

## **Aimé Césaire—An appreciation**

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The sad news of the demise of Aimé Césaire, the great Caribbean poet, at the age of 94 was not a shocking piece of information. But when it came to me last week, just the day following my return from the Asian Human Rights Commission and Hong Kong, it aroused in me a series of cultural and political issues, responses, and the battle for the cause of social justice, freedom, human rights and dignity in the 20th century world of the Blacks.

I remember that winter evening in 1974 in the Monday market street of Karol Bagh in New Delhi where I saw for the first time in the long spread of second hand books '*Return to my native land*', Aimé Césaire's epic poem with a yellow line sketch of a Negro's head by Picasso on a deep black cover. I remember my sleepless Delhi nights with Aimé Césaire's poetry. It was far different from what I experienced as modern poetry from the west. Césaire's lines were like charged high power electric lines; multi-potential lines, lines which can evoke memories, history, wrath and protest lines which can carry resonances of dark crying jungles on its lyre, lines which could predict the freedom, pride, and cultural identity of the Negroes and the downtrodden masses. They were lines which can play the violent symphony of the upsurge of the undefeatable spirit of negritude. They were lines which can portray with love, joy, and music the resurrection of the oppressed, the victorious green vastness, and the beauty of triumphant and free human souls.

A disquiet and profound creative energy was my first experience of that long poem. It was a great poetic document of the new turbulent Negro times. It had a multitude of resistance-centres within; centres of consciousness and culture, fighting against colonialism, fighting against prisons and chains and gallows for a celebration of freedom, fighting against despotism for democracy. Centres that were in deep disagreement with the yielding savage attitudes of the traditional negro mind set, accommodating silently the torturous everyday happenings and inhuman bondage and sufferings in the brutal order of the white hell of colonialism.

Aimé Césaire's high power words relentlessly urged for resistance, freedom and justice. It was clear that the poem was written by a rare brand of poet fascinated by surrealism and its rebellious style and spirit dancing in tunes with liberty and equality of the inner universe of humanity. Naturally this poem was easily accounted in the registry of 'modern poetry'; poetry of the bewildered individual surrounded by a hostile and bitter world; as poetry of memory and of dream. Later as the sense of black resistance resulted in the readings of the creative contributions of the Negroes and started redefining the black culture, '*Return to my native land*' by Aimé Césaire received great poetic acclaim as one of the masterpieces of third world political modernity, a work that raises serious questions against the value system of the ideology of the Eurocentric 'modern' of the west. The new mix of tenderness and thunder in this poem became one of the major hallmarks of modern black aesthetics. This poem became gradually identified as a great call for the freedom and the justice due to the wretched of the earth. Here the word RETURN means discovery; discovery of the self, reclaiming the cultural identity; regaining the locations of justice, dreams, freedom, love and happiness. Return is in no sense a going back to the primitive darkness.

The new world could now hear in this poem the untamable lions roaring in the subconscious jungle of the Negro minds. Images in Aimé Césaire's poetry were wild and aggressive with a bright vision of liberation from all forms of oppression. Its rhythm is the violent rhythm of the storm.

The life of this great Caribbean poet Aimé Fernand David Césaire, playwright, thinker, politician, cultural analyst, is closely knitted to the renaissance movements and freedom struggles of the Negro race. He was a great inspirer, advocate, teacher, leader, and fighter for the cause of justice to the so-called slave race, the Negroes. Redefining the great negro spirit he used the word 'negritude' to convey the essence and

force of the blacks' cultural identity. He is credited with coining the word *négritude* to spread the message of radical black humanism all over the world. He has his own unique contributions in shaping the new sensibility and fighting spirit in our modern heritage to shred down all forms hegemony from the social consciousness of all societies in the colonial and post colonial worlds.

Many of his poems were translated into Malayalam and some other Indian languages .

**Aimé Césaire's life, contacts, works, and commitments:**

Aimé Césaire was born in Basse-Pointe, Martinique in 1913 . In 1931, he traveled to Paris to attend the Lycée Louis-le-Grand on an educational scholarship. In Paris, Césaire, who, in 1935 passed an entrance exam for the École Normale Supérieure, created with Léopold Sédar Senghor, the great Senegalese poet , and Léon Damas, the literary review, *The Black Student*, which was a forerunner of the *Négritude* movement. In 1936, Césaire began work on his book-length poem *Return to my native land*. The *Notebook of a return to my native land* (1939) was a vivid and powerful depiction of the ambiguities of Caribbean life and culture in the New World.

Césaire married fellow Martinican student, Suzanne Roussi, in 1937. Together they moved back to Martinique in 1939 with their young son. Césaire became a teacher at the Lycée Schoelcher in Fort-de-France, where he taught Frantz Fanon and served as an inspiration for, but did not teach, Édouard Glissant. He would become a heavy influence for Fanon as both a mentor and a contemporary throughout Fanon's short life.

The years of World War II were ones of great intellectual activity for the Césaires. In 1941, Aimé Césaire and Suzanne Roussi founded the literary review *Tropiques*, with the help of other Martinican intellectuals like René Ménil and Aristide Maugée, in order to challenge the cultural status quo and alienation that then characterized the Martinican identity. Many run-ins with censorship did not deter Césaire from being an outspoken defendant of Martinican identity. He also became close to French surrealist poet André Breton, who spent time in Martinique during the war. Breton contributed a laudatory introduction to the 1947 edition of *Return to my native land*, saying that "this poem is nothing less than the greatest lyrical monument of our times."

In 1945, with the support of the French Communist Party, Césaire was elected mayor of Fort-de-France and député to the French National Assembly for Martinique. He was one of the principal drafters of the 1946 law on departmentalizing former colonies, a role for which independentist politicians have often criticized him.

Like many leftist intellectuals in France, Césaire in the 1930s and 1940s looked towards the Soviet Union as a source of human progress, virtue, and human rights, but Césaire later grew disillusioned with Communism. In 1956, after the invasion of Hungary by the Soviet Union, Aimé Césaire announced his resignation from the French Communist Party in a text entitled *Lettre à Maurice Thorez*. In 1958 he founded the *Parti Progressiste Martiniquais*. In 1960, he published *Toussaint Louverture*, based upon the life of the Haitian revolutionary. He served as President of the Regional Council of Martinique from 1983 to 1988. He retired from politics in 2001.

In 2006, he refused to meet the leader of the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), Nicolas Sarkozy, then a probable contender for the 2007 presidential election, because the UMP had voted for the 23 February 2005 law asking teachers and textbooks to "acknowledge and recognize in particular the positive role of the French presence abroad, especially in North Africa", a law considered by many as a eulogy to colonialism and French actions during the Algerian War. President Jacques Chirac finally had the controversial law repealed.

His writings reflect his passion for civic and social engagement. He is the author of *Discourse on Colonialism* (1953), a denunciation of European colonial racism which was published in the French review *Présence Africaine*. In 1968, he published the first version of *Une Tempête*, a radical adaptation of Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* for a black audience.

Martinique's airport at *Le Lamentin* was renamed Martinique Aimé Césaire International Airport on January 15, 2007.

On April 9, 2008, he suffered serious heart troubles and was admitted to Pierre Zobda Quitman hospital in Fort-de-France. He died on April 17, 2008.

Courtesy: Wikipedia , the free encyclopedia.