

The Literary and Cultural Overtones in the Global South

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The recent International Conference on the Global South, held at the KMGIPSR, Pondicherry, on 23rd and 24th February 2026, was one of such magnitude as it encompassed several thought-provoking aspects, and it had a certain focus on Francophone Literatures too. This already heralded the Month of La Francophonie in March, where all persons contribute a part of themselves to “*build the civilization of the Universal*” within a transnational space, and thus “*weave an integral humanism*”, as so eloquently expressed by Léopold Sédar Senghor, a key proponent of African culture and black identity.

As we embark today on the journey of exploration and learning, let us remember that this Conference on “Dialogues between Science, Humanities, Social Sciences, and the Arts & Creative Expressions” in the Global South has convened from across the world experts and writers, as well as individuals from diverse fields to ignite new ideas, foster collaborations, and pave the way for future advancements. Interdisciplinary interfaces, intersections, overlapping, convergence and divergence redefined and pushed back the boundaries constricting a free flow of thought beyond Eurocentric constrictions. Academic meets always bring together brilliant minds from distinct inspiring domains, and after diving deep into discussions and sharing knowledge, the interdisciplinary perspectives undoubtedly unlock original possibilities and build connections, granting all an opportunity to learn, grow, and contribute to the greater good. Didn’t Helen Keller say : “*Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.*”, thus efficiently illustrating that binding and bonding in harmony and unity always foster progress.

The Global South is characterized by a shared history of colonialism, economic dependence, demographic explosion, growth challenges. But as the economist Joseph Stiglitz affirmed, “*Development is about transforming the lives of people, not just transforming economies.*” So, we look forward to novel evolving themes in the political and economic scenarios, as well as in the fields of Literature, Linguistics, Cultural Studies, Human Rights, Decolonization, thus throwing light on identity, hybridity, memory, trauma, to name a few areas.

Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906 - 2001), the great Senegalese poet and cultural theorist, who also had the merit of remaining President of his country for two decades (1960-1980), was an ardent advocate of “Francophony”. He made his views clear in a journal called *Esprit*, published in November 1962 in Paris. In this Special Edition titled “Le Français, Langue Vivante”, devoted to the status of the French Language as a modern language in the world, he affirmed :

“At a time when the civilization of the Universal slowly evolves itself from globalization and socialization, the point, in short, is that we should make use of this marvellous tool, found in the ruins of the colonial régime. Of this tool, that is, the French language.

Francophony means this integral Humanism which is woven around the world : this symbiosis of “latent energies” of all the continents, all the races which are stirred up by their complementary warmth.”

“Au moment que, par totalisation et socialisation, se construit la civilisation de l’Universel, il est, d’un mot, question de nous servir de ce merveilleux outil, trouvé dans les décombres du Régime colonial. De cet outil qu’est la langue française.

La Francophonie, c’est cet Humanisme intégral, qui se tisse autour de la terre : cette symbiose des “énergies dormantes” de tous les continents, de toutes les races, qui se réveillent à leur chaleur complémentaire.”)

Now, of course, the term of “Francophony” designates in the socio-linguistic sense, “the entire populations speaking French”, or in a geo-political perspective, it means “the total countries or places where French is spoken” – such as Pondicherry. However, this word of “Francophony” is now loaded with marked connotations and opposite values.

Formerly, the need was not felt for a specific word to indicate the universalist inclinations of the French language. Today, the success of a term like “Francophony” points to varying perceptions and attitudinal changes. On one hand, the feeling of a decline in the use of the French language is thus exorcised ; in fact, the number of learners in French keeps on rising (as we can see in our University itself year after year). And on the other hand, new rapports have been established between the people of different countries in a dialogue of cultures at the crossroads of lands and histories, creating thus a new space where the colonial hangover of the Global South is slowly erased.

So, nowadays, French is no longer the language of France alone for it has gone far beyond the frontiers of the Hexagon that France is, as rightly stated by Senghor : “*The French language, Sun that shines beyond the Hexagon*” (“*Le français, Soleil qui brille hors de l’Hexagone*”), or like Yves Duteil highlights in his song, “*La Langue de Chez Nous*” (*Our Language*) :

“It has thrown bridges across the Atlantic,

It has quit its nest for another land.”

(“Elle a jeté des ponts par-dessus l’Atlantique,

Elle a quitté son nid pour un autre terroir.”)

These days, it is often said that there is no one type of French, but many varieties of this language. Far from the normative or prescriptive usage stipulated by purists, the French language has accepted a diversity of variations emanating from the different cultures across the Francophone space where it is no longer a static object, but a tool which each speaker appropriates -- and the language grows in various hues and colours. The geographical dissemination of the French language thus brings about linguistic variations which only enhance the liveliness of this language in a wide panorama. This linguistic decentralization encourages local words and accents, original syntactic expressions, regionalisms, dialectal features. The resulting lexical creativity thus prevents a linguistic stagnation and infuses the French language with a renewed vigour in a broad spectrum. In fact, thanks to Canadian French, the feminization of professional titles happened.

One can observe a North X South perspective, specially when one wants to analyze the literary works emerging from Africa or Canada. The African novels and poems will mostly reflect the tensions and the anguish of still using a colonial language, as the Haitian poet, Léon Laleau (1892-1979), expresses so eloquently in his poem, *Trahison (Betrayal - 1948)* :

*“This obsessing heart, which matches
Neither my language, nor my costumes,
And on which bite, like spikes,
Borrowed feelings and customs
From Europe, can you sense this unparalleled suffering
And this despair of taming with words from France
This heart which came to me from Senegal ?”*
(*“Ce coeur obsédant, qui ne correspond
Pas à mon langage ou à mes costumes,
Et sur lequel mordent, comme un crampon,
Des sentiments d’emprunt et des coutumes
D’Europe, sentez-vous cette souffrance
Et ce désespoir à nul autre égal
D’apprivoiser, avec des mots de France,
Ce coeur qui m’est venu du Sénégal ?”*)

The African or Maghrebi author will try to “africanize” or “arabize” the French language he uses as he considers it the colonial language of the Other (such as “tap-tap” for “bus”, “chorba” for “soup”, “macache” for “nothing”, “tabrissi” for “snuff -- *tabac à priser*”) -- thus, a new idiom is created which belongs to him alone. He redefines writing by defying the linguistic norms and whips the French language out of a stodgy, sclerosed slough, thus creating an authentic Verb indeed.

The works from the Maghrebi zone also reveal the malaise of being torn between two cultures and languages : for these North African writers, Arabic represents tradition, religion, identity, whereas French gives access to modernity. Hence, they will constantly confront the language of the coloniser and invert its signs.

But for the Quebecer authors, French is the language which establishes their identity and their liberation vis-à-vis the invading presence of the Anglophones around (such as “*chique de gomme*” for chewing-gum, “*draveur*” for log driver across waterways, “*poudrerie*” for a blowing snow storm, “*bommer*” for to bum around). Yves Duteil mentions this struggle to maintain the original French language in his song, “*La Langue de Chez Nous*” :

*“... there, in that country of snow,
It has faced winds blowing from everywhere
To impose its words even in colleges,
And that our language is still spoken there.”*
(*“... là-bas, dans ce pays de neige,
Elle a fait face aux vents qui soufflent de partout
Pour imposer ses mots jusque dans les collèges,
Et qu’on y parle encore la langue de chez nous.”*)

So, you can imagine how considerably the French literary landscape changes with the inputs from the various Francophone zones. Where there used to be only one French Literature, now, there are several Francophone Literatures blossoming across the world -- a fact which only underlines the linguistic plurality in a variety of dimensions. The French language becomes a means of promotion and radiation of different cultures and a tool at the service of community cooperation. The polyphony and broader horizons of the 90’s effect an acceptance of Francophone literatures

and cultures and a movement is initiated to welcome their differential aspects. French centralism is thus questioned. There is hereafter an interaction between France and the other Francophone countries, and a new literary space is created with books written, published and appreciated beyond the hexagonal circuits. The prestigious literary French prize of Goncourt is awarded to non-Hexagonal writers such as the Caribbean Patrick Chamoiseau (born in 1952 -- for *Texaco* in 1992) or the Moroccan Tahar Ben Jelloun (born in 1944 -- for *La nuit sacrée* in 1987), or the Senegalese Mohamed Mbougar Sarr (born in 1990 – for *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* in 2021).

Nowadays, the Francophone world is coming to the fore with its vast spectrum of Francophone Literatures emanating from the five continents with a specificity of their own. These Literatures are far more engaging now than their Hexagonal counterpart, erstwhile known as the French Literature.

Each culture creates a binary division between “one’s own” interior space and the space belonging to “others”. These two spaces operate as a mirror where what is permitted in one is considered bizarre or simply forbidden in the other. Thus, the self and the other confront one another in a very conflictual manner as we can see in many Francophone texts. We can often observe in the Francophone writers the identity tussle between their roots and an involuntary uprooting.

A cultural mix is often experienced and lived with difficulty. This theme of a problematic identity or the meeting of the *self* with the *other* is witnessed in writers who have mixed origins, or those who, due to certain determining circumstances, had been forced to switch, willingly or not, from one cultural world to another. Most of the Francophone writings illustrate the uneasy feeling of being marginalized, of finding oneself in the difficult situation of being stuck in-between (or the *entre-deux*, as it is said in French), of living a conflict, which then leads the writer to experience not only difference, but solitude and rejection. “*L’entre-deux*” hints at the *no man’s land* where many Beurs or Africans consider themselves relegated and underlines the anxiety of Maghrebi or African children born in France, but caught *in between* opposite cultures.

Writing thus becomes an act of communication and liberation. Therefore, Francophone literatures give us an interesting insight into “*the will to be oneself*”, as Albert Memmi so aptly puts it, and the trials and tribulations to achieve that problematic goal. After all, as the Lebanese writer Andrée Chedid says, “*The place of writing is always situated in between the roots and an uprooting. It is an elsewhere which is always reconquered.*” (“*Le lieu de l’écriture est à la fois celui de l’enracinement et du déracinement. Un ailleurs sans cesse reconquis.*”)

Both Anglophone and Francophone Literatures from various former colonial zones have made their mark by unique works wherein the writers use the colonial language of the Other, but adorn it with indigenous originality. Anglophone and Francophone writers of the Global South did not merely inherit English or French; they reshape these foreign languages: they bend syntax, infuse rhythm, insert orality, and embed ancestral cosmologies into European forms. Existed a time when only works written in the Queen’s English or Parisian French were considered. But that perspective drastically changed when the number of noteworthy writings by the authors from former colonial zones were noticed, and that is how they were even awarded prizes for their unique ideation and literary value. For instance, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy was awarded the Booker Prize in 1997. From Martinique, René Maran’s *Batouala* in 1921 was a groundbreaking French novel set in colonial Central Africa. It explored the disruptive impact of French colonial rule. The novel’s Preface sharply criticized the abuses and hypocrisy of the French colonial system, which sparked a major controversy at that time. But strangely, René Maran became the first Black writer to win France’s most prestigious literary award, the Prix Goncourt.

I recall how in the ’80s, when I had suggested a Course on Francophone Literature, eyebrows

were then sceptically raised. But in the late '90s, different creative writings evolved from the various French-speaking zones across the world -- and now, Francophone Literature has carved a niche for itself and become a domain of reckoning, and French works are getting more and more translated in English and many other languages. The strange success of Nancy Huston resides in the fact that though she wrote her novel, *Plainsong* (1993), in her mothertongue which was Canadian English, it was her French translation of the same novel, *Cantique des plaines*, which got her recognition with the award of the *Prix du Gouverneur Général Canadien* for French Language Fiction. We just celebrated the International Mother Language Day or *Mathrubhasha Diwas* on 21st February 2026. *Ret Samadhi*, a 2018 Hindi novel by Geetanjali Shree, was translated by Daisy Rockwell as *Tomb of Sand*. This became the first work translated from an Indian language to earn the International Booker Prize in 2022. Last year, Banu Mushtaq wrote an anthology of short stories, in her mothertongue which is Kannada. This was translated by Deepa Bhashti, and published as *Heart Lamp*, winning the International Booker Prize. This just proves how powerfully Global South narratives have come into reckoning.

Reading Anglophone or Francophone literatures, emanating from the Global South, is therefore a voyage of cultural discovery in diversity -- implicitly or explicitly explaining the divergent dimensions. What makes this *Otherness* visible is precisely the linguistic inventiveness : English or French language thus moves and unusually stunning effects surface from these linguistic shifts. Everything changes when these writings emerge from unfamiliar, exotic regions, far removed from the Empire or the Hexagon. And if the reader belongs to the community from where the text originates, he will immediately recognize his identity and appreciate the writing. But if the reader is a stranger to the place from where the writing evolves itself, his reading will discover the text in an hitherto unknown form and the new culture it reveals.