

# Maryse Condé's Deconstruction and Reconstruction of the Creole Identity

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## Abstract

The works of the Caribbean writer, Maryse Condé, are unique in modern Antillean literature as they express an open and humanist vision of the Antillean society, a society comprising a complex Creole identity with its ancestral roots in Africa and a religion which is a blend of Catholicism and Voodoo. This paper focuses on the rhizomatous aspect of the Creole identity which becomes the driving force of the characters of Maryse Condé, to undergo a series of displacement in the process of finding their true identity.

**Keywords:** Caribbean, Creole, Maryse Condé, Displacement, Identity, Francophone.

## Prolific Francophone Caribbean Writer

Maryse Condé is the most prolific among the Francophone Caribbean women writers. A major novelist, essayist, playwright and a former Professor of African and Caribbean literature, Condé, over a period of thirty five years, (from her first novel, *Heremakhonon* (1976) to *La vie Sans Fards* 2012) has published some sixteen novels, eight plays, several children's books and a collection of short stories. Some of her works have been awarded prestigious literary prizes

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including “Grand Prix littéraire de la Femme’ for *Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem*, Prix de l’Academie Française for *La vie scélérate*.

Born in 1937 in Guadeloupe at Pointe-à-Pitre, Condé constantly migrated between three continents (Europe, Africa and North America). She left Guadeloupe at the age of sixteen in 1953, lived in France, England, West Africa (Ivory Coast, Guinea, Ghana and Senegal) and the United States before returning to Guadeloupe in 1986. Her return was not definitive and in 1990’s she moved to the United States to take up various teaching positions. Now retired, the author divides her time between the Caribbean, North America and Europe. It was during the period of her return to Guadeloupe that Condé began writing her novels. Her extensive travel and her critical thought contribute majorly to her creative and other writing.

### **Present Caribbean Demography – Issues Relating to Identity**

The 17<sup>th</sup> century slave trade which unceremoniously transported hundreds and thousands of Black slaves from West Africa and the subsequent 19<sup>th</sup> century influx of hundreds of plantation workers from the Indian Subcontinent has led to a demographic and physiological mix constituting the present Caribbean population. This present Caribbean Society believes that their true roots are not in the Caribbean but in Africa where their Ancestors came from. Yet, they do not speak any African language and have never seen African land. They speak Creole, their religion is a blend of Catholicism and Voodoo and they have always lived among Indians and Whites who also claim to be Caribbeans. Hence, it is not surprising that literature from the French Caribbean obsessively explores issues relating to identity. This quest to find one’s identity is the driving force that leads Condés stories.

### **Early Novels – Focus on Africa to Discover Roots**

In Condé’s early novels, her characters often go to Africa to discover their roots, thus stepping in a famous Caribbean writer’s footsteps, Aimé Césaire, who advised his fellow

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countrymen to return to Africa in the 1950s and 60s. Nevertheless, having lived in Africa herself, Condé just like her characters, realizes quickly that Africa is not her motherland in spite of her ancestor's African origins.

### **In Search of Roots, Return to the Caribbean Home**

*Heremakhonon* and *Une Saison à Rihata* both have female protagonists who, like Condé, travel from the West Indies to Africa in search of origins that remain elusive and disappointing.

Her third novel *Ségou* continues with the idealization of Africa, but the novel that followed *Ségou* was written and set in the United States, *Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem*.

*Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem* uses fiction to fill in the gaps on the historical account of a Black Barbadian woman caught up in the Salem Witch trials.

### **Return to Homeland**

Condé accomplishes her literary “retour au pays natal” (Return to the homeland) in *Traversée de la Mangrove* and *La migration des coeurs* set in various Caribbean islands. “Pays Natal” or the “Motherland” according to Condé is not Africa but the Caribbean islands.

### ***Traversée de la Mangrove***



Courtesy: <http://leslecturesdebibliophile.blogspot.in/2012/11/traversee-de-la-mangrove-de-maryse-conde.html>

Condé's 1989 novel, *Traversée de la Mangrove*, taking place in Guadeloupe, is structured around the voices of Blacks, Indians, Békés (Caribbean white upperclass), Dominicans and Haitians, who are all part of the social fabric of Guadeloupe. Each chapter of the book is told from a different cultural or racial point of view. The twenty voices talk about Francis Sancher, the protagonist, the man who brings them together at his funeral, reveal something new about Francis' personality. Their attempt to establish his identity from different perspectives parallels, on a larger scale, the attempt to determine the complex Caribbean identity.

The "Mangrove" of the title is a very well chosen metaphor expressing the difficulty to disentangle the true Creole identity from the lies, the myths, the made-up past and the confusing present. It is also an interesting metaphor as it defines a new type of Identity. The Caribbean identity relies on a web of roots that does not refer to one single culture inherited from the past, but refers instead to a multiplicity of cultures that the present still weaves together. This rhizomatous identity (a rootlike subterranean stem, commonly horizontal in position, that usually produces roots below and sends up shoots progressively from the upper surface, [http://dictionary.reference.com /browse/rhizomatous](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/rhizomatous)) allows no single origin made up in a distant past but testifies of a new understanding of Identity. Condé's writings help to understand this rhizomatous aspect of the Creole identity. In spite of the apparent unsolvable tangles in the process of the quest for identity, Condé believes in easing it by acknowledging the Black diaspora.

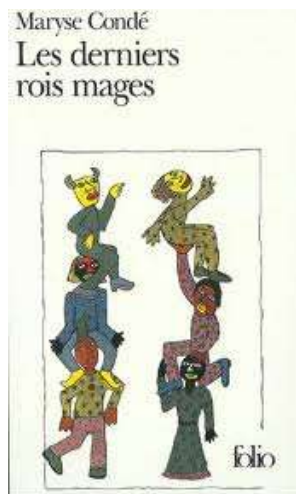
### **Black Diasporas in Americas – Step to Creole Identity**

Thus, after a first period, during which her characters retrace the steps of their ancestors in Africa, Condé turns to writing about the Black Diaspora in the Americas and forgets about Africa, Césaire and the Négritude. Her characters, in her next period of writing, give life to the

multiple facets of the Black Diaspora present in both North and South, Insular and Continental America.

Condé believes that acknowledging the existence of the Black Diaspora is the first step towards understanding the existence of the Creole identity, as it gives a sense of unity of Blacks scattered throughout the Americas.

## **Deconstruction**



Courtesy: <http://www.jambe-dlo.fr/boutique/romans/les-derniers-rois-mages-maryse-conde/>

Condé, on the one hand, eases the confusion by “Constructing” the proper route towards finding the true Creole identity. On the other hand, she “deconstructs” all the false identities surrounding the Caribbean individual. In her later novel, *Les Derniers Rois Mages*, she goes to the extent of mocking the quest for African ancestors and the myth that surrounds it; the myth being that some in the Caribbean believe their ancestors to be African Kings and Queens. Condé understands that this desire to find noble African origins has to stop in order to understand and rebuild the true Caribbean or Creole identity.

## **Not Indifferent to the Caribbean Women’s Experience**

Although, Condé refuses the “feminist” label, she is not indifferent to the Caribbean women’s experience. Her reflection on the topic of the Black woman started in 1979 with her

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book entitled: *La Parole des femmes*. In this short book, Condé breaks many stereotypes that are ascribed to the Black woman. After a careful study of the French Caribbean literature, Condé found that the black women's body was still very much idealized and they have been stereotyped by both westerners and by their own countrymen as well. The western stereotype depicts the black woman as a hyper-sexualized exotic woman, while Caribbean men see her as a vessel and pillar of their society, someone who can bear any hardship and many children (this is the legacy of Patriarchy).

### **Unveiling Stereotypes**

In order to unveil those stereotypes, Condé uses several ways. While some of her heroines (such as Tituba in *Moi, Tituba, Sorcière noire de Salem*) expose those stereotypes and ridicule them, others (as Renalda and Marie-Noëlle in *Désirada*) destroy them and depart from them. In both cases, Condé gives voice to the Black woman previously deprived of the freedom and the power of speech and mainly seen as a commodity.

Dispelling the veil that hides the Black Woman's sexuality is only the first step towards freedom. Condé goes to the extent of destroying it and reconstructing the black woman by depicting a new type of female heroine, the black working or intellectual woman. In *Ségou* or *Désirada*, Condé depicts the intellectual black woman, who rejects both the imperialistic and the patriarchal clichés. This woman is often sterile instead of maternal, skinny instead of voluptuous.

### **Creating a New Culture amidst Tragedy**

Although the Creole identity finds its origin in a tragedy, the crossing of the Atlantic, this tragedy succeeded nevertheless in creating a new culture, a new identity; a rhizomatous identity that encompasses Anglophone, Francophone and Hispanic cultures. Migrations, displacements and exiles are major components in the process of exploring one's identity. Condé's entire

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output, as a creative writer, projects this identity “construction” and, in some cases, “deconstruction” of the various subject positions surrounding the Francophone Caribbean individual.

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