is simple; there are lengthy sentences with several commas. The poem does not adhere to any formal structure. There are four stanzas in the poem with different lengths and no specific rhyme scheme; yet the poem bears a certain rhythm and musicality. This again is a hallmark of African poetry which bears a certain musicality.

He states "Up there, the tall palm trees swinging in the night breeze rustle hardly." The words "night breeze" and "rustle" helps the reader develop a feeling of a dark and calm setting, or windy setting. He also uses metaphors. Senghor states "Woman, put on my forehead your balsam hands, your hands softer than fur." This compares the famous feeling of the soft and oily flower, to a woman's hands. He also says "Look how the feet of the dancers grow heavy, as well as the tongue of the alternating chorus." He provides a comparison between someone's dancing and their exhaustion, and a group of people singing in different tones. He last states, "Let me inhale the smell of our Dead, let me collect and repeat their living voice, let me learn to live before I sink, deeper than the diver, into the lofty depth of sleep." This is a comparison between living and dying, and a comparison between respecting the dead and living their legacy by "collecting" and "repeating" their living voice. Senghor personifies in this poem as well. He creates a sense of movement to the moon, making the moon seem to be transitioning today by using the word "sinks". The writer also used paradox, by putting two contradictory words together. He states, "Let the rhythmic silence rock us." This would be contradiction because rhythm can be a noise or sound, and sound cannot be silent.

This poem is one of the classic examples of negritude poetry. Throughout this piece, we see a celebration of African culture and heritage, and a resentment towards everything that occupied its splendour; a vehemence towards the abuse and misuse, a symbolic death of Africanness. He ends the piece with the speaker asking to be allowed to learn to live; to discover what it rightly is before it was tainted (Postcolonial Literatures).

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## Black Woman :

The poem "Black woman" is one of the most acclaimed poems of Senghor. It is a typical example of Negritude poetry of which Senghor was a champion. The poem "Black Woman" was published in "*Chants d'Ombre*" in 1945. It was initially written in French as "*Femme Noir*" and later translated to English (Post-Colonial literature).

Throughout the poem we see that Senghor praises and applauds the blackness of the African nation. The figure of an African woman who is a "black woman" and "naked woman" is metaphorically used for the African people as a whole. The garment of this black woman is her sheer liveliness:  
Naked woman, black woman / Clothed with your colour which is life / with your form which is beauty! (Senghor)

The poem traces womanhood within a range of traditional selves, including the mother, the lover, and the creative artist. (Jason)

The African woman that Senghor talks about in this poem is a symbol of the African race itself. In the fourth and fifth lines, Senghor likens Africa to a mother. He says that his life was nurtured under the safety of his mother land. He calls Africa the "Promised Land" (Line 8) and says that he is returning to Africa which, for him, is the Promised Land. Further in the poem, Senghor compares Africa to a beloved. He acclaims her as a goddess. Throughout the poem, Senghor associates the African woman to everything of beauty. In the last stanza, for instance he likens her skin to the oiled, beautiful skin of an athlete, or the Princes of Mali. He goes on to say that the African woman is as elegant and graceful as a gazelle. Senghor concludes his poem on a philosophical note by saying that he will preserve the African woman's beauty perpetually in his poetry (Post-Colonial literature).

Senghor's poetry hinges on the idea of Negritude. In this poem also he champions the cause of the African native, with special reference to his blackness. The African's suffered inhumanity and brutality at the hands of the colonizers owing to their black skin. The blackness of the African native is thus considered a thing of beauty. "Writing in a period of decolonization, Senghor went to great lengths to uplift the standards of the African people, and the African culture, and the African people's own view of themselves and their culture." In this poem, he endlessly praises the "black woman" in order to highlight the greatness of the African culture and the African people. He takes pride in being African- and this is the crux of the negritude movement (Post-Colonial literature).

The poem is lyrical and supplements the poet's admiration of the black African woman's resourcefulness, both as mother and musician. The procreative, productive nature that he promotes is representative of both the fertility of the human and the land, and its extension into the cosmic and, by association, mystical realm (Jason).

Africa is glorified through a range of different colours, not only black but also gold, where black stands for African people at large and gold exemplifies the mineral wealth of West Africa (Jason).

Another major idea that stands out about Black Woman is the idea of "appropriation." "Appropriation is a postcolonial concept which refers to a technique of writing that many postcolonial writers adopted where they used the language of the colonizer to speak out against them." (Post-Colonial Literature).

The natives use the language of the colonizer to express their cultural or colonial experiences. In "Black Woman", however, Senghor used French to speak out against the colonizers (Post-Colonial Literature).

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### Prayer to Masks :

"*Prayer to Masks* is an invocation of the dead whose spirit the masks symbolise." (Olafioye 83). The ancestors are called upon to assist human efforts in time of difficulties. He believes that the only way his people can remain unwavering is if they accept what is new, but remember that nothing will change within (Poetry in Motion). The poet wishes the people of his nation to take refuge and inspiration in the traditional past of Africa and use it to inspire them to face the colonisers. The people should remember that their ancestors did not let anyone walk over them. (Poetry in Motion) He wants his people to remember the names they were called by the colonisers and that they must celebrate their heritage and take pride in it (Olafioye, 83).

The theme of the poem is that the traditions and the spiritualism of pre-colonial Africa are not only still alive in a world where Africa has been ravaged by conquest, the Africans viewed as "cotton heads, coffee men, and oily men" (Senghor) , but also that modern Africans must take strength from them to regain their dignity and independence.

Senghor begins by addressing black, red and white masks of his ancestors. They are rectangular and appear to be made of paper. His tone is that of reverence and silence reminding the masks of their power to guard to purify and to create.

As the poem proceeds there is a shift from a reverent and quiet address to a powerful request. He calls for help to the masks in the rebirth of the nation.

He skilfully builds the poem to a climax where Senghor reminds the masks of the attitude of the world towards the African people that they are called "cotton heads, coffee men, and oily men". However, he does not want the people to dwell upon their colonial past but take inspiration from their rich heritage. They are far from what the Europeans believe they are the "men of the dance", whose power comes from their rhythmic evocation to their ancestors (Gale).

Senghor employs the figure of "apostrophe," a "term in rhetoric referring to a direct address to an object, a place, an abstraction or ideal, or an immaterial entity such as a god or spirit". In "Prayer to the Masks," he addresses his poem to the masks, which in turn are figures of the ancestors and repositories of mythic powers. Apostrophe characteristically is used to imply the power of the poet's word or voice to invoke hidden powers in nature. Thus, in the latter half of "Prayer to the Masks," Senghor beseeches the masks to join him to help in the rebirth of Africa, but at the same time implying that it is his poetic "cry" that can drive the assistance of the masks (Book Rags).

Analogy, simile, and allusion and various other literary devices are used in this work. In the poem, the writer makes reference to certain gods and ancestors by name to be speaking directly to them. The Masks are also a reference used, as it is a spiritual figure that is being used in a subjective context. The author then goes on to compare his life and struggles to the lives of others. In doing this, he creates an analogy with some as they are indirect, and later creates similes by using like and as (Olafioye 82).

He employs simile while comparing Africa to an unborn child connected to the European mother through the umbilical cord. However, in order to grow and live it must sever its ties with the mother colonizer. The black man's sacrifice for the colonizer has been compared to a poor man's sacrifice of his last garment. He compares the white people to flour and the African natives to leaven, who will help them to rise. The "pitiable princess" represents the traditional Africa and its death is a symbol of degeneration (Gale).

The figure of the mask is Senghor's central image in the poem, of the traditional past and the ancestors for whom it was a living reality. (Books Rags). He uses the word "mask" as a kind of invocation to call up the ancestral spirits (Gale).

The poem is marked by rhythm, repetition and musicality, which is characteristic of traditional African poetry. Senghor uses a strongly cadenced verse, with the rhythm marked by frequent rising and falling of the voice (Olafioye83).

The poem ends on a note of hope for new Africa which is rooted to its traditional past.

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### **To The Negro- American Soldiers :**

'*To The Negro- American Soldiers*', is a poem that extols the dignity of the African American, West Indian and Senegalese soldiers that Senghor befriended during the war.

Senghor relates with these soldiers as they all are Africans and were imprisoned while serving the respective armies of their colonial rulers. All these soldiers despite being from different European colonies have a common emotional base.

He believes that they are the only race in the world that can establish peace in the world and can teach the world mercy in the face of brutalities that exist in this world. As the poem proceeds the subject of the poem shifts from the bloodshed and war to peace and beauty of African culture and people.

Senghor upholds the African culture and views it as the only hope for saving the future generations from the ravages of war. For him only the African man with his undying spirit can establish peace in the world.

This poem like most of Senghor's poems has an emotional strain. Being a torch bearer of the Negritude movement he lays bare open the condition and plight of the Negro soldiers. The poem is complex with several allusions and metaphoric language. The poet controls the poem throughout, sparing nothing for the reader to decide. For him the African people are the messengers of peace and they alone are capable enough to achieve it.

Repetition is a device that Senghor often uses in his poems to emphasise certain feelings and ideas. In this poem he uses the phrase 'I did not recognise you' four times at the beginning of the poem. Senghor wants to make it clear that his attachment to these imprisoned soldiers is not personal as he does not know them. Yet their common heritage makes them one people, he calls himself 'Afrika!' which is a metaphor for all the people of his continent.

The soldiers do not wear sophisticated uniforms as they wear 'calabash helmets', which were nothing but dried fruit shells. This allusion clearly proves the insignificance and triviality of the Negro soldiers in the eyes of the European ruler.

He uses transferred epithet when he says that the soldiers wear 'sad uniforms'. He uses several metaphors to describe the war machines. His fellow African soldiers are mounted on iron horses which are nothing but tanks. He employs onomatopoeia to express the whining sound of the war machines. He continues the image of war machines as horses when he says that these machines do not eat but only drink, implying that these machines are fed with fuel.

The pre-colonial noble African soldiers fought on elephant backs. However, in the present times under the colonial rulers they fight mounted on huge prehistoric monsters, which is a metaphor for cruel and merciless monstrous machines of the war. He again uses transferred epithet when he uses the phrase 'barbaric weight' to describe the brutal war machines. He further employs the metaphor of brown hand as a symbol for the black people.

There is a marked change in the tone in the second half the poem as the poem makes a shift from despair to hope.

Making an allusion to the Biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah; the cities that were consumed in fire as a result of divine judgement; it does not matter to him as to which cities they ruined as soldiers in the colonial army.

Through a picturesque imagery of the African landscape, Senghor tries to prove that African people naturally peace-loving people and the ones who can spread peace in the world. He creates a word picture when he mentions the blue field of the sky, the sun and the clear skies with clouds, which have been called 'air beats with liquids'. He also uses oxymoron when he says that 'silence sings'.

Senghor also describes the beauty and the physical attributes of the African men and women. These black soldiers' mouths are metaphorically compared to flowers. Senghor has drawn from his personal experience as a prisoner of war as a soldier of the French Army in the in this poem. He holds the unnamed and unnoticed soldiers of African descent as the ultimate messengers of peace.

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### **Conclusion :**

Senghor the statesman, the soldier, the academician was unarguably a wonderful poet. His poems, which are mostly written in French, speak for his love for Africa. He uses poetry as a medium to convey his political thoughts as well.

Senghor mastered the French language of the coloniser. He was among the first to give poetic expression to African experience in a European language, and in doing so he has achieved perfect blend, where he demeans neither but brings out the best in both.

The major themes in his writings are those of exaltation of the African culture and black man's individuality. The theory of Négritude forms the core of his writings. The major themes in his poems like *Black Woman*, *Prayer to the Masks*, *Night in Sine*, *Luxembourg 1939*, *In Memoriam* is racial identity, racial discrimination, and the condition of the African soldiers and the culture of Africa (Irele 14).

The French traditions have largely shaped Senghor's writings. He draws from the French literary developments, as he had a close affinity with the language and its informing spirit. These influences have been merged into a distinct expression. The direction of Senghor's poetry is towards the development of an African emotion and image in poetry whose medium of expression remains French (Irele 12).

His emotional strain begins to reveal itself in his early French poetry. His two volumes, *Chants d'Ombre* and *Hosties Noires* are like "mental diaries of his experience of exile" in Europe. The spiritual union of the living with the dead is the core of the spiritual life of Africa, it is a theme that occupies particular significance in Senghor's imagery and symbolism. This theme explored in poems like, 'Prayer to the Masks' and 'Night in Sine' (Irele 12).

The individual participating in the life and values of the community, is also involved the larger relation with the forces of nature. This view is best conveyed in his poem, 'Black Woman' Senghor creates a sensual image of the black woman in his poems 'Black Woman' and *Chants d'Ombre: Naked woman, black woman / Clothed with your colour which is life / with your form which is beauty*.

Senghor can be compared to the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century especially John Donne owing to his farfetched conceits. Black women are presented as stepping 'airily like bathers on the beach' and the 'long muscles of their legs' as 'harp strings under their platinum skin'. The hips of a black woman have a 'subtle music' in 'My sister, these hands of night' (Egudu 42)

His poem 'A New York' is a presentation of the opposites and his quest for "inner coherence." Senghor advises the white world through 'New York':

... let the black blood flow into your blood / Clearing the rust from your steel articulation / like an oil of life / Giving your bridges the curve of the hills / the liana's suppleness.

The advice is essential because in 'Manhattan', New York, we find women with 'no mother's breast', with 'legs in nylon', women possessing 'legs and breast with no sweat and no smell'. They have 'no tender word for mouths is lipless'. They are also heartless, for they only have 'artificial hearts' bought with 'hard cash'. Senghor compares these modern western women with the women of his native Africa and finds striking differences (Egudu 43).

Senghor's imagery is concrete visual and picturesque. The symbol of night and darkness as a motif of the African identity is seen in many of his poems. Senghor's poetry essentially centers on the glorification of the African nation and the black identity. Thus, we may say that Senghor was a poet power excellence. His contribution to the Négritude movement and love for Africa stands out in all his poetic works (Ba 10).

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