

Re-Reading of Agency and Eroticism in Senghor's 'Be Not Amazed' and 'Totem'**Anakoro, Canice Ihentuge (PhD) & Unoroh, Solomon Ogheneochuko (PhD)**

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Email: anakoroci@lasued.edu.ng / eaglecreativepress2006@yahoo.comORCID Registration: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7187-7700>**Email:** unorohso@lasued.edu.ngORCID Registration: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9359-0112>**Abstract**

This paper is a critical re-reading of agency and eroticism in Léopold Sédar Senghor's influential poems, 'Be Not Amazed' and 'Totem'. Historically, Senghor's Negritude poetry has been critiqued for prioritizing African identity and romanticizing the black female form as a submissive emblem of motherland. Nevertheless, this paper looks at the complex interface of self-determination and longing. Therefore, the critical reduction of Senghorian eroticism to a simple aesthetic nostalgia presents the gap addressed by the researcher in this paper. This exposes the obscurity of poetic role of being an active struggle and psychological reclamation. It is, consequently, rooted on a theoretical framework of Negritude aesthetics integrated with postcolonial feminist theory, demonstrating that eroticism serves not as a passive retreat, but as a dynamic exercise of agency. Uncovered through an analysis of the thematic and structural significance of both poems, the paper investigates how Senghor uses sensual imagery to reconstruct Afrocentric prejudice. On the whole, this paper attains a basic purpose of reframing Senghor's poetic eroticism as a fundamental, decolonial device. It exposes the poet's subversion of common notions of submissive stereotypes and the sensual landscapes associated with Senghor's poetic corpus, especially poems 'Be Not Amazed' and 'Totem'. This paper confirms the prevalence of the complex, self-actualising African perception that dynamically contradicts colonial objectification in order to salvage both physical and cultural self-sufficiency.

Keywords: Agency, Eroticism, Negritude, Postcolonialism, Senghor**Introduction:**

This paper on two Negritude poems of Léopold Sédar Senghor is presented through the lens of political resistance, cultural nationalism and anti-colonial perspective. It is observed that these conventional frameworks frequently compress the elaborate dimensions of selfhood, particularly regarding how African subjects negotiate domestic desires and helplessness. Accordingly, this paper proposes a critical re-reading of agency and eroticism in two Negritude poems of Senghor, namely, 'Be Not Amazed' and 'Totem'. It seeks to expose the dialectical apprehension between communal political position and private existential

desires. By moving the analytical spotlight from macro-political confrontation to micro-subjective experiences, this paper investigates how Senghor utilises poetic structure to assert a nuanced African subjectivity that is concurrently erotically nuanced and politically self-sufficient.

Scholarship on Senghor's poetic oeuvre has been unique and passionate. Championed by literary analysts such as Abiola Irele (1977) and Lilyan Kesteloot (1986), this has historically prioritised the ideological and ancestral elements of Négritude in his poetry, regularly casting Senghor's exploitation of African motifs as essentialist instruments for cultural recovery. Modern theorists such as Diagne (2011) have, on another pedestal, been challenged to rescue Senghor from charges of biological essentialism, highlighted his philosophies of cultural hybridity, throwing up an imperative critical gap regarding how the physical body and carnal desire function as sites of self-determination. The problem addressed by this paper is, thus, the persistent critical omission of the intimate body as a site of agency and eroticism in Senghor's poetry, where 'Be Not Amazed' and 'Totem' are regularly misread either as mere celebrations of romanticised African womanhood or as an uncritical veneration of her ancestral heritage. This paper sees this scholarly neglect as a reduction of the intricacies of Senghor's poetic subjects. It further considers it a critical failure to apprehend the fact of the expression of erotic desire and the concealment of the totem as part of poetic sophistication and assertions of agency that defy both colonial objectification and restrictive nationalist puritanism.

The dense structural and thematic progression of Senghor's verse offers the vital background for this paper as both selected poems showcase the deep negotiation between helplessness and authority. In 'Be Not Amazed', the poetic voice insists on the recognition of an intricate and resolute inner life that refuses to be simplified or subdued by the external world, by means of the language of passion, bridging the gap between the self and the other. Conversely, 'Totem' dramatises the inevitability of both mental and spiritual concealment. The poem, hence, conceals and defends the innate mysteries of African traditions from the insidious, analytical gaze of the Western world. This paper, consequently, views these poems as dynamic, living texts that leverage eroticism and strategic opacity to assert a wholly comprehended, multi-dimensional African agency, instead, of contextualising them as inert artifacts of twentieth-century anti-colonialism.

Theoretical Framework

The paper notes an interface of postcolonial identity and personal affect in mid-twentieth-century African literature which remains the predominant model for critical inquiry, regarding how pioneers of the Négritude movement (Césaire, 1939/2001; Senghor, 1945/1964; Bâ, 1973), navigated the intricacies of cultural recovery. A leading architect of Négritude, Senghor prominently championed a cultural attitude that commemorated African rhythm, emotion and essence. Most early studies on Senghor poetry, often classified his poetry into strictly anti-colonial resistance or essentialist stereotypes. However, modern critical continues to insist on a nuanced reassessment of those poetic works. This paper is a critical re-reading of agency and eroticism in two of his remarkable poems, 'Be Not Amazed' and 'Totem'. It views his engagement with craving and ancestral heritage beyond the traditional notions as passivity or pure nostalgia, noting how these poetic spaces function as dynamic sites of self-determination, psychic negotiation, and corporal self-sufficiency.

The principal intention of this study is to scrutinise Senghor's reconfiguration of the concepts of agency and eroticism, using them to confront both colonial annihilation of African subjects as well as conventional, limiting readings of Negritude. Through the sampling of these two poems, 'Be Not Amazed' and 'Totem' for close analysis, this paper seeks to demonstrate that erotic longing and ancestral mysticism are not commonly restricted or simply ornamental elements. Through this method, the study sees them as unified devices by which the colonised masses or subjects claim a total, unfragmented humanity. Again, the study seeks to bridge the gulf between the political and the personal in Senghor's poetic corpus, and to demonstrate that intimate expressions of excitement and ancestral reverence are, in themselves, profound acts of political insolence and drive to self-autonomy. For these dynamics to be actualised and effectual, this investigation adopts a dual theoretical framework combining Postcolonial Theory (Ngũgĩ, 1986; Bhabha, 1994; Fanon, 1961/2004) and Black Feminist/Queer Erotic Frameworks, particularly relying on Audre Lorde's (2007) conceptualisation of "the erotic as power". Postcolonial theory offers the essential devices to take apart the Eurocentric binaries that historically alienated the mind from the body, and the sacred from the profane, in African literary analysis. Hence, the investigation goes beyond sheer carnality by concurrently, integrating a liberal view of the erotic. It frames desire in Senghor's poetry as an internal, creative, and spiritual force that restores the capacity for feeling, acting, and self-definition, thereby operating as a vital locus of agency for the subaltern subject.

Despite widespread studies on Senghor's political philosophy, a continual problem in existing literary analysis is the propensity to over-politicise his work at the expense of its multifarious affective and sensual dimensions. Again, there is a gap in disregarding his romanticism as naive essentialism. Conventional scholarship often ignore how subversive agency is constructed within his intimate and spiritual lines, regularly untying the visceral passion of 'Be Not Amazed' from the guarded, ancestral consciousness of 'Totem'. This critical disintegration creates a challenging gap in perception regarding how emotional helplessness and spiritual mystery combine to form a resilient shield against colonial hostility. By offering a combined re-reading mode that positions agency and eroticism not as second-rate themes, the paper addresses this problem, seeing as the foundational catalysts of Senghor's decolonial vision.

Review of Relevant Literature

Generally, a review of literature on Senghor's poetry commonly focuses on his two-fold engagement with African cultural identity and the intricacies of human emotion. Concerning his notable poems 'Be Not Amazed' and 'Totem', critical conversations often touch on how the dual forces of agency and eroticism overlap within the structure of Negritude. This section of the paper scrutinises how scholars have conventionally read these concepts, exposing the need and style for a nuanced re-reading that places the poet's pre-occupations not just as inactive emblems of cultural pleasure, but as vigorous participants navigating private and shared liberty. Historically, literature on Negritude has compartmentalised his themes, perceiving poems like 'Totem' by launching an anthropological or anti-colonial analysis. Such reading also treats poetic pieces like 'Be Not Amazed' as typical passionate lyrics. However, this paper mediates by positing that Senghor employs eroticism as a critical medium for agency. By closely re-reading these poems, the study seeks to show how the sensual component of man and the ancestral spirit collaborate to claim a self-determined African subjectivity that resists colonial domination.

The essential apprehension of the repossession of African sensual quintessence from the colonial gape remains the fallacy of existing scholarship on Senghor's poetic corpus. This sums up the themes predominate the analysis and reviews of 'Be Not Amazed'. Hence, most critics observe that colonial dissertation historically justify the spate of colonial subjugation by hyper-sexualising or dehumanising the Black body. Notably, early scholarship on Senghor, therefore, posits that his romanticism risked submitting to exoticism. On the other hand, modern studies propose that his celebration of the erotic is a deliberate counter-strategy. In 'Be Not Amazed', the speaker's close susceptibility is re-interpreted by modern scholars as a fundamental act of self-possession and emotional autonomy, changing the private location into a site of political confrontation. Conversely, the poem 'Totem' has met the critical investigation tallied with spiritual and ancestral agency. This is the bedrock of most analyses on the poem. Thus, literature on it is deeply centred on the internal tension amid assimilation and native African legacy. Scholars have extensively debated the emblematic significance of the "totem" hidden in the speaker's veins, often seeing it as a mental burden forced by ancestral anticipations. Additional current post-colonial studies, nevertheless, transform this paradigm, signifying that the totem represents a covert, shielding agency. The concealed nature of the totem is progressively more understood not as fear of colonial judgment, but as a strategic conservation of consecrated power and cultural sovereignty.

Moreover, a major gap in the current literature hinges on the fusion of these two dimensions, that is, the physical-erotic and the spiritual-political. Thus, with the traditional scholars engaging in the analysis of 'Totem' for its ancestral politics and 'Be Not Amazed' for its romantic aesthetics, few have combined how both poems utilise the concept of "vital force" (*force vitale*), a central principle of Senghor's philosophy. Current literature reveals a budding harmony that in African cosmology, in which the spiritual and the sensual are interrelated. The paper builds upon this fragment of scholarship, arguing that the erotic passion in 'Be Not Amazed' is driven by the very ancestral force guarded in 'Totem'. In the long run, the literature regarding Senghor's poetry reveals a rich, developing discourse from inflexible political readings to flowing, multi-dimensional interpretations. By dealing with the critical rift between the ideological and the sensual, this reading bridges an indispensable gap in Negritude scholarship. This review accentuates that a re-reading of agency and eroticism in 'Be Not Amazed' and 'Totem' is not a mere an artistic exercise. It is an essential repossession of holistic Black humanity, affirming that for Senghor, the liberation of the mind is inseparable from the liberation of the flesh.

Data Analysis

A critical analysis of Senghor's of 'be not amazed' and 'totem'

This analysis of Senghor's poetry, and specifically 'Be Not Amazed' and 'Totem', would centre, among other things, on how the relevant themes overlap with Négritude philosophy, post-colonial identity and cultural reclamation. This entails the reclamation of subjectivity and agency; the eroticism as cultural and spiritual vitality; as well as the tension between hidden ancestral agency and visible identity. Both poems exemplifies the poet is concerned with the reclamation of the Black populace from imperialist objectification. This is seen in the dichotomy of the "white gaze" versus self-definition.

In ‘Be Not Amazed’, the speaker addresses an outsider, who is definitely an Europeanised mindset. He asserts control over how African beauty and culture are perceived. His choice of interlocutor is a radical act of reclamation. By overtly targeting an outsider or a deeply Europeanised mindset, the poem acknowledges the reality of an objectifying perspective only to actively subvert it. Instead of allowing the Black subject to be inactively consumed as an alien artifact or an inferior “Other”, the speaker assumes an authoritative position. The command “Be not amazed” serves as a rhetorical border, indicating that African identity, beauty, and cultural expressions do not exist for the validation or entertainment of the colonial gaze:

*Be not amazed beloved, if sometimes my song grows dark.
If I exchange the lyrical reed for the Kham or the tama
And the green scent of the rice fields for swiftly galloping
war drums. I hear the threats of ancient deities, the furious
cannonade of the god. (lines 1-4)*

In these opening lines, Senghor launches a dramatic tonal movement that breaks away from pastoral and romanticised expectations of African art. The lines sum up the foundation of the Negritude movement which aimed at dismantling colonial feelings of inferiority. It proves that African cultural forms possess their own autonomous political agency and emotional depth, operating entirely on their own terms. The poet mentions “ancient deities” and this helps in re-centring spiritual power, shifting it away from colonial frameworks and back toward ancestral authority. This signals that African art answered to its own heritage, instead of external approval. There is also the metaphor of war drums. This replaces the peaceful “green scent of the rice fields” with “swiftly galloping war drums” that transforms the music from something aesthetic or submissive into an active, urgent call to resistance. The speaker also uses the “lyrical reed” to represent conventional, harmonious European poetic styles or soft, exotic melodies that might soothe a colonial audience. By exchanging it for the *Kham* or the *tama* (traditional West African string and drum instruments), the speaker deliberately reclaims native means of self-expression. The poem refuses to present African culture as a tender, alien landscape intended to amuse or comfort the Western gaze. It rather declares that African identity can “grow dark” and challenging when protecting its autonomy.

In the poem, the bard positions his artistic purpose entirely toward his “beloved”, an emblem of both the African woman and the African motherland.. The “glowing voice” honors “**black beauty**” naturally. The looming pain and twilight emphasise that this artistic act is cherished, predetermined, and totally self-reliant inside the society. There are references to reclaiming of the purpose of black aesthetic praise: “And you will weep in the twilight for the glowing voice that sang your black beauty”. By framing the praise of Black identity as an internal dialogue between the African bard and the African subject, the colonial gaze is utterly de-centred and rendered irrelevant. One implication is that African beauty and heritage do not require confirmation from external colonisers to exist or hold worthwhile. Its conservation is an act of love and collective survival of all Africans. This serves as a direct counter-narrative to colonial systems that sought to systematically distort or destroy African aesthetics.

The poem ‘Tortem’ is equally a foundational text of the Négritude movement, emphasising African identity, beauty, and cultural expressions. It also exhibits the sacred internalisation of identity:

*I must hide in the intimate depths of my veins
The Ancestor storm-dark skinned, shot with lightning and thunder
And my guardian animal, I must hide him
Lest I smash through the boom of scandal (lines 1-4)*

A poem of seven lines in its original structure, it exposes a profound subversion of the colonial gaze. The speaker uses a vocabulary of deliberate concealment (“hide”, “innermost veins”) to build an dense mental shelter. The ancestor is described using majestic, unpredictable metaphors, including “storm-dark skinned”, “lightning and thunder”, which openly defies the reductive, submissive, or “primitive” tropes consigned to African history by European colonisers. The reference to a “guardian animal” invokes totemism, a spiritual milieu that Western anthropology historically categorised as primitive fetishism. Rather than showing this spirituality to be commodified, observed, or judged, the poet hides it away. Hence, by highlighting African cosmic spirituality as cherished, inner scenery, the poet avows that African cultural forms do not need the permission, comprehension, or validation of the coloniser to stay alive. The “scandal” that would break out implies that if the raw, un-assimilated power of African heritage were openly exhibited, it would terrify or dislocate the unbending, Eurocentric communal order. Cultivating this secret, internal resistance becomes a guard against intellectual and cultural assimilation.

There is also the subverting of the colonial ego. This section sees in the poem, shifts from an entity that must be hidden to an active shelter.

*Lest I smash through the boom of scandal:
He is my faithful blood and demands fidelity
Protecting my naked pride against
Myself and all the insolence of lucky races. (lines 4-7).*

The totem represents a “faithful blood” requiring “fidelity”, creating an unyielding task to historical roots that cannot be negotiated away for the goodwill of the imperialist. The expression “naked pride” discards any colonial attempts to clothe, “civilise” or tame or domestic African identity. Remarkably, the ironic tag “lucky races” becomes a piercing critique of European powers. This shows colonial supremacy not as an emblem of cultural advantage, but instead, as a historical blow of conceited fortune. The poem totally shifts the forceful power of the colonial gaze, through the placement of the African heritage as the shield against the “insolence” or arrogance of the West. Here, the poet denies the coloniser the position of a stylish arbiter. Hence, African identity and beauty are made plausible and viewed as self-validating, self-sufficient and blocked off from outside curiosity. This institutes a vital political implication for the Négritude movement: true liberation begins with mental autonomy. It entails reclaiming one’s internal self-esteem so that it remains entirely unconcerned about Western endorsement.

Both poems, display eroticism as cultural and spiritual vitality. This is seen in the sacred and the sensual constitutions of language and contexts of the poems. In Senghor’s work, the erotic is hardly seen as just physical; it is deeply spiritual and attached to the life force (*force vitale*) of African cosmology. The poem sees the Black body as the standard of beauty, thereby, subverting the colonial supremacy that historically imposed Eurocentric

standards of beauty and positioned the Black body as inferior or invisible. Senghor expressly defies this by elevating the African woman to an archetype of divine, unassailable perfection. The speaker, who is the “Bard” of Blackness, warns the audience and the beloved to “be not amazed” by the irresistible profusion of praise he pours upon her. By defining his poetic voice as the “glorious” or “purple voice of your bard”, he views the act of singing about Black beauty as a sacred, public duty. The poet insists that no one should be astonished by the enormity of his adoration and unapologetically over-write to challenge decades of colonial erasure, demanding that Black physical beauty be recognised as an objective, colossal reality. Thus, sensuality becomes the counter-philosophical rendition against Eurocentric wisdom. Everything in the life of the woman is applied in this poetic projection. Both physical love and deep emotional helplessness are treated as forms and sources of enormous spiritual power. The intimate room shared by the lovers becomes a site untouched by the hostility of the colonial contraption. The metaphorical love shows the woman as Mother Africa. This is deeply stressed in the poem, justifying that Négritude poetry often sees the physical, sensuous description of a woman beyond an individual depiction. It is always an allegory for the African continent itself. Moreover, through the portraiture of the beloved (and by extension, Africa) with profound veneration and idealistic agency, the poet defies the colonial dynamic of mastery and exploitation. The relationship is rooted in shared dignity, adoration, and spiritual reciprocity rather than defeat.

Conclusion

This paper engaged on a re-reading of Léopold Sédar Senghor’s ‘Be Not Amazed’ and ‘Totem’. It was anchored on perspectives of agency and eroticism, exposing a deliberate subversion of colonial paradigms. The study also affirmed that Senghor’s celebrate-nature aesthetics are beyond inactive romanticism. Data selected and analysed from two of his poems, ‘Be Not Amazed’ and ‘Totem’, demonstrated that the erotic serves as an active, empowering force mobilised against Eurocentric hegemony. In the first poem, the praise of womanhood and bodily intimacy moves beyond plain adoration, establishing that the black body is a self-influential agent of love, life and imaginative creation against systemic oppression. In the second verse, ‘Totem’, the visceral, internal hiding of the ancestor inside the “innermost veins” transforms spiritual continuity into an act of emotional and bodily autonomy. In the long run, both poems demonstrate that Senghor’s conceptualization of freedom consists in recovering the corporeal and ancestral body that extends beyond mere aesthetic choice, to entail a foundational exercise of decolonial agency and cultural resilience. In other words, the paper attained a basic purpose of reframing Senghor’s poetic eroticism as a fundamental, decolonial device. It exposes the poet’s subversion of common notions of submissive stereotypes, confirming the prevalence of the complex, self-actualising African perception that dynamically contradicts colonial objectification in order to salvage both physical and cultural self-sufficiency.

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