
RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Overview of Caribbean and African Literary Theories

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ABSTRACT

As it is believed, Africa is the cradle of humankind, where humans also left for other parts of the world during the slave trade and also during World War I and II. At the abolition of the slave trade, many African descendants settled where they could call home, like in the Caribbean islands and other parts of the world, as a result of the ancestral and cultural attachment between Africa and the places where the descendants of the slaves where we could see some similarities in their ways of life. We can see these facts also translate into the African and Caribbean writers' literary works, among other spheres of life. The analyses show that while both literatures share common concerns related to colonial legacy and the quest for identity, they are distinguished by unique historical and socio-political contexts that influence their narrative perspectives. For example, African literature tends to focus more on the effects of colonization and decolonization on the African continent, while Caribbean literature often emphasizes the dynamics of the diaspora and the multiple facets of Caribbean identity. In addition, this study examines the use of language and literary techniques specific to each region, as well as the contributions of major literary figures such as Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Monique Ilboudo, Werewe Liking, Wole Soyinka, Maryse Condé and many others. Finally, this comparison offers a deeper understanding of the richness and diversity of postcolonial literature while highlighting the unique voices and shared experiences of African and Caribbean writers.

KEYWORDS

Literary theory, African, Caribbean, overview, post-colonial.

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1. Introduction

Africa and the Caribbean have both seen great writers in literature, such as Aimé Césaire, Patrick Chamoiseau, Maryse Condé, and Jean Bernabé for the Caribbean, and African writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Léopold Senghor, Werewere Liking, Monique Ilboudo, and many others. Many of these writers have written about topics that are dear to them, such as Negritude, postcolonialism, Afropeanism, and ontology. While these writers from these two parts of the world share some common concerns, their concerns are also shaped by unique philosophies, cultural beliefs, and realities. In this study, I would like to make a comparative analysis of Caribbean and African literature by demonstrating the factors that associate them and the differences that separate them. By comparing works from these two regions, I seek to understand how African and Caribbean writers construct their literary and cultural identities, how they address questions of memory, resistance, and belonging, and how their narratives contribute to a broader understanding of postcolonial experiences in the French-speaking world and beyond.

2. Literature review

African and Caribbean literature is part of a postcolonial tradition that has given rise to narratives deeply marked by histories of colonization, slavery, and the struggle for independence. These two forms of literature, though distinct, often converge in their exploration of themes of identity, memory, and resistance.

Within African literature, authors such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o have played a central role in redefining postcolonial narratives. Achebe, in his novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), set out to deconstruct Western stereotypes of Africa and depict the complexity of pre-colonial African societies. Soyinka and Ngugi, meanwhile, explore the dynamics of colonial and post-colonial power while highlighting the resilience of African cultures in the face of oppression.

At the same time, Caribbean literature, led by figures such as Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Maryse Condé, explored the notion of creolization and the memory of the transatlantic slave trade. Césaire, in his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939), initiated a reflection on negritude, a concept that would be fundamental to the reaffirmation of black identities in the postcolonial context. Glissant, with his theory of rhizomatic identity and creolization, proposes a reading of the Caribbean world as a space of encounter and métissage, while Condé sets out to revisit historical myths from a feminine and critical perspective.

Comparative studies between these two literary corpuses have often highlighted how African and Caribbean writers respond to colonial and post-colonial experiences with similar narrative strategies while taking into account the cultural and historical specificities of each region. For example, Françoise Lionnet's work on métisse and créolisation illustrates how African and Caribbean literature intersect in their approach to identity plurality while highlighting the contextual differences that distinguish them. Postcolonial critics such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak have also provided theoretical tools for analyzing the discourses of resistance present in this literature. Bhabha, with her concept of *mimicry* and *third space*, offers a framework for understanding the subversion of colonial identities, while Spivak questions the possibility for subalterns to express themselves in a postcolonial context, thus paving the way for a critique of literary representations.

Thus, this literary review shows that a comparison between African and Caribbean literature not only enables us to understand how writers from both regions articulate their postcolonial experiences but also reveals the specificities of their responses to the challenges posed by history, memory, and identity in a globalized postcolonial world.

3. Method

For this study, I decided to compare French and African literary works, focusing on the post-colonial period. In particular, I have selected emblematic works such as "Notebook of a Return to My Native Land" by PETAR GUBERINA, Kerline Paul's "Ayiti" for Caribbean literature, and "Poetry and Liberation Struggle," Gibert Doho "The Masks Speak" by Fatoumata Sidibé, "Things Fall Apart" by Chinua Achebe, "The Journey of a Caribbean Woman" Maryse Conde ... for African literature. My aim is to examine common themes, such as identity, decolonization, and modernity while analyzing stylistic and narrative divergences. I will analyze how the historical and socio-cultural context of each region influences these works and incorporate interviews with literary experts to enrich my analysis. This comparison will shed light on the complex interactions between French and African literature and deepen our understanding of post-colonial dynamics in literary production.

3.1 Historical Background

First, to conduct a comparative study of these two literary worlds, it is important to draw a parallel between the history and existence of the Caribbean, whose past is connected to Africa through the many slaves who were transported to Europe and other parts of the world during the slave trade. In search of social justice and equity that has never existed between the majority "whites" and the minority "blacks," there is a heartfelt cry for equitable justice. Caribbean literature emerges from heated topics and Black existentialism to denounce the arbitrary treatment suffered by Black people in Europe. Other writers also wrote about Africa as a way of belonging and recognition to the people from whom they descended. It is in this context that Aimé Césaire wrote his famous poem, "Notebook of a return to my native land," where he speaks about themes like identity, colonization, and the quest for freedom and dignity for colonized peoples.

3.2 Caribbean Literature

French Caribbean literature is the symbolic and imaginative expression of the people from the French-speaking regions of the Caribbean, notably Haiti, Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana, and their dependencies. Each of these regions shares the legacy of French colonialism. Recent studies on Francophone Caribbean literature have tended to reconsider the viability of a linear and teleological narrative in terms of its development. Throughout Francophone Caribbean literature, there is a unique focus on particular themes such as slavery, colonization, and the deprivation of rights faced by individuals and communities in their historical development. Undoubtedly, Antillean literature opens much to the subjects of identity and self-definition. The literary construction of a Francophone Caribbean identity found its most famous and controversial articulation in the Negritude movement, founded in Paris by Aimé Césaire (the term first appeared in his "Notebook of a Return to my native land" in 1939). Negritude, according to Césaire, refers to the collective understanding of self by members of the African diaspora, an identity founded on a shared historical experience of African heritage and the suffering and non-freedom of slavery. In Martinique and Guadeloupe, a series of political and literary magazines in the 1920s and 1930s heralded a new critical spirit towards colonialism and a desire to affirm a Black identity. These include "La Dépêche africaine" founded by René Maran and Paulette Nardal in 1928, "Le Cri des Nègres" (1931), "La Revue du Monde Noir" (1931), and especially "Légitime Défense" founded in 1932 by Martiniquan Etienne Léro and

"L'Étudiant Noir" (1934), founded by Césaire with Gilbert Gratiant, Leonard Sainville, Paulette Nardal, and Léopold Senghor. Over time, the literary themes of Martiniquan writers have evolved based on daily realities. Moving from predominantly Negritude writings to literary reflections on Caribbean communal consciousness, as seen in Francophone social realism novels and critiques of colonial alienation by Frantz Fanon, which transcends heroic Black individualism to convey a sense of collective Martiniquan consciousness across time and space. French Caribbean literature is also marked by its concerted struggle to resolve issues of space production and identity in the colonial and now neocolonial world, remaining an aesthetic intervention within a broader historical and existential reality. The representation of divisions and alienations, as well as the desire for reconciliation and wholeness that characterizes Francophone Caribbean literature, are determined by the region's unique status. This is unlike the vast majority of African diasporic cultures but not simply reducible to this status. Speaking of Caribbean countries, including Haiti, although this country has enjoyed independence since 1804, unlike other Caribbean countries, the overseas territories present a complex and ambiguous image of a postmodern European colony. Faced with economic underdevelopment and the quest for non-existent freedom among populations, many Antillean authors have referred to this situation as a "postmodern European colony." However, apart from philosophical terms and thoughts like Negritude and postcolonialism, terms like ontology, which is a study of existence, reality, and the essence of beings, were also prevalent in the literary works of Caribbean authors. Aimé Césaire's *"Notebook of a Return to My Native Land"* poetry collection, published in 1939, is considered one of the most important works of 20th-century literature. In this book, the author deals with various literary terms that revolve around identity, colonization, Negritude, and ontology, questioning self-existence and the quest for dignity and freedom for colonized peoples. Césaire explores issues of personal and cultural identity as a person of color and a descendant of Black slaves in the Caribbean. The poems also denounce the injustices of colonization and the ensuing oppression, addressing racism and the exploitative system established against colonized peoples and advocating for the practice of traditional cultures and beliefs. Here are some examples of verses that discuss these themes.

3.3 The Misery of the People

In the preface to the second edition of *"Notebook of a Return to My Native Land"* by PETAR GUBERINA, Césaire speaks about the death of the Black race and its cultures to the detriment of a supposedly superior race and culture through the following verses: "The reason that has annihilated Black civilizations into corpses must be what, despite words, but according to the true meaning, is called cannibalism and madness." P.18. Through these verses, Césaire powerfully addresses the heightened consequences of colonization and the destruction of the values and beliefs governing a people to the detriment of a supposedly superior culture. Similarly, in his book, *"Poetry and Liberation Struggle,"* Gibert Doho also speaks about the hidden side of decolonization and its sequestration on wounded human consciences when he says: "They have ruined our country and our children." (P.12). This "they," a third-person plural pronoun, does not designate anyone specifically but points fingers at those who could be called invaders and destroyers of the spiritual and ancestral values and beliefs with which an entire people identify. The same theme can also be seen in Kerline Paul's "Ayiti," in her play "Roots and Freedom," with the following lines on page 35: "When we see / Our fields green again / After these terrifying times / We can smoke / The peace pipe and fraternity / While talking about an unprecedented past / Never seen before." These verses imply the hope that the author has, a hope long mortgaged by the whims and inhumane actions suffered by innocent populations enslaved by a destiny full of mirages and victims of circumstances. The author hopes that after all this dark past, a long-awaited glimmer of hope will finally arrive.

3.4 The Revolution

Césaire P.74: "Make me rebellious against all vanity, but docile to its genius / Like the fist to the extension of the arm / Make me commissioner of its blood / Make me a man of conclusion / Make me a man of contemplation / But also make me a man of incense." Through these verses, the author sees himself as a guarantor of his people's freedom, a warrior determined to lead his people out of the misery in which they have long remained. The author is ready to do anything in his quest to find justice and pave a new path for a people long trapped in a destiny of misery. Despite the lack of political power and will, the author can still dream of being a liberator of seized destinies. In *"The Masks Speak"* by Fatoumata Sidibé, in the title "Rebellious Spirits" on page 41, she says: "Since the people discovered another possible / Outraged and indignant / They lift the burden of their destiny with all their might / And without complacency engage in a reckoning with the mutilating and glittering class that oppresses them." Fatoumata speaks of a people's awakening that has long been docile and dormant until the moment of no longer accepting the realities they face and taking their destiny into their own hands through an unprecedented revolution to free themselves and rid themselves of the burdens that have long hampered their development. In her collection "Inner Voice" and "The Murmur of Intimacy," the author also discusses the same theme through the following verses: Césaire celebrates the richness and beauty of African culture and its descendants while also speaking of the pride of being African. He denounces stereotypes and racist prejudices against Blacks. Through these writings, Césaire expresses a deep desire for freedom and dignity for colonized peoples. He calls for resistance against colonial oppression and the struggle for emancipation and justice for all. Similar terms can also be seen in other Caribbean authors' novels, such as Maryse Condé, who, in her book *"The Journey of a Caribbean Writer,"* in the chapter "Roots," speaks about the same theme of African cultural identity. "No one tells you, for example, that when you travel to Guadeloupe, you are not going to meet Blacks only. There are Whites. There are Indians from India. There are people who have a bit of everything in them." In this

passage, Maryse Condé emphasizes the importance of embracing African roots and cultural diversity, reinforcing the importance of ancestral ties to Africa for Caribbean people. Similarly, in "The Bewitching," she mentions the quest for identity of a people marked by colonization and the mixing of different cultures. She evokes the quest for individual and collective identity in a world where different cultures blend and influence each other. In the chapter "Afropeanism," this theme is illustrated with the following lines: "My uncle used to say: we are neither Africans, nor French, nor Guadeloupeans, nor Martiniquans. We are all of these at once. We are Creoles!" Here, the author expresses the idea that Caribbean identity is rich and diverse, drawing on African, French, and Creole influences and highlighting the complexity and uniqueness of Caribbean culture. In the book *"Dictionary of Creoleness"* by Patrick Chamoiseau and Jean Bernabé, we also find a recurring theme of cultural identity, questioning their place and the importance of Creole culture in the Caribbean world. "They ask us: 'But what is creoleness?' And in our hearts, we can hear it, these empty words that resonate, these words that make us vulnerable." Through these verses, the authors speak of a quest for self, self-understanding, and acceptance in a mixed world. The richness of creoleness lies in its ability to unite diverse influences to create a unique cultural identity. Despite this, literature from the Caribbean and other places continues to be a powerful vehicle for addressing cultural identity and fighting the alienation brought about by colonization.

3.5 African Literature

African literature includes literary texts written by Africans for Africans, exploring issues specific to their cultures and realities. African literature is often distinguished by its diversity, reflecting the diversity of African cultures, languages, and traditions. However, African writers also share common concerns, such as the fight for freedom, social justice, and the recognition of African identity and culture. Themes such as colonialism, slavery, racism, cultural identity, African traditions, and the quest for freedom are often at the heart of African literature. Postcolonialism, Afrocentrism, and Afropeanism are also key terms in African literature, reflecting the influence of Western history and cultures on Africa and the quest for recognition and valuation of African cultures and identities. African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Léopold Senghor, Wole Soyinka, Wole Soyinka, and Monique Ilboudo have written about these themes and terms, exploring how they influence African societies and the struggle for freedom and social justice. The search for identity, cultural traditions, and existential issues are also central themes in African literature. African writers use their literary works to explore the realities of African societies, denounce the injustices they face, and highlight the richness and diversity of African cultures. Afrocentrism is an intellectual and cultural movement that emphasizes the importance of Africa and Africans in the history and culture of humanity. Afrocentrism seeks to revalorize African cultures and traditions, highlighting their contribution to world history and civilization. It also aims to challenge stereotypes and prejudices about Africa and Africans, promoting a positive and authentic vision of African history and culture.

3.6 Afrocentrism

Afrocentrism is also closely linked to the Black Consciousness movement, which emerged in South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s under the leadership of Steve Biko. The Black Consciousness movement aimed to awaken Black consciousness and pride, promoting the recognition and valuation of African identity and culture. This movement was also a response to apartheid, the system of racial segregation that prevailed in South Africa at the time. African literature is thus a powerful tool for exploring African realities, denouncing injustices, and promoting the recognition and valuation of African cultures and identities. By exploring themes such as colonialism, racism, cultural identity, African traditions, and the quest for freedom, African writers contribute to a deeper understanding of African societies and their struggle for freedom and social justice. Afrocentrism also plays a key role in African literature, emphasizing the importance of Africa and Africans in the history and culture of humanity and promoting the recognition and valuation of African cultures and traditions. An illustration of Afrocentrism can be found in the book *"Things Fall Apart"* by Chinua Achebe, who, through his protagonist Okonkwo, highlights the values and traditions of African societies, showing how colonization disrupted and altered these traditional values. For example, the book depicts the daily life and customs of the Igbo people, illustrating the importance of traditions, rituals, and family ties in Igbo society before the arrival of Europeans. Similarly, in *"Houseboy"* by Ferdinand Oyono, the protagonist Toundi tells the story of his experiences as a houseboy in a European household in colonial Cameroon. The novel exposes the injustices and abuses of the colonial system, highlighting the exploitation and oppression suffered by the colonized people. Afrocentrism is also present in *"God's Bits of Wood"* by Sembène Ousmane, which narrates the story of the railway workers' strike in colonial Senegal. The novel highlights the solidarity and courage of the African workers in their fight against the colonial authorities, emphasizing the importance of African values and traditions in this struggle. Afropeanism, for example, is an artistic and cultural movement that focuses on the experiences and identities of people of African descent living in Europe. This movement aims to highlight the unique experiences of Afro-Europeans, promoting the recognition and valuation of their cultural identity. One of the key aspects of Afropeanism is the exploration of the dual identity of people of African descent living in Europe. These individuals often have to navigate between their African heritage and their European upbringing, creating a unique cultural identity that is neither entirely African nor entirely European. Afropeanism seeks to highlight this unique experience and promote the recognition of the cultural identity of Afro-Europeans. An example of Afropeanism in literature can be found in *"The Lonely Londoners"* by Sam Selvon. This novel tells the story of Caribbean immigrants living in London in the 1950s, highlighting their experiences and struggles as they navigate life in a new and unfamiliar environment. The novel

explores themes such as identity, belonging, and the challenges of adapting to a new culture, illustrating the unique experiences of Afro-Europeans.

4. Conclusion

Caribbean and African literature share many common themes and concerns. They reveal an impressive richness and diversity in the themes, styles, and preoccupations of authors from these regions, such as the fight for freedom, social justice, and the recognition of cultural identity. Although the literatures of both geographical areas are deeply influenced by their colonial histories, their struggles for independence, and their quest for identity, they are also distinguished by unique features specific to their particular cultural and socio-political contexts. Despite their differences, African and Caribbean literature share a common vision of literature as a tool of resistance and identity-building. They use narrative to give a voice to the voiceless, to criticize social injustice, and to imagine possible futures. This comparative study demonstrates that, although geographically distant, these two literary traditions are in constant dialogue, influencing each other and enriching the world of literature. Caribbean literature often focuses on themes such as slavery, colonization, and the quest for cultural identity, reflecting the unique experiences of the Caribbean people. African literature, on the other hand, often explores themes such as colonialism, racism, and the quest for freedom, reflecting the unique experiences of African societies. Both Caribbean and African literature play a crucial role in promoting the recognition and valuation of African and Caribbean cultures and identities. They provide a platform for exploring the realities of these societies, denouncing injustices, and promoting social justice and freedom. Through their literary works, Caribbean and African writers contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences and struggles of their people, highlighting the richness and diversity of their cultures and traditions.

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