



**A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE FRANCOPHONE AND THE  
ANGLOPHONE CARIBBEAN RESPONSES TO COLONIALISM:  
COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AIMÉ CÉSAIRE AND DEREK  
WALCOTT**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Aimé Césaire, the founding figure of the Negritude movement, is a great Francophone poet, playwright and politician. His responses to colonialism are quite different from that of Derek Walcott's, another significant poet and playwright from St. Lucia. Though their responses to colonialism differ, a comparative study of their responses will bring out a complete picture of Francophone and Anglophone Caribbean reactions to the colonialisms. In this article, Walcott and Césaire's responses to colonialism in the postcolonial Caribbean context will be examined.*

Caribbean literatures are the part of the New World literatures and like most of the New World literatures, Caribbean literatures as a whole manifest a resistance to oppression which is always present in the Caribbean society. Hilary Beckles has appropriately asserted that resistance is an inevitable part of being enslaved, and after emancipation it has always been carried out in the visual and verbal arts of the oppressed. In a more general way, Caribbean literature is the manifestation of the Caribbean experiences of migrations, slavery and their multi-cultural identity.

The first phase of Caribbean colonial history began since the time of Columbus's arrival in the archipelago. As C. L. Innes has pointed out that during Columbus's arrival in the archipelago, two dominant indigenous communities, the Arawaks and the Caribs, populated that area. The Spanish and the Portuguese invaded these islands for gold and other precious metals "and the indigenous population was reduced to near extinction by genocide, disease, slavery and mass suicide. Slaves from West Africa were introduced to replace the dwindling native population. In the seventeenth century, England, France and the Netherlands joined the struggle for supremacy over the islands, and many islands changed hands, making the Caribbean a Creole society woven out of diverse cultures and languages" (Innes, 226). Later



when slavery was abolished in the Francophone and Anglophone Caribbean colonies, cheap and indentured labours were imported from India, China and other Asian countries in order to run the plantations in the archipelago. Thus in the five hundred years' long history West Indies had become multi-cultural and multi-lingual nation.

In the next phase of colonization, the white colonizers began their civilizing and socializing mission for establishing European racial supremacy. The black pupils in the classes were taught to internalize that they had no history in the archipelago. Moreover in the academic curriculum, the black pupils in both the French Caribbean and the English Caribbean colonies were taught to believe that western literature, culture and philosophy are the measure of the standard of the humanity itself against which the African ancestral tradition was looked upon as vulgar and barbaric. If the black pupil really aspire to raise themselves from their "jungle status (in Fanon's term), they must affiliate themselves to the European culture and tradition.

In this context it should be pointed out that the British colonial policy and the French colonial policy were basically different. In case of the French colonial strategy, the colonized part of France was usually looked upon as another France. Aimé Césaire, the great Francophone Caribbean poet and playwright, represented the Martinique constituency in the French Assembly in Paris. The Francophone Caribbean subjects were usually looked upon as French citizen if they affiliate themselves to the French norms and standards by learning the metropolitan language of the colonizers. Fanon here argues that learning the language of the French colonizers was an added advantage for the black colonized because in this way they can put a white mask on their black skin. The knowledge of the French language has always given them an advantage among the black people in the archipelago but they encounter a fiasco when they tried to become more French in France. The island education system had created a class division in the archipelago. The intellectual blacks constituted an elite society and those who had no colonial education represented the marginalized class of the island. In a way, Léon-Gontran Damas, a renowned poet of the French Guiana, has criticized the elite education system in his poem "Hoquet":

*Ma mere voulant d'un fils memorandum*

*Si votre leçon d'histoire n'est pas sue*

*vous n'irez pas à la messe*

*dimanche*

*Avec vos effets des dimanche*

*Cet enfant sera la honte de notre nom*

*cet enfant sera notre nom de Dieu*

*Taisez-vous*

*Vous ai-je ou non dit qu'il vous fallait parler français*

*le français de France*



*le francais du francais*  
*lLe francais francais.*

(Lillehei, 27)

Alexandra Lillehei's English translation of the poem is also quoted here:

*My mother wanting a noteworthy son*  
*If you do not learn ypur history lesion*  
*you will not go to mass*  
*Sunday*  
*in your Sunday best*  
*The child will be the disgrace of our name*  
*this child will be our in the name of God*  
*Shut up*  
*Did I or did I not tell you that you must speak French*  
*the French of the France*  
*the French of the French*  
*the French French.*

(Lillehei, 24)

Contrarily, the British colonial policy never allowed the colonized natives as the citizen of the Great Britain but they had to tolerate similar colonial experiences in the archipelago. In a similar way, the Anglophone Caribbean pupils were taught to believe their rootlessness and in spite of Caribbean flora and fauna, their geography lesson include European geography and history.

Naturally there may be a slight difference between the Francophone reactions and Anglophone reactions to colonialism but their basic pattern of response were all the more similar. Aimé Césaire, one of such black students who bears the marks of French colonial education and culture, never assimilated spiritually to the colonizers' tradition and in spite of having all the qualities to serve as a civil servant; he preferred to teach the students of Le lycée Victor-Schœlcher, a French colonial school in Martinique capital Fort-de-France. He always talked about restoring the ancestral African past and tradition because it will substitute the discourse of colonial cultural tradition. Though he propagated the restoration of African past, he himself contrarily follows the legacy of European literatures and cultures. His poem Cahier d'un retour au pays natal (Notebook of Return to the Native Land) is marked by his use of surrealist literary manner which emerged in early twentieth century Europe. But his use of Surrealist techniques is quite different from that of its European practitioners. The poem begins with the following French phase:



Au bout du petit matin...  
(At the brink of early dawn)

Gregson Davis here asserted that at the threshold of Cahier, Césaire sets the poem in the borderline between the world of dream and reality which is an important crossroad for the surreal imagination. The poet seems to point out that the dawn is actually the Caribbean condition. It signifies an awakening and enlightenment in the form of Negritude movement and at the same time it signifies a state between past night (both Ancestral past and colonial past) and daylight of future (the independent nation). Moreover, the poet uses the ancient Greek myth of Odysseus's return to his homeland Ithaca in the Francophone Caribbean context. Aime Césaire, one of the founding father of the Negritude movement in Paris, in one of his interviews with the Haitian poet Rene Depestre in the Cultural Congress, Havana (1967), has acknowledged his use of surrealist literary practice because it functions for him as the "liberating factor". According to him, the so-called literate class of Martinique bears the marks of French and in a way; they have been branded by their French manners. But after they dissociate from the French, only the African black will remain within them. Surrealism is a process for him to decolonize and emancipate the Caribbean national consciousness from the bondage of colonial sensibility. According to him, surrealism calls forth deep and unconscious forces and the unconscious forces signify African black sensibility. Thus his use of surrealist method is naturally different from the European writers' practice of this mode.

Derek Walcott, on the other hand, has used modernism in the postcolonial Caribbean context. According to Charles W. Pollard, Walcott is one of the Caribbean exponents of New World Modernism. His use of inter-textual references, his transformation of the Modernist crisis into postcolonial Caribbean crisis of identity, his adaptation of the European literary modes, his painterly exploration of the poetic imagination have given his poems and plays a unique Modernist flavor. Born and brought up in the island of St. Lucia, Walcott realized that he belongs to the minority Methodist community among the Catholic islanders. Though the colour of his skin is white among the black population of his native island, the grandmothers of his parents were actually the black African descends. After seventeen times' continuous battle between the French and the British, when the island finally became British colony, the language of the island was French based 'patois' but Walcott belongs to the minority English speaker. Like the diverse cultural tradition of his islanders, Walcott himself felt the diversity in him which nourished his sensibility as an artist and poet. His postcolonial experience of Modernism actually assisted him to express the anxiety of his cultural and identity crisis. Poems like "Green Apple Kingdom", "The Schooner Flight", "Ruins of a Great House", "A Far Cry from Africa" etc encapsulate his cultural crisis from a modernist perspective.

Walcott has re-contextualized the order and myth of Homeric epic narrative in his Nobel Prize winning verse narrative Omeros. In the poem Trojan prince Hector and the great Greek



hero Achilles have been presented as the simple fishermen of the island of St. Lucia, the land of Walcott's birth. Helen of Sparta, for whom the epic battle is often said to have taken place, is metaphorically represents the island of St. Lucia itself because seventeen times the French and the British fought over this Caribbean Helen island. Moreover Walcott reinterprets Homeric vision of sea in the St. Lucian context because history and literature will actually deepen the wounds of their past but sea by washing them up will heal their pains. In classical epic, the roars on the sea were caused by the Greek armed forces in their attack to Troy but in the Caribbean context, the sound is made by enraged waves and winds who sympathize the condition of the Caribbean people. In the poem "Goats and Monkeys", there is a passing reference to Eurydice, whom Orestes failed to bring back from the land of death in classical myth. Walcott, the Caribbean Orestes, also realizes that past which is metaphorically represented by Eurydice in the Caribbean context, can never be restored in the present Caribbean context. Past for them lies either in Africa or in Europe or in Asia and never in the West Indies. Aimé Césaire in a similar way, had used classical literary tradition in some of his poems and plays like Notebook of Return to the Native Land, And the Dogs Were Silent because in both the books, Césaire used classical Greek intertextual references in the Francophone context.

In a way both the poets represent two different phases of Caribbean responses to colonialism. Their socio-cultural milieu has determined their poetic sensibility because the French colonial policy and the British colonial policy were not similar. Aimé Césaire was a politician but Derek Walcott was never. Therefore, Aimé Césaire's works have always been motivated by the political agenda. Moreover, Aimé Césaire represents quite an earlier phase of colonial response to colonialism but contrarily, Walcott represents the post-1960s decades of the Caribbean colonial responses.

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