

The Influence of Negritude Movement on
Modern African Literature and Writers: A Study
of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Elechi
Amadi's *The Concubine*

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Abstract

Negritude is a movement and an ideology. As a movement, it is deeply rooted in Pan-African congresses, exhibitions, organizations and publications produced to challenge the theory of race hierarchy and black inferiority developed by philosophers such as Friedrich Hegel and Joseph de Gobineau. As an ideology, it is a defining milestone in the rehabilitation of Africa and African diasporic identity and dignity, and thus, provided a unifying, fighting and liberating instrument for black Francophone students in the first half of the twentieth century in search of their identity. It was an expression of a new humanism that positions

black people within a global community of equals. Like any other movement and ideology, negritude faced grave challenges and criticisms but has continued to survive because of its significant role and influence in the development of African Literature. This research examines the influence of Negritude on Modern African literature and writers with particular reference to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Amadi's *The Concubine*. It contends that Negritude, in spite of criticisms, has not only survived but has also greatly influenced modern African literature and writers.

Keywords: negritude, influence, modern, African and literature.

Introduction

Negritude is a literary movement of the 1930s to 1950s that began among French-speaking African and Caribbean writers living in Paris as a protest against French colonial rule and the policy of assimilation. The Negritude movement was influenced by the Harlem Renaissance, a literary and artistic flowering that emerged among a group of black thinkers and artists, especially poets and novelists, in the United States, in New York in 1920s.

The Harlem renaissance is associated with such writers and poets as Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, and Claude McKay. They are intellectuals who fled to France to escape racism and segregation in the United States. It was, however, Claude McKay, a Jamaica-born poet and novelist and a prominent voice of the Harlem group, who caught the attention of Senghor. He believed that a writer should deal with important political subjects, and he himself had much to say about institutionalized racism. He projected his ideas and hatred against racism in his masterpiece and picaresque novel, *Banjo*, which centres on black seamen in Marseilles and is notable in part for its

portrayal of French treatment of black colonials. Senghor read McKay's *Banjo* and became highly inspired to begin his movement.

Basically, Negritude movement is born out of the context of francophone Africans who were responding to stiff, dehumanizing, and cultural and religious disorienting policy of French assimilation. Assimilation is a term used to describe the French colonial policy in Africa. The policy was aimed at turning Africans into 'Frenchmen' through the process of education. The French educational policy in Africa was thus meant to make the Africans culturally French. Quoting P.C. Lloyd, Egudu states that 'to make this policy attractive to Africans, the French proclaimed that Africans could assimilate French culture and that those who did so could be accepted on terms of full social equality by all Frenchmen' (30). The social equality was, however, never realistic. Importantly, 'assimilation was not aimed at elevating the African but at devaluing his culture, and that was why it was thought necessary to strip him of his true cultural self and put on him a foreign one which he was later to revolt against' (Egudu, 30).

The assertion of black pride by members of the Negritude movement was attended by a cry against this assimilation. They felt that although it was theoretically based on a belief in universal equality, it still assumed the superiority of European culture and civilization over that of Africa (or assumed that African has no history and culture). They were also disturbed by the World Wars, in which they saw their countrymen not only dying for a cause that was not theirs but being treated as inferiors on the battlefield. They became increasingly aware, through their study of history of the suffering and humiliation of black people; first under the bondage of slavery and then under colonial rule. These views



inspired many of the basic ideas behind Negritude. First, the mystic warmth of African life, gaining strength from its closeness to nature and its constant contact with ancestors, should be constantly placed in proper perspective against the materialism of Western culture. Second, Africans must look to their own cultural heritage to determine the values and traditions that are most useful in the modern world. Third, committed writers should use African subject matter and poetic traditions and should excite a desire for political freedom. Fourth, Negritude itself encompasses the whole of African cultural, economic, social and political values. Fifth, the values and dignity of African traditions and peoples must be asserted. Lewis Nkosi's quotation of what Césaire told the Haitian poet René Despestre during the Havana cultural congress in 1967 is worth reproducing in full here:

We lived in an atmosphere of rejection, and we develop an inferiority complex. I have always thought that the black man was searching for his identity. And it has seemed to me that if what we want is to establish this identity, then we must have a concrete consciousness of what we are, that is, of the first fact of our lives: that we are black; that we were black and have a history, a history that contains cultural elements of great value, and that Negroes were not, as you put it, born yesterday, because there have been beautiful and important black civilizations (97).

Negritude movement was thus borne out of the context of the above quotation. Against slave trade, colonialism, neo-colonialism and above all, prejudices towards the black race and black people. Three young Africans in Diaspora, particularly in Paris, namely Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, Aimé Césaire of Martinique and Léon Damas of Guyana cried out. But, before the assertion and subsequent establishment of the African historical

relevance, her heritage and values, the Negroes had to undress themselves of the shackles and constrictive tendencies of assimilation. Oladele tells us of Césaire's postulation,

To set our own and effective revolution, we had to first put off our borrowed dresses, those of assimilation and affirm our being, that is negritude, to be truly ourselves, we ought to embody the negro-African culture in the realities of the twentieth century for our negritude to be effective an instrument of liberation... we had to shake off the dust and assert it in the internal movement of the contemporary world (45).

Negritude Movement and Ideology

The triumvirate, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Leon-Gontran Damas and Aimé Césaire founded the Negritude movement. The troika theorized Negritude around the ideology of unified liberation. The term 'negritude' means 'blackness'. Césaire coined it from pejorative French word, *negre*. Césaire boldly and proudly incorporated this derogatory term into the name of an ideological movement, and used it for the first time in writing of his seminal poetic work, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Notebook of a Return to the Native land). The original concept of Negritude is 'rooted in the specificity and unity of black people as historically derived from the transatlantic slave trade and their plight in New World plantation system' (Kesteloot 36). In the words of Césaire, 'Negritude is not cephalic index or plasma, or soma, but measured by the compass of suffering' (8). Ideologically, it is therefore,

The simple recognition of the fact that one is black, the acceptance of this fact and of our destiny as blacks, of our history and culture (Senghor 10).

Cesaire's response to the centuries-old alienation of blacks via negritude movement is a call to reject assimilation and reclaim their own racial heritage and qualities. He experiences his negritude as a fact, a revolt, and the acceptance of responsibilities for the destiny of his race. He advocates the emergence of 'cultural workers' who will reveal black specificity to the world by articulating their experiences, their fortunes and misfortunes. It is only the black that will write about their history and validate their achievements. This will restore the lost humility, dignity, integrity, and subjectivity of black identity necessary to confront Colonialism, racism and Western imperialism. Cesaire rejects assimilation and ideologically articulates,

My negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against the clamor of the day, my negritude is not a leukoma of dead liquid over the earth's death eye, my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral, it takes root in the flesh of the soil, it takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky (58).

Damas (1937) in his *Pigment* provides an ideological perspectives. For him, negritude is a categorical rejection of an assimilation that negated black spontaneity as well as a defence for his condition as a black and a Guyanese. In his poem, 'Limbe', Damas articulates negritude,

Give me black, my black dolls
 So that I may play with them
 The naïve genius of my instinct in the darkness
 Of its laws, once I have recovered
 My courage and audacity and
 Become myself once more (39)

Senghor conceptualized negritude as that which promotes a quest for the authentic self, knowledge of self, and a discovery of African beliefs, values, institutions and civilization. Negritude

implies the rehabilitation of the black man, the affirmation of African personality. Negritude, Senghor asserts,

Is the consciousness of being black, the simple recognition of the fact, implying acceptance and responsibility of one's destiny as a black man, one's history and one's culture. It is the refusal to assimilate, to see oneself in the 'other'. Refusal of the other is affirmation of the self.

It is not only the *trios Peres*, the troika-founders of negritude that have offered ideological perspectives of negritude but also other African critics and advocates of negritude have provided theoretical framework . For instance, Egudu looks at it from a more panoramic and metaphysical view,

As a concept, negritude means the black man's 'being' in its cultural, spiritual, psychological and physical aspects, it is based on racial consciousness, though not racist, and it has political emancipation as one of its aims, though it is not a political concept (35).

Julio sees negritude as simply 'a process of social emancipation' (47). Lewis Nkosi refers to it as,

A movement of political revolt against the tyranny of western culture over those who were colonized by Europe; as an attempt to restore pride and dignity to those demanded of either hope or racial identity.... Negritude was primarily a movement of political reactions (80).

Dathorne contends that 'negritude meant a nostalgic glance to the African past and; as a corollary to this, a denunciation of all that was wrong with French colonial endeavour' (243). In all, negritude is unbridled desire and concerted effort towards psychological, physical, religious, cultural, political and any other form of liberation and empowerment.



Criticisms against Negritude Movement

Many African authors and critics seem not to have been in favour with negritude movement and its ideological perspectives. Non-African and African critics attack negritude on the ground of its 'irrelevance' and extremities. John-Paul Sartre in the preface to Senghor's *Anthologie de la nouvelle poesie negre et malgache* calls negritude an 'anti-racist racism' (4). Rene Menil, a Marxist philosopher and co-founder of Martinique Review, *Tropiques*, considered Negritude as 'a form of exoticism and self-consciousness sustaining French imperialism'. Kesteloot credited negritude with the 'birth of French Caribbean literature' as well as critiqued its fetishization of blackness and identity politics. Edward writes that 'Senghor's existentialist definition of negritude was challenged by African scholars and philosophers such as Marcien Towa, Stanilas Adotevi and Paulin Hountondji' (23). Other African literary critics like Soyinka, Lewis Nkosi, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Dathorne have challenged not only the approach but also the content and excesses of negritude. Wole Soyinka views negritude as reinforcing colonial ideology, a stance that automatically places black intellectuals on the defensive. For Soyinka 'a tiger does not proclaim its tigerritude, it jumps on its prey' (22). Lewis Nkosi writes that 'one sees in these [negritude poems] literary ideology which may be as crippling to young writers as the high-handed dictates of a cultural commissar in communist countries' (88). Ezekiel Mphahlele considers it as 'sheer romanticism, often it is mawkish and strikes a pose' (56).

Importantly, Negritudism is not all about negativism as projected above. Other African literary critics have seen it in a positive light. Egudu has cautioned that,

In discussing negritude in Africa poetry, one should be guided by what the founders have pointed out as its elements: the

value of the civilization of the African world. And these 'values' are to be found in the African culture, the African human person, the African world view, and the African spirit of humanity (35).

This caution is imperative because ideologies like negritude and Pan-African movements seem to be 'unifying bond of Africity' (Karen, 35), which was broken as a result of Atlantic slave trade and the African colonial experience. It is in this light that Irele asserts that,

Negritude and black intellectuals represent an extensive exploration of black condition in both historical setting and in its direction towards an ultimate significance (68).

Dathorne does not see any reason why Negritudism should be dismissed as irrelevant because negritude poems 'expressed common concern for the predicament of their [poets'] race and the legacy of a colonial bondage' (219). More importantly, Finn tells us 'they expressed deeper sentiment of exile and suffering which Europe caused them' (67). For instance, Finn describes Damas' *Pigment* as 'synthesis of revolt, anguish, the affirmation of black values and dignity and the negation of cerebral white-washing' (67).

Negritude and Modern African Literature

Despite criticisms against Negritude, the movement had influenced and still influences African literature. This fact owes to the claim of John and Clive that,

The spirit of African civilization animates, consciously or unconsciously, the best negro artist and writers today, both in Africa and America. Insofar as they are aware of African culture and draw inspiration from it, they rise to international

status. Insofar as they turn their backs on Mother Africa, they degenerate and are without interest (82).

Indeed, many Francophone African writers contributed to Negritude literature as they produced works focused on the plight of their people. Among them are Mongo Beti, David Diop, Birago Diop, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Paul Nizer, Sembene Ousmane and Guy Tirolien. The 1970s witnessed a dramatic shift in style where writers like Ahmadou Kourouma of Cote d'Ivoire introduced his native Malinke linguistic features into French. Younger generations of writers are creating a new type of language that draws the readers into African daily life; for instance, Congolese Daniel Biyaoula's *Alley Without Exist*, Mauritian Carl de Souza's *The House Walking Towards the Ocean*, and Cameroonian Calixte Boyala's *The Lost Honors*.

Anglophone literary culture is not devoid of the Negritude influence. Harrow refers to literature – novels, plays and poems, of Anglophone countries of 1950s and 60s as 'literatures of testimony' (15). Novels such as Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* are examples of literature of testimony because they attempt to respond to the derogatory representations of, and myths about African cultures and are concerned with representing African reality and valorizing African culture.

Negritude Influence on Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Amadi's *The Concubine*

Negritude, we have emphasized is the assertion of self-worth and identity, a return to original cultural roots and a correction of misconceived ideas about the black continent and black people. *Things Fall Apart* and *The Concubine* are two novels remarkably

influenced by the ideologies of Negritude. They are primarily meant to change the negative images or misrepresentations of Africa as done in works like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939), and Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan*. In these works, Africans are regarded as savage, uncivilized, primitive people of no culture but with a fetish religion. It was the initiation of Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* and Amadi in *The Concubine* to not only repudiate the western stereotypes of Africa and Africans but also to place at the centre of their narratives, an African living and breathing in an African language or milieu where even the weather and the cold wind, and the harmattan are indigenous and culture specific, as well the role of the god in determining the course of events for mortal man and his temporal world. The novels explored the settings of Omakachi (*The Concubine*), and Umuofia (*Things Fall Apart*) as microcosm of the macro African Society.

It is vital to reminiscence the fact that Christian missions and the Colonial Schools backed by the coercive force of the Colonial state were the elementary agents of transformation. The civilized, western-educated Africans were the targets of the worst form of Colonial racism. This led to a desire of reformation and re-orientation of consciousness among the educated. Africans through their writings, which saw the origin of movements like Negritude, African Aesthetic and political Nationalisms made independence possible. The cultural-artistic decolonization, this fashioning of creative originality from both indigenous and borrowed materials, became phenomenal in its success (Schwarz and Sangeeta, 273-274).

Achebe's novels focus on the tradition of Igbo society. Smith contents that 'all his works... voice a concern for the loss of native culture in the flood of imported European values' (233),

particularly his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe tells us most recently before his demise that *Things Fall Apart* is ‘the history of Colonization’ (*There was A Country*, 19). Beyond colonization, however, is the projection of the Igbo people’s culture and world view. Achebe devotes more than half of the novel to portray Igbo society with all its myths, legends, beliefs, customs, superstitions and taboos which are deeply rooted in the consciousness of the people. In fact, with *Things fall Apart*, he brings back the entire society into the folds of history. The central character, Okonkwo, is a staunch champion of the Igbo tradition. His tragic downfall symbolizes the fall and disintegration of an ancient society. The African man depends and lives closely and in harmony with nature. They respect seasonal changes with an almost religious fervour, preparing themselves for the best and the worst. The myths and beliefs associated with season compel them to perform certain rites and rituals which shape their consciousness and their daily lives. They even have their judicial system – a village council to settle disputes and punish offenders. The daily life of the people is governed by the belief in gods and goddesses whose omnipotence they dare not challenge lest they incur their wrath. Ancestral worship as well as respect for the old is deeply ingrained in their psyche as they must worship the deities. In fact, the novel’s appeal lies in Achebe’s portrayal of the communal life of the Igbo. He brings to attention the weakness of these people, the ruthless laws of tribal society, its treatment of women and children and the custom of discarding twins. Such subtle practices observed by the society are deftly woven into the fabric of the text to lend them the legitimacy of a tribal way of life.

Things Fall Apart reveals culturally that the Igbo community is ordered around a hierarchy of male elders who serve as collective leaders in both the secular and spiritual realms. These elders

(*Ndichie*) consist of respected men and achievers in the land. The ancestral spirits command respect and fear from members of the Community. In an incident which warrants the intervention of the *Egwugwu* (ancestral spirits), the Umuofia Community assembles in the village square to hear their [spirits'] verdicts. The verdict of the ancestral spirits is final and binding on the disputing factions.

In *Things Fall Apart*, festivals and ceremonies like New Yam festival, serve to reaffirm commonality. The New Yam festival plays significant role in the lives of the people and the gods,

...it was an occasion for giving thanks to Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility.... to honour the earth goddess and the ancestral spirit of the clan. New Yams could not be eaten until some had first been offered to these powers. Man and woman, young and old, looked forward to the New Yam festival because it began the season of plenty – the New Year (26).

Another aspect of culture that Achebe projected in *Things Fall Apart* is that of marriage, its processes and its phenomenal essence. During marriage rites, friends and families of the two families are present. It shows that marriage among the Igbo people is not just between the bride and bridegroom, the entire community is involved. The bond which is cemented with the marriage lasts beyond the ceremony and breeds enduring goodwill between the relevant communities. Chapter twelve gives us the pomp and pageantry that follow marriage. The details make it abundantly clear that marriage is not a brief, one day affair, but an enduring ritual which binds people, families and communities, and turns strangers into not only friends but also kinsmen and kinswomen.



The Umuofia people believe in reincarnation and the ancestral spirit and see life as a continuous process even after death. Achebe tells us,

The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at festival and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors.... A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites, which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors (86).

This belief summarizes the African cosmology especially with regard to religion. Metuh asserts that 'the conception of life and death for the Igbo is one of cyclic process in the sense that death is not the terminal, the end point of human life, rather it is only a phase in the continuing round of human existence' (107). Onwuatiegwu adds that 'the Igbo conceive life as cyclic. It is a process of birth, death and rebirth; life is equally communitarian in nature...' (41). And, Asouzu insists that 'a human person... has therefore a destiny beyond mere corporeal existence' (149). In all, *Things Fall Apart* mirrors Igbo cosmology, sensibilities, culture and world view.

Amadi's *The Concubine* is another novel influenced by negritude which reflects African village life, customs, beliefs and religious practices as they were before contact with the western world. It is vital to state that unlike *Things Fall Apart*, there is no mention of western influence in *The Concubine*. However, the novel is about the cultural norms of the Omokachi people and that cultural fervour gives it timeless quality. The rhythms of village life and the routines are immutable. The plot of the novel reveals a doomed love. It revolves around a young beautiful human and well-behaved Ihuoma who belongs to Nigerian's Igbo ethnic group. Her plight involves her past life when she was said to be

the wife of the mythical Sea King deity. This gives her great status in the present but portends doom for any mortal man who seeks her hand in marriage. For this reason, Ihuoma is widowed three times as a result of the wrath of the Sea King toward those who would usurp his bride. This does not deter Ekwueme, who passionately falls in love with Ihuoma. Ekwueme is, however, betrothed to Ahurole since childhood. He later marries her according to tradition but the marriage does not endure even with the love portion from Ahurole. Ekwueme opts for Ihuoma, but, like all other husbands of Ihuoma, he is doomed to death.

The dilemma that confront and finally destroy Amadi's heroines and heroes derive entirely from the beliefs, practices and events of their indigenous culture. Beyond the destruction of his characters, Amadi projects an ideal society with enviable culture. It is a society where beauty is measured not only by the woman's features or looks, but more importantly, by the innate characteristics of the woman. Ihuoma, whose beauty attracts all men and women in the villages of Omokachi, Omigwe and even Chiolu, maintains rational behaviour, intelligence and social decorum. Ihuoma is a model of perfect beauty and morality,

She was young; it was easy to reckon her age. Ihuoma's complexion was that of an ant-hill. Her features were smoothly rounded.... Ihuoma's smiles were disarming. Perhaps the narrow gap in the upper row of her white teeth did the trick. At that time, a gap in the teeth was fashionable. Ihuoma's gap was natural and other women envied her. Her beauty is the scale of all women who want to be considered beautiful. Everybody envies her. Everybody wants to be her. Further, in truth, she wanted to gaze at herself. That she was beautiful she had no doubt, but that did not make her arrogant. She was sympathetic, gentle and reserved (15).

These characteristics of Ihuoma place her on the pedestal of the tribal and communal centre of exemplary womanhood and motherhood. For the male, the concept of handsomeness and strength is measured not just by looks but by his performance in wrestling, in hunting, and willingness to go into battle with the machete, always ready to defend his village against the enemies and the ability to maintain his wife and raise children. Physical deformities and incapacity or abnormality are considered ugly. A man who is not able to win wrestling matches is denigrated and labelled weak. Madume, though considered a successful man at the age of early thirties, was not considered strong. He was not a good wrestler, although he danced well to the beating of drums.

One of the most elaborate cultural traditions practised in the novel is the custom of marriage. It is almost as we have it in *Things Fall Apart*. Mbiti states that,

Marriage is a complex affair with economic and religious aspects which often overlap so firmly that they cannot be separated from one another... For Africans, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet to be born. Marriage is a duty, a requirement... he who does not participate in it is a curse to the community, he is a rebel, and a law breaker, he is not only abnormal, but 'underhuman'. Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person concerned has rejected the society and the society rejects him in return (58).

It is the awareness of the above facts that makes parents highly concerned about the marriage of their children. One significant point about marriage in *The Concubine* is that a child (male or female) can be betrothed and nothing would stop the marriage of betrothed persons. This is the case of Ekwueme and Ahurole.

Ekwe is five years old while Ahurole is eight years when they are engaged. Love plays little or no role in such a marriage but the wishes of the parents and the circumstances surrounding the betrothal prevail. All these combine to make marriage processes and rites very elaborate in Omokachi and the surrounding villages.

Another custom that is highly elaborate is the observance of death rites of a member of a family and community and the superstitions involved. When Ihuoma's first and legitimate husband, Emenike, died owing to lock chest, Wigwe village mourns for eight days for his demise. People show much care for their neighbours. He is buried within his rich compound, preferably his backyard. It is believed that his spirit will protect his property and his family. All the long and elaborate burial ritual is hinged on belief in reincarnation as in the case of Umuofia in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The people hinge their lives, successes, loves and fears on the spirit of the ancestors and their gods. Each part of the earth is ruled by a god. The gods, Osundare contends, do 'not only control human beings and their affairs, they also direct the plot and events mediated through them' (102). Often mentioned and feared by the villagers are the god of thunder, Amadioha, Ojukwu, a god of the air and the forest, and Ani, god of earth. Each person is ruled by his personal spirit-god. No one can go against the spirit but the spirit can go against the person like what happened in the wrestling between Emenike and Madume. At the individual level, however, the *Chi*, interpreted by some as guardian angel, appears to play a more active role in the affairs of any individual. The belief is that a person's *Chi* has direct hand in his or her affairs; the Igbo idea of destiny and free will is bound up with *Chi*.

The practice of the medicine men is accepted as holy, healthy and healing. The medicine man may pray to the gods on behalf of

the people; he acts as a village doctor, he acts as a prophet who can see the future. Both Anyikwa and Agwoturumbe see the impending death of Ekwueme. Both are afraid of the Sea king, who, legitimately owns the sea goddess, Ihuoma, who chose to be human. Hence, the medicine man is as ubiquitous as the needs of the people. In all, *The Concubine* deals with tough cultural subjects of tradition, expectation, doomed love, and rules of the society. It also preoccupies itself with longing and love as well as respect and what effect all of those can have on humans. Finally, it concerns itself with religion, divinations and appeasement of spirits.

Conclusion

Negritude movement and ideology is one of the movements that attracted wide ranging criticism. Yet, a well-meaning and intellectually honest critic would not, in any way, underrate the fundamental role of Negritude to the consequential emergence of modern African literature, not only in poetic genre, but also in prose and drama genres. In fact, Negritude is germane and sine qua non to any discussion on African literature. This is evident in *Things Fall Apart* and *The Concubine*. A cursory glance into Africa's epochal and historical experiences would factually enable us to bear with whatever the excesses and romanticism the negritude founders have been accused of. The undeniable fact remains that it has played, is playing and will continue to play a significant role in discussions of contemporary African literature.

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