

# The Portrayal of Africa in Maryse Conde's Novels

<sup>1</sup>Williams-Umeaba Chidi Ifeyinwa & <sup>2</sup>Omembu Obiajuru Emmanuel

<sup>1</sup> Department of Mass Communication, Federal Polytechnic, Oke, Anambra State, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup> Department of French, Faculty of Arts, University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

Africa is a major theme and source of inspiration in Francophone Caribbean Literature. A number of factors has been attributed to this. First of these is the interest in African culture in the 1930s by the literary work of the great Caribbean scholar, Jean Price-Mars, *Ainsi parla l'oncle* (1928). This ethnographic study was an attempt to encourage the Black intellectuals and the urban elites to appreciate whatever was of great value and admirable that emanated from Africa and their own native cultures. Second is that, Francophone Caribbean writers share the same roots and the same historical realities as their Francophone African counterparts. Third is the radical and intellectual attitudes of some Black students in Paris, who sought, under the umbrella movement known as Negritude to fight a common battle. The fourth and perhaps the most important factor is the role a personality like Aimé Césaire played in encouraging the ties between the Caribbean and their African brothers and sisters in Africa which made the Caribbean writers believe in Africa and which influenced them in making Africa the centre piece of their literary creations. The portrayal of Africa by this writer aroused in Caribbean writer what amounted to a socio-cultural consciousness and interests in the land of their ancestors. Aimé Césaire had considerable influence in re-directing the attention of young Caribbean writers coming after him to make Africa a worthy object of interest in their literary works. One of the most significant and successful literary products of Aimé Césaire is Maryse Condé. Through her novels, especially *Heremakhonon* (2000) and *A Season in Rihata* (1987), Maryse Condé pursued relentlessly the reintegration of West Indians in their African roots. By the range of her commitment, her novels also depict Africa's political situations by portraying a

continent that is torn apart by political tensions, fettered by exploitative and oppressive indigenous leadership. This paper seeks to take a close look at Africa as portrayed in Maryse Condé's two novels. Specifically, the attention of this paper centres on the socio-political narratives of Africa in the two novels. Our guiding theoretical framework will feature trauma and postcolonial studies as the theoretical basis for the interpretation of the two novels.

**KEY WORDS:** Africa, novels

## I. INTRODUCTION

Africa constitutes a major and constant theme in Francophone Caribbean Literary creations. This constant evocation of Africa as a worthy object of interest in Francophone Caribbean literary creation has been attributed to a convergence of four major factors. First of these is the interest in African culture in the 1930s by the literary work of the Caribbean scholar, Jean Price-Mars *Ainsi parla l'oncle* (1928). This ethnographic study was an attempt to encourage Black intellectuals and urban elites to appreciate whatever was of great value and admirable that emanated from Africa and their own native cultures. Second is that, Francophone Caribbean writers share the same roots and the same historical realities as their Francophone African counterparts. Furthermore, Africa constitutes their racial identity and provided for them and their literature the opportunity to be able to underscore their affinity with their ancestral land. Ever since the evolution of Francophone Caribbean Literature in the twentieth century, Francophone Caribbean writers have been engaging, through their literary creations, in the discovery of those cultural and other links that bind the two groups of Black people: the one in Africa, the other in the West Indies. In the process, they

have raised some of the vital questions Black West Indians who come in contact with Africa often ask. Such questions relate invariably to the Caribbean identity: “Are the Caribbeans or West Indians related to Africa?”. “How is their current relationship with Africa and Africans?”. All these questions, in one way or the other form part of the issues the Francophone Caribbean writers attempt to explicate in their literary creations. Third is the radical and intellectual attitudes of some Black students in Paris, who sought under the umbrella movement known as Negritude to fight a common battle. Negritude, as a word is a neologism which was coined by Aimé Césaire from the word negro which means black. The word was first and foremost used in Aimé Césaire’s classic work titled *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (Return to my Native Land), which was published in 1939. Negritude was, therefore, an all embracing literary movement that brought together French speaking Black West Indians and Black Africans to fight a common battle: Rehabilitating the battered image of the Black man all over the world. The literary movement was thus committed to the positive presentation of the African cultures and values as a way of correcting the various erroneous and fallacious impression peddled around by the highly racist works of the White writers and intellectuals. Leopold Sedar Senghor reminds us of the reason why himself, Leon-Damas and Aimé Césaire (Caribbean writers), who are often called *Les Trois Mousquetaires* (Mokwenye 2014:2) decided to pursue this objective at the time. As Senghor explains:

Nous étions alors plongés dans une sorte de désespoir panique. L’horizon était bouché. Nulle réforme en perspective et les colonisateurs légitimaient notre dépendance politique et économique par la théorie de la « zable rase ». Nous n’avions, estimaient-ils, rien inventé, rien créé, ni sculpté, ni peint, ni chanté.

We were plunged into a kind of panic, despair. The future was bleak for us. No reform was in sight and the colonialists legitimized our political and economic dependence by the theory of the “tabula rasa”. In their opinion, we did not invent anything, did not create anything, neither did we sculpt, paint nor sing anything. (Our translation). Except otherwise indicated, all subsequent translation in this paper are ours).

The Negritude movement was principally established to promote the spirit of Africanness among Black African and Black Caribbean writers through their published works that depict Africa and African liberation struggle.

The fourth and perhaps the most important factor, is the role a personality like Aimé Césaire played in encouraging the ties between the West Indians and their African brothers and sisters in Africa. This great Martinican scholar, through his literary works, made the Francophone Caribbean writers that came after him to believe in their African origin. He encouraged them to pick up their pen in favour of Africa by making Africa the centre piece of their literary creations. Let us listen to Maryse Condé as she explains Aimé Césaire’s role in this regard as cited by Kesteloot (1963:96):

Pendant un temps, les Antilles ont cru que leur quête d’identité passait par l’Afrique. C’est ce que nous avaient dit des écrivains, comme Césaire et d’autres de sa génération. L’Afrique était pour eux la grande matrice de la race noire et tout enfant issue de cette matrice devait pour se connaître fatalement, se rattacher à elle. (Interview granted by Maryse Condé to Marie-Clothilde Jacquy, 1984, p.25)

(For some time, the Caribbeans thought that their quest for identity pass through Africa. That was what we were told by writers like Aimé Césaire and others of his generation. Africa was for them the great womb of the black race and every child born of this womb had to be fatally attached to her to know itself).

Aimé Césaire, as can be seen, had considerable influence in re-directing the attention of Francophone Caribbean writers to take up the pen in favour of Africa as a worthy object of interest and source of inspiration. These writers, depict Africa and show considerable attachment to Africa, their ancestral home in their literary works. One of the most prolific and successful writers to have come from the West Indies who portrayed Africa in her novels is Maryse Condé. Through her novels, notably *Heremakhonon* (2000) and *A Season in Rihata* (1987), this Guadeloupean writer portrays the West Indians’ quest to reintegrate with Africa because as Zana Akpagu and Unimna Angrey (2013:123) put it “the Black West Indians cannot forge a true Caribbean identity without Africa”. By the range of her commitment and attachment to Africa, Condé also highlights some of the major factors responsible for the underdevelopment in Africa.

Originally published in French in 1976 as *En attendant le bonheur* Hérémakhonon, *Heremakhonon* (2000), (the English translation) is the story of a young West Indian lady named Veronica, who came to Africa under the Overseas Volunteer Corps from France in search of her ancestral root and self-fulfilment. She came in

pursuance of her dream of not only locating her roots, but also in participating in the African struggle for political liberation. Every attempt she made in achieving this dream failed. Extremely frustrated during her short but action-packed stay, she decides to leave Africa without realising her dream.

A Season in Rihata (1987), originally published in French language as *Une Saison à Rihata* (1981), also depicts the arrival of a young lady by name Marie-Helene to Africa with her African husband to settle, after several years of sojourning in France. She came to Africa with a very high hope of settling down among her African brothers and sisters. She failed in her various efforts to reintegrate with her African brothers and sisters, whose hostile attitudes and dispositions towards her resulted in her state of solitude and disenchantment.

In situating the action of the story in Africa, Maryse Condé directs our attention to the traumatic experiences of the West Indians who came to Africa in search of psychological fulfillment and their ancestral roots. Furthermore, Maryse Condé directs our attention, through the portrayal of Africa, to the political situations in post-independent Africa. By portraying Africa in these two novels, Maryse Condé has not only shown that Africa is the centre piece of her literary creation, but also that Africa is a place of diverse encounters for the Black West Indian.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It has often been remarked that no serious critical analysis of a literary work can be done without a theoretical background. This paper adopts trauma and postcolonial studies as the theoretical basis for the interpretation of Maryse Condé's two novels. No serious and much work been done on the theory of trauma. As Kennedy, R (2011:237) puts it: "till date, there has been little work on trauma in the context of colonisation and assimilation". In spite of that, the impact of forced assimilation on the historical existence of the West Indians have remained indelible in their memory and history. Postcolonial theory, according to Pastrascou, E (2013:382) is: concerned among other things with the role of memory in representing history, the fictionalization, the politics of identity, the dynamistics centre-periphery, all indicating between memory and trauma.

De Mey, J (2011), affirms that postcolonial studies, narrations and testimonies are central to overcoming the stifling effects of

trauma. Heremakhonon and A Season in Rihata engage in the process of revealing the traumatic experiences of Condé's heroines. The novels capture the traumatic experiences being faced by today's West Indians and Africans in Diaspora who still believe in Africa and so seek to return in response to the positive manner Africa and Africans are being presented to them. Maryse Condé thus writes as a *témoignage* (eye witness) to borrow the expression of Ajah, Richard (2016:30), to these realities by effectively communicating the horrors and atrocities she saw and lived during her stay in Africa.

### Portrayal of Africa in Heremakhonon

Veronica, the heroine in the novel's journey to Africa was majorly inspired and fuelled by the force of African mythologies and fables. As Arowolo Bukoye (2013:129) puts it: "Veronica is in Africa in search of her roots to see the glorified continent as against the hell of Caribbean black misery". Based on this, Veronica undertook a journey to Africa. Her intention is to come and perceive and have a firsthand experience of a chimeric and paradisaic continent where her ancestors lived before and after their forceful deportation from their ancestral root in the precolonial era; a continent presided over by thoughtful and invincible emperors, a continent which has a rich history of great men, who had paid their fair share to what they called the New World, a black world that Europe did not reduce to a caricature of itself. She sees her departure to Africa as a form of liberation from the hellish experiences she has passed through in both her native land and metropolitan France. Africa is thus regarded as a place one goes to in order to find true fulfilment. Veronica explains the purpose of her journey to Africa to Birame 111: Purpose of visit? No, I'm not a trader. Not a missionary. Not even a tourist. Well, perhaps a tourist, but one of a new breed, searching out her herself, not landscape" (p.3).

Veronica's statement is a clear statement to the escapist attitude of *mauvais fois* of the West Indians in their identity which consist in emigrating to Africa to escape the misery and trauma of living in metropolitan France and West Indies. Her position is clear: it is only by going to Africa that her true identity can be forged. This is the trajectory canvassed by Maryse Condé who was married to an African and lived in Ivory Coast.

In the period of her short but action-packed stay in Africa, Veronica identified the absence of leadership and dictatorship as the major causes of

political and economic setbacks in Africa. It is interesting to note that the period of her coming and stay in Africa coincided with the period most African countries were decolonised and attained political independence. In the novel, Maryse Condé portrays the picture of an African continent that is torn apart by political tensions and crises. These tensions and crises are largely filtered by an exploitative and oppressive indigenous leadership. In the face of these tensions and crises, the Minister of Defence, Ibrahima Sory and other civil authorities are of no help whatsoever. As the immediate representative of the repressive regime, Ibrahima Sory engages in all forms of illegal and shady deals with the hope of keeping his master, President Mwalimmawana in power for life. He extorts money from the defenseless masses and those who refuse or are too critical of his boss are harassed, tortured and blackmailed with threats of imprisonment for rebellion and public scandal. The president himself lives on the people like fleas. He has an interest in keeping the people poor, ignorant and resigned. Any attempt to critically oppose his regime is seen as an act of sedition. The first and major victims of this despotic African indigenous leader are the student revolutionaries led by Birame 111, Veronica's student at la lycée. These students were subjected to some intolerable and unbearable conditions like incessant arrests and senseless killings for carrying out activities aimed at educating the masses on the injustices and other atrocities of the exploitative and oppressive regime.

In portraying Africa's political situation, Condé directs our attention to the naivety and credulity of African indigenous leaders, who derive pleasure in keeping their people ignorant, poor and resigned. These situations, conditions and realities do not reflect a chimeric and paradisiac continent, major factors that inspired Veronica's journey to Africa. The hunger, the social and moral misery, arrest and torture of critical and fiercest oppositions and other intractable atrocities which constitute Africa's political realities have nullified the glorious past of Africa. Veronica came to experience. Unaccustomed to such bewildering situations, Veronica decides to leave Africa for France. She declares that she was through with Africa: "Shall I sum up my stay? No. No summing up. Anything but that. I would be positively negative--- would plunge me into despair". (p.127). She further explains her decision to leave Africa to Ibrahima Sory:

Oh, let me get out of here! Let me shake the dust of this country off my feet ! (...) I must leave if I want to maintain a semblance of respect.

One day I'll have to break the silence. I'll have to explain, what? This mistake, the tragic mistake I couldn't help making, being what I am. My ancestors led me on. What more can I say? I looked for myself in the wrong place. In the arm of an assassin. (p.164).

### **Portrayal of Africa in A Season in Rihata**

The journey to Africa by Marie-Helene, the heroine of the novel, was majorly influenced by the activities of some radical Black students from both the French speaking Caribbean Island and French speaking African countries. This group of students, who gather in freezing or over-heated meeting halls in Paris, usually come together to discuss the future of African continent in particular and the progress of the Blackman and his place in the world in general. These meetings and discussions fascinated Marie-Helen, a West Indian. The narrator explains:

It was like her liking for abstract ideas which had never once entered her mind: the future of African continent, the progress of the Black man and his place in the world" (11).

It was her liking for a which had never onc.

To the activities of the radical Black students which inspired Marie-Helen's journey to Africa is added the influence of Zek, a Black African, who like Marie-Helen had gone to France to study and obtain a Baccalauréat. Zek was committed to the positive presentation of African cultures and virtues, African women and their hospitality as a way of correcting the erroneous and fallacious impressions peddled around by some white ethnologists and intellectuals that Black Africans are barbarians, hostile, thoughtless, backward and irritable. That the continent has no culture and no history. The complimentary manner Africa and Africans were being presented to Marie-Helen aroused in her what amounted to a burning desire to go to Africa in order to have a firsthand experience of the dream-like existence in Africa. This complimentary remark was also an attempt by Zek to convince Marie-Helen to marry him and follow him down to Africa where the marriage will be consummated. Until then, Marie-Helen, a beautiful young lady studying Political Science in France had despised or ignored Zek and other Black Africans that have approached her for an amorous relationship, preferring rather a Whiteman or a Mulatto, so as to "whiten her race", to borrow the words of Frantz Fanon. The narrator vividly captures the efforts of Zek in convincing her to marry him and follow him to Africa:



He used to tell her of Africa, his country, his village. They would go to Asin. He would introduce her to his father, that great old man. (...). His neighbours would greet her graciously while stepping out of their cars. (22).

Zek's supreme triumph and the crowning success of his effort is his hard-worn conviction of Marie-Helen to marry him and follow him to Africa. No sooner had Marie-Helen settled in Africa than her exclusion was felt. She had barely settled down to relate with the family of Zek in Rihata when the words which stifled the immense joy and excitement she had felt at being in Africa, the land of her parents-in-law and ancestors, were uttered by Zek's father.: "Why did you do it? Why did you marry a white woman? (p.13).

This question is a clear and subtle refusal and rejection of Marie-Helen, a West Indian, as a daughter-in-law. His position is clear: It is a taboo for his son to marry a West Indian that is from a country, his people still regard ( the Black West Indians) as slaves. As if to further drive home the message, the women of Rihata point out that Marie-Helen is "a semela", meaning "a woman from over there" (p.2). The women hated her and everything about her. They find her irritable and quarrelsome. In their hatred towards her, some of them use words which common decency and decorum would not allow. Marie-Helen could not understand why the women, including Zek's mother would hate her that much, despite already having six daughters for Zek, their son and brother.

In the face of this prejudice and otherness, Zek, her husband is of no help whatsoever. On the contrary, he is an added source of suffering and misery to her. He is both her victim and her executioner. He picks her up, soothes and heals her, only to plunge her again to the depths of despair. According to the narrator: "it was as if he was trying not to make her happy and could only love her when she was at odds with herself, in anguish or at a loss." (p.23).

The hatred and feeling of rejection have their social and psychological repercussions, mostly noticeable in women and children, who are usually the most vulnerable in such situations. They are the first to realise the unpleasant and undesirable situations like estrangement and quarrels in the house and within the neighbourhood. " Why was she excluded?"(p.22). Sia, the eldest daughter of Zek and Marie-Helen had asked in utter bewilderment. Sia regards the the unusual and hostile reception and treatment of her mother in Rihata as a symbol, a symbol that her mother was

partly a foreigner who is making efforts to be integrated into a community that puts its own people first.

In situating the action of the story in Africa, Maryse Condé directs our attention to the experiences of today's West Indians who still believe in Africa and so seek to return home in response to the positive manner the continent is being presented to them. More importantly, in portraying the firsthand experience of her heroine in Africa, Condé clearly points to the utter impossibility of the Black West Indians to return to Africa as reintegration with the land of their ancestors is tied to conditions that are outside their capacity.

### III. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we attempted to present important factors responsible for the evocation of Africa in Francophone literary creations. We attempted to present Maryse Condé's views about Africa, using two of her novels. Maryse Condé, as reflected in our paper felt concerned about the political situation in the continent and considered her novels as veritable instrument for the reawakening of political consciousness and gingering of political liberation of Africa. Such was Condé's passion for the enthronement of democratic principles in Africa. Her passion and commitment to Africa's political cause was portrayed when she portrayed a character (Birame 111), a revolutionary leader of the youths who dared at the time to criticize the president's regime and also incited the youths to action urging them to be more radical and practical in their approach towards ending a bad regime. The hostile and unfriendly attitudes of Africans towards the West Indians who return to Africa in their quest for psychological fulfilment and reintegration with the land of their ancestors was condemned by Condé. These attitudes have resulted to an in-ward looking approach of the West Indians' identity and a desire to project a purely Black West Indian worldview and specificity; a total departure from what Negritude stood for. The pursuance of Black West Indian objective through what is today known as Antillanité marks a change of attitude on the part of West Indians towards Africa and Africans.

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