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Alienation in Maryse Condé's *Le Cœur à Rire et à Pleurer*

Maryse Condé'nin *Le Cœur à Rire et à Pleurer* Eserinde Yabancılaşma

Cansu Avcı 0000-0001-9336-8127
Marmara University

ABSTRACT
Postcolonialism is a theoretical framework that problematizes the legacy of colonialism through the lenses of sociology, psychology, and literature. Postcolonial literature, exploring the enduring impact of colonialism on literary works addresses themes such as identity, exile, and alienation. Frantz Fanon was one of the most prominent thinkers of the 20th century with his anti-colonial works, which dealt with the problems created by colonialism on both an individual and a cultural level. Fanon, exploring the alienation of colonized peoples from their own origins, asserts that true freedom can be attained when individuals liberate themselves from this imposed sense of otherness. Maryse Condé, one of the leading figures of French postcolonial literature, delves into the search for identity among those who have endured the experiences of slavery, colonialism, and exile. The aim of this study is to analyze the concept of alienation in Maryse Condé's autobiographical storybook, *Le Cœur à Rire et à Pleurer,* within the framework of Frantz Fanon's postcolonial theory.

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Introduction

Postcolonialism, encompassing the period from the second half of the 20th century to the present, is a movement and a way of thinking that examines the political, economic, and cultural effects left behind by colonialism through philosophical, sociological, psychological, and literary theories. Postcolonial literature refers to works written by authors from formerly colonized regions about the people living in those regions. The 1950s and 1960s, when European colonies in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean gained their independence, constitute a significant part of postcolonial literature. Alienation, a recurring theme in this literature, is represented through the content and form of the works. Postcolonial novelists place alienated postcolonials in various places and settings within historical and fictional frameworks, exploring the search for identity between tradition and modernity in their works.

The work of American sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s, especially the studies of psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, contributed to the spread of the concept of "alienation." Having theorized the alienation caused by colonial oppression in *Peau noire, masques blancs* in 1952 and *Les damnés de la Terre* in 1961, Fanon is now considered one of the leading thinkers of anti-colonialism today. According to Fanon, alienation is essentially a result of internalized oppression, a fragmentation

CONTACT Cansu Avcı, Dr., School of Foreign Languages, Marmara University, Turkiye | cansu.avci@marmara.edu.tr; ORCID# 0000-0001-9336-8127; https://doi.org/10.47777/cankujhss.1540125

arising from the gap between a person's self-defined identity and the identity imposed upon them by society. Characters who encounter the Other or the Westerner also try to hide their 'black skin' with a 'white mask' by imitating this Other" (1961, p. 19).

Fanon (1952) analyzes the alienation of the colonized, especially the Black Western Indians. The Martinican thinker states that this alienation is inherent in the colonial system, and the colonized individual eventually internalizes derogatory and stigmatizing discourses, leading them to belittle their own culture, language, and people, ultimately desiring only to imitate and resemble the colonizer. As a result, the colonized rejects the Creole language[1] and adopts French, which is the language of the colonizer. The hostility of Black people towards other blacks is characteristic of alienation and they internalize this colonial system by seeing whites as very superior. In other words, "black is not human" and "wants to be white." All these thoughts are actually a sign of their alienation. A Black person will only become a fully realized individual when liberated from this alienation that has dehumanized them.

With a similar thought, Irèle points out that alienation is a well-known and frequently discussed phenomenon in the field of African culture and invites to reflect on the liberating potential of this term (1989, pp. 46-58). Similarly, living in exile and returning to one's own country is hardly a new phenomenon in the world of African literature. Postcolonial writers also address the issue of alienation in addition to the colonial problem during childhood.

Maryse Condé, a French novelist, critic, and playwright from Guadeloupe, has become one of the most important figures in postcolonial literature in terms of the themes of racism, otherness, alienation, and womanhood in her works. As a novelist who particularly investigates the African diaspora resulting from slavery and colonialism in the Caribbean in her works, she unmasks the control mechanisms of patriarchal and colonial systems as refusing to obey them. In addition, the author, who thinks that social transformation takes place through women's voices, tries not to subjugate men in her works, but to completely destroy this hierarchy and dichotomy (Klingele 2013, p. 4).

The Author Identity of Maryse Condé

Born in Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe, in 1934, Maryse Condé comes from a black bourgeois family. Her father was a founder of a cooperative fund, and her mother was among the first teachers of her generation. Condé, at the age of 16, left her country and went to Paris to begin her studies at Fénelon High School. There, she discovered writers who wrote novels about the Black race, and in particular, Aimé Césaire's discourse on colonialism. In 1959, she married African actor Mamadou Condé and taught in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Ghana, and Senegal. In 1970, she decided to return to France to study French literature at the Sorbonne and also worked at the *Pan-African* magazine founded by Alioune Diop. In 1975, she completed her doctorate in literature with a thesis on stereotypes about Black people in West Indian literature. Between 1975 and 2002, she taught at numerous French and American universities. With *Moi, Tituba Sorcière* in 1986, she won the *Grand Prix Littéraire de la Femme*, and with *La Vie Scélérate*, she received the *Académie française* award in 1987. In 1993, she became the first woman to win the *Putterbaugh* award, given to a Francophone writer in the United States. Condé's novels, read all over the world, explore the memories of slavery and colonialism, and the identity search of exiles.

In 2002, Condé ended her teaching career at Columbia University, where she is known as the founder of the Francophone Studies department. Today, the author lacks manual dexterity due to a neurological disease that affects her mobility and coordination. Her latest novel, *Le Fabuleux et Triste Destin d'Ivan et d'Ivana* (2017), was brought to light with the help of her second husband,

[1]It is a language consisting of a mixture of several languages that develops according to the region and person.

writer, and translator Richard Philcox, who transcribed the entire novel for her. The author passed away in 2004.

Condé was a writer with a powerful voice. The author's struggle with various forms of oppression is the result of past experiences, perception, a resilient life lived in a colonized and patriarchal society. In many of her works, such as *Ségou* (1987) and *Moi, Tituba, Ciel Noir de Salem* (1986), Condé examines the effects of white colonialism on Black people and gradually constructs a collective female identity (Simplice, 2022, p. 3). The author's inspiring journey is also based on her ability to openly criticize issues previously concealed by men and hegemonic ideals. On the other hand, in the novels *La Traversée de la Mangrove* (1989) and *Les Derniers Rois Mages* (1992), the author focuses on male characters. However, inspired by one of her most important works, *Ségou* (1985), especially from Mali, Condé writes extensively about globalization, which is a way for West Indians to participate in the new world order and enables enrichment between countries, and depicts nations beyond linguistic and cultural borders in these works (Simplice, 2022, p. 13).

According to Condé, the purpose of literature is to become concerned, to encourage thinking, and to express existential anxiety (2004, p. 155). Literature alone cannot change the world, but it can play a dominant role in the process of change. Condé also describes her own experience in which transformation is triggered. The tool that allowed her to do this and break free from imposed frameworks was language.

In her book, Condé tells her readers about her memories spent in Guadeloupe. The work is her first autobiographical story, in which she recounts her youth in the region in the 1950s, her tumultuous relationship with her mother, her confrontations with death, racism, and romantic disillusionment, and her dreams of freedom and autonomy. These memories allow readers to go to the sources of the author's inspiration to write novels. For the author, the biographical element is very important because this Caribbean childhood greatly influenced her writings. This is also true of other postcolonial writers, as geography and parochialism are central to postcolonial Caribbean literature.

In the book, Maryse Condé talks about her childhood in Guadeloupe with educated parents who were proud to be French. The theme of culture is essential here. Her family, who lived in Paris, the city of art, and spent most of their time visiting museums, turned their backs on the Creole language and spoke French. As the last child of a large family, Maryse, who grew up alone with parents who are arrogant and proud of their social achievements, she rejected authority. She is too outspoken for the tastes of adults and her peers, so one may already see the strength of the author's character, her political and feminist values.

As Simplice, points out, the greatest contemporary power of Maryse Condé's work is that it depicts conflicts between countries and cultures without errors and exceptions. Thus, the author provides a better view of what binds and separates people in these intercultural conflicts. From her early works, Condé places herself among this new generation of writers by demonstrating the problematic nature of Césairian and Senghorian Blackness, and in her works, she repeatedly explores the theme of identity, often embodied in characters of West Indian origin from her own homeland (2022, p. 2).

Due to societal pressures to adapt to mainstream culture, both men and women have the capacity to actively maintain this system of inequality. However, Condé's stories of exploitation place the responsibility on women to question their beliefs. Since the author grew up in a culture where patriarchal values are consumed, she does not witness the power of women's voices. Condé, thus, presents her early childhood doubts and questions to invite women to reflect on their own experiences and write their own stories (Klingele, 2013, p. 2).

On the other hand, Condé tells women that writing is not useless, but rather full of creativity, while giving them the opportunity to expand their knowledge and ideas about the essence of self-expression. Only then will the world progress toward equality (Nesbitt, 2003, p. 403). For this reason, the author states that women should act as primary aggressors, as they have to struggle with the tradition of official language culture or the European language developed by male suppressors (Hodge, 1998, p. 47). According to Condé, a woman's voice is full of creative literary talents beyond the reach of men and colonizers. In this context, Condé's thoughts on women reveal her role in challenging the deeply rooted patriarchal world (Klingele, 2013, p. 3). Undoubtedly, according to Condé, writing and speaking are tools that put women at the same level as men. Thus, while outlining the meaning of the brave new world, Condé points to the difficulty of women proclaiming their authenticity in a repressive environment.

Traversée de la Mangrove (1985) and *Hérémakhonon* (1976) are also works of Condé's stance on the desire to change the mindset of women. These writings also present the origins of Condé's inspiration to challenge the discriminatory world that is prevalent in her life. Each reflects the importance of identity development, and the character's experiences parallel the author's own childhood. In this context, Condé's writings go a step further in terms of postcolonial and feminist discourses, as evidenced by her novels. While encouraging women and oppressed countries to act in terms of making their voices heard, she also aims to eliminate competition completely (Klingele, 2013, pp. 4-6). As can be seen from her aforementioned works, Condé's past is an effort to destroy the dominant tradition. Accordingly, a thorough understanding of the transition from obedience to subversion requires an analysis of the author's autobiographical text.

The Phenomenon of "Alienation" in *Le Cœur à Rire et à Pleurer*

The last decade of the 20th century was a period when autobiographical works, especially childhood and women's narratives, were common (Cooper 2016, pp. 26, 34). Accordingly, many women writers decide to leave the patronage of men and present their own writings to the world. In 1999, Maryse Condé published her autobiographical work *Le Cœur à Rire et à Pleurer*. The work is a collection of true stories from the author's childhood that question the dynamism that formed her own identity and culminate in resistance against the mechanisms of oppression she encountered along the way (Klingele, 2013, p. 1).

Le Cœur à Rire et à Pleurer is significant for the reader as it reflects the traces left by dramatic events on local cultures and the postcolonial conflicts that still affect the continent. Like Guadeloupe, which is highly valued by Maryse Condé, Africa always holds an important place in her stories where the identity search of West Indians is questioned (Chancé, 2009, pp. 66-77). Therefore, although this literary genre focused on the experience of a white-bourgeois character and men, black women decided to embrace it, rewrite the history of the postcolonial subject and adapt it for their own purposes (Xiuxia, 2008, p. 9).

Condé's novels, filled with humor and irony, explore questions about race, gender, and culture. Some of her novels are shaped by her personal experiences, disappointments, setbacks, and travels, and often incorporate current events, history, and politics. Her stories, particularly those featuring images of Creole societies, touch on many recurring themes of contemporary postcolonial literature such as the complexity of family relationships, the figure of the traveler, the postcolonial past, creolization, and globalization (Simplice, 2022, pp. 3-4). Condé's historical fiction describes the African family, which is on the verge of losing its traditions and history due to modernization and is overwhelmed by modernity.

The book is dedicated to his mother, who died a long time ago. Her mother was a wounded woman who had a bad marriage. Maryse Condé does not forgive her, but when the young girl goes to France, she feels the farewells with a painful tenderness, as if an instinct warns her that they will

never see each other again (Rüf, 1999). Thus, she recalls these memories that gave her back her family's love, especially the last night she lost her mother.

Condé uses variable point-of-view techniques to present the reader with a Guadeloupean society divided along racial and social status lines. She is the only writer who uses the possessive pronoun "my" in the title "My Childhood" (Condé, 1999), suggesting a secure sense of ownership of her past. The author uses indirect expressions to evoke painful memories. The fact that she used "oxymoron," that is, the contradictory concepts of "laughing" and "crying" together to write the title of her novel, is the result of a well-managed life after many setbacks related to the desire to tell the truth (Jatoe-Kaleo, 2013, pp. 352-353).

Maryse creates a chasm between herself and her family by portraying her parents as timid black people who are fully assimilated into French culture. She not only recounts these facts after the events of her upbringing but also from the time of her birth. The author's use of possessive pronouns in relation to her parents, brothers, and sisters places her in the context of a stranger: "Because my father was a former civil servant and my mother was employed, they regularly took advantage of the leave from the French mainland with their children."[2] (Condé, 1999, p. 11). However, Maryse underlines her parents' pride and loyalty to Paris: "For them, France was in no way the center of colonial power. The only thing that really shed light on their existence was the homeland and the City of Light, Paris." (Condé, 1999, p. 11).

On the other hand, narratives about colonialism, otherness, and alienation, family, and patriarchal society shed light on the birth of Condé's character. The traditional image of the Creole woman implies a matriarchal figure occupied by the family and serving as the pillar of her community (Cooper, 2016, pp. 37-38). However, Condé does not rely on these stereotypes and refuses to create a woman who can be reduced to a historical object. Condé refuses to be categorized as a black slave/victim because this would limit her potential and creative power that could lead to social transformation.

Although her own origins were not French, her mother's admiration for that nation emphasized that this race had developed thanks to herself and other blacks. Thus, throughout the narrative, Maryse draws attention to the power of women in society, based on the power of her mother: "At the same time, neither of them felt the slightest inferiority complex because of their color. They believed themselves to be the brightest, most intelligent proof of the progress of the Great Black Races" (Condé, 1999, p. 18).

However, Maryse also describes her father's indifference to his wife's situation; the person who was uncomfortable with his wife's attitude: "He felt liberated around two o'clock in the afternoon when he could escape from all these disgusting things. Periods, pregnancies, births, menopauses! […]" (Condé, 1999, p. 22). The use of free indirect discourse here to describe her father's reaction shows Maryse's uncertainty about her father's feelings and the fragmentation of his identity: "Indifferent and somewhat impatient with his wife's sulks, he was nevertheless happy to be a man. He puffed out his chest as he passed Place de la Victoire." (Condé, 1999, p. 22).

In the story, Condé also reveals the difference between classes economically. Madonne's son threatening Maryse reveals the tension between the rich and the poor. At the end of the *Class Struggle* chapter in the story, Maryse's parents make an explanation about the hostility she faced: "Fashion was divided into two classes: a well-dressed, well-shoe children's class that went to school to learn and be a good person. The other class consisted of scoundrels and jealous people who only wanted to harm them." (Condé, 1999, p. 35). Maryse, who admires the beauty of a woman she sees on the street, tells her mother about her contentment. However, the fact that the woman

[2]All quotations in the work have been translated into English by me.

is white causes criticism from her mother:

> In a way, I guessed my mother was right. At the same time, I wasn't guilty either. I didn't admire Amélie because she was white. Yes, but her pink skin, light eyes, and wavy hair were an integral part of this combination that I admired so much. All of this was beyond my understanding. The next Sunday, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Amélie kneeling and pulling out a cross at the entrance of her bench. I didn't turn my head towards her. I realized that her beauty was forbidden to me. (Condé, 1999, pp. 93-94)

Maryse becomes alienated like her parents but cannot identify with them. She feels suffocated by her parents and their obsession with France. At sixteen, Maryse discovers that she knows almost nothing about Guadeloupe beyond her limited experience. An escape into a fantasy world, a thirst for knowledge, dreams of autonomy and freedom lead her towards her destiny as a writer. "Staying at Dolé-les-Bains made me want to open the cage where I had been locked up since I was born. I realized I didn't know my country. I realized that I only knew a narrow quadrilateral about La Pointe" (Condé, 1999, p. 129). According to Condé, the root of the problem is actually alienation, and her family is also making efforts in this direction:

> They were constantly trying to control something hidden within them, something that could escape from them at any moment and cause greater damage. Because of this effort, they were never natural. […] My mother and father were alienated. I felt that I was getting to the core of the problem. (Condé, 1999, p. 127)

Conclusion

Postcolonialism is an intellectual and political movement that emerged from the mid-20th century onwards, analyzing the history of European colonialism. Therefore, literary works characterized as postcolonial often deal with themes such as identity, exile, cultural alienation, racial mixing, and racism. The 21st-century literary critic and theorist of postcolonialism, Frantz Fanon, discusses the colonized in his work, particularly the phenomenon of alienation of the Black Western Indians. Fanon, who theorized alienation, states that this situation arises from the difference between an individual's self-defined identity and the identity attributed to them by society.

Maryse Condé, one of the important novelists of postmodern literature, draws attention to the fact that she questions slavery, colonialism, and the identity search of exiles in her works. The author, who investigates the effects of white colonialism on black races, also addresses female identity in her works. In her autobiographical storybook, *Le Cœur à Rire et à Pleurer*, Condé tells her memories from Guadeloupe, especially her parents' alienation from their own roots. Condé's parents became alienated due to their passion for France, a country that did not reciprocate their attachment. On the other hand, although Maryse grew up in Guadeloupe, she never identified herself with either the Guadeloupean or French heritage. She spends most of her childhood and adolescence trying to find her true identity. However, Johnson (2008, p. 16) emphasizes that Condé does not feel sadness for this lost home in neither her fiction nor her autobiography (2008, p. 16). Although being detached from their roots caused a painful alienation for Maryse's parents, Maryse decides to fight against it by accepting her roots and telling her story (Čepo, 2020, p. 158).

As a native of Guadeloupe, a French citizen, and also a United States citizen, Condé analyzes a society that distinguishes itself as "inferior" and "superior" (Nesbitt, 2003, p. 391). This alienating dilemma becomes personal for Condé because conforming to such rhetoric leads to the erosion of identity and consequently, the loss of her voice. In this context, Condé's writings are an effort to defend all universal societies that have succumbed to injustice. The author fights for absolute freedom.

Through Maryse's free and indirect speech, it is possible to understand the complexity of a

multicultural, multiracial, and highly hierarchical society. The portrait of her mother allows Pointe to see the perspectives of this hierarchical multicultural society's memory. Maryse, coming from a mother who could not read or write, also draws a portrait of an enigmatic and hermetic individual (Jatoe-Kaleo, 2013, p. 354).

On the other hand, Condé, through her stories, wants to break free from the chains of the patriarchal system and colonial culture, find her voice, liberate her body, and show that women's place is not condemned to eternal silence. The author states that identity is formed as a dynamic that is shaped in relation to the Other, and the reflection of this allows the individual to draw their own image (Klingele, 2013). She believes that the best way to solve such injustice problems is to completely eliminate the concept of "an inferior entity" and instead support a universe that includes the concepts of race, nationality, identity, and language that have long divided people, and searches for new expressions in her works (Condé, 2004, pp. 154-159).

Finally, Condé's writings are part of a lineage of postcolonial writing since she comes from a previously colonized country. As a witness to independence, the author writes texts that denounce the traumatic injustices of the colonial and postcolonial periods as well as socio-political issues. Maryse Condé's characters are not always satisfied with life and are often in search of happiness, which becomes a recurring theme in her novels; therefore, Black people must take on their own cultural polyphony in the aftermath of colonialism (Simplice, 2022, p. 11).

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