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African Literature (Francophone)

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AFRICAN LITERATURE (FRANCOPHONE). The term “Francophone African literature” is widely used to designate sub-Saharan African literature written in French by authors living in Africa or abroad. It derives from *Francophonie*, the nineteenth-century neologism coined by the French geographer Onésime Reclus (1837–1916). In the African context, the concept gained relevance in the 1960s under the aegis of Léopold Senghor and Habib Bourguiba, two African presidents who advocated the creation of an organization linking all the nations sharing the French language and culture. In a way, their idea was a response to the creation of the British Commonwealth (1965), an organization gathering former British colonies. Thereafter, a series of Francophone institutions were created: ACCT (Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique) in 1970, CIRTEF (Conseil International des Radios-Télévisions d’Expression Française) in 1977, AIMF (Association Internationale des Maires Francophones) in 1979. With the emergence and consolidation of literary writings in Francophone countries, it was worth classifying and studying these new authors and their work. At various stages, critics started speaking of Quebecois literature, Belgian Francophone literature, Maghrebian literature, French Caribbean literature, and Francophone African literature. Although some critics have expressed their uneasiness in defining African literature along the Anglophone-Francophone linguistic divide reminiscent of colonial history, Francophone African literature is widely used as a descriptive category.

During the colonial era, Francophone African literature was dominated by the *négritude* movement, although some critics trace its beginnings to René Maran’s publication of *Batouala* (1921). In the 1930s, black students from the Caribbean and African French colonies rebelled against the assimilation policies of their education and vied to revalorize their common African cultural roots, which colonization had systematically devalued. Aimé Césaire, Léon-Gontran Damas, and Senghor led this movement, which not only galvanized black students but appealed to prominent members of the French literary establishment, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, André Gide, Marcel Griaule, Michel Leiris, and André Breton. From this revolt rose a whole body of writings (especially poetry) that celebrated the African roots of black cultures long considered manifestations of barbarism. Sartre’s “Black Orpheus,” the preface to Senghor’s *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache d’expression française* (1948), highlighted the main ideas of this literary movement. The review *Présence africaine*, published in both French and English, was created to serve as one of the main means of transmission (1947). This collectivization of suffering in the name of the race fostered highly visible cultural activities, including two meetings of the Congress of Black African Writers in Paris (1956) and in Rome (1959); it nevertheless showed weaknesses in accounting for the wide range of black

experience with the traumas of colonialism. Negritude literature focused on extolling blackness while denouncing derogatory colonial policies; Anglophone writers concentrated their attention on the main differences between Western and local cultures. This difference in perception is often illustrated by Wole Soyinka's terse reply to the narcissistic tendency of negritude: "the tiger doesn't proclaim its tigerness; it jumps on its prey." In the 1950s, novels by Francophone writers were published, including those by Camara Laye, Mongo Beti, Ousmane Sembène, and Ferdinand Oyono.

Decolonization was a triumph for negritude writers who, in many instances, played important roles in the struggle for freedom. In the earlier days of independence, the need to denounce the forced assimilation of African masses and the positive re-assessment of the so-called primitive cultures gave way to close scrutiny of the elite's performance. When euphoria subsided, issues forced a redirection of energy on pressing problems besieging new nations in need of consolidation. Hamidou Kane, Ahmadou Kourouma, and Yambo Ouloguem were among the prominent figures in this new literary phenomenon.

In the postindependence era, the urgency of problems facing the new nations created the need to scrutinize one's specific location. Therefore, Caribbean writers and critics gradually realized the importance of focusing on their "Caribbeanness" (such as Edouard Glissant in *Le Discours antillais*, 1981), resulting from a sedimentation of elements drawn from African, European, and Asian cultures. Going even further than Glissant, the Caribbean tandem of Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant (*Eloge de la créolité*, 1989) claimed the era of *créolité*, whereby attachment to their creole culture took precedence over a far-removed romantic Africa. Likewise, African writers went beyond racial issues to deal with problems specific to their communities. In their case, the use of European languages has raised questions on the essence of African literature and on being African. Some critics, such as the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, saw the Africans' experiences as unique to all and suggested their subsequent writings as falling into two categories, namely Europhone and African literatures.

Since independence, Francophone African literature has evolved along a trajectory similar to its English counterpart. In the 1960s, many writers dealt with the clash of cultures, disillusionment with the native elites, and the latter's gross mismanagement of public affairs. This trend culminated into what is known as "Afropessimism." The 1980s saw the rise of women writers, pioneered by the Senegalese novelist Mariama Bâ, whose *Une Si Longue Lettre* (1981) marked the watershed moment when women found and used their own voices. Award-winning authors such as Aminata Sow Fall, Werewere Liking, Calixthe Beyala, Ken Bugul, and Véronique Tadjo have become familiar names in literary circles. In the 1990s and 2000s, reflecting the multidimensional crisis rocking the continent, Francophone writers such as Kourouma, Dongala, Bugul, Tadjo, and Monenembo have focused on the fate of the child, not as perceived in Laye's *L'Enfant noir* but as victimized by a deceitful adult world bent on exploring his innocence. Francophone literature has grown in scope with seasoned writers and refined works in drama, poetry, novels, essays, and folktales. However, as in earlier years, society remains its main focus.

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