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Transatlantic Slave Trade and Slave Uprooting in Maryse Conde's *Segu*

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Abstract:

The paper seeks to explore the issue of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and slave uprooting in Maryse Condé's *Segu*. Due to their geographical location, African coastal countries seem to be the slave providers par excellence. Consequently, most of the written accounts of the *Triangular Trade* are limited to the coastal Africa to the detriment of the hinterland countries such as Mali. Nevertheless, the estimates show its importance in the supply of slaves during the *Atlantic Slave Trade*. Another problem is the issue of 'Identity Fading' which is scarcely approached as an outcome of the *Triangular Trade* in colonial and post-colonial times. In this scope, the study's data are collected and analyzed in the postcolonial theoretical context. As a result, the findings of the study have established the responsibility of the *Triangular Trade* in today's depersonalization and acculturation of many Africans leading to "autophobia" and "Negro Negrophobia."

Key-words: depersonalization, diaspora, postcolonial theory, slave uprooting, slave trade.

Résumé :

L'article vise à explorer la question de la traite négrière transatlantique et du déracinement des esclaves dans le roman *Segu* de Maryse Condé. De par leurs situations géographiques, les pays côtiers africains semblent être considérés comme les pourvoyeurs d'esclaves par excellence. Par conséquent, la plupart des témoignages écrits sur le commerce triangulaire se limitent à l'Afrique côtière au détriment des pays enclavés comme le Mali. Néanmoins, les statistiques montrent son importance dans l'approvisionnement d'esclaves pendant la traite négrière. Une autre problématique est « l'effacement de l'identité » qui est rarement abordée comme une conséquence directe du commerce triangulaire pendant les périodes coloniales et postcoloniales. C'est dans ce cadre que les données de l'étude ont été collectées et analysées dans le contexte théorique postcolonial. En conséquence, les résultats de l'étude ont établi la responsabilité du commerce triangulaire dans la dépersonnalisation et l'acculturation de nombreux Africains contemporains conduisant à « l'autophobie » et à la « négro-nérophobie ».

Mots-clés : dépersonnalisation, diaspora, théorie postcoloniale, déracinement des esclaves, traite des esclaves.

Introduction

The present paper is a retrospective account of the Bambara roots of the Guadeloupean-native writer, Maryse Condé, who achieved a historical reconstitution of her enslaved Sub-Saharan ancestors. Practically, a significant number of the enslaved Africans shipped abroad to work on the plantations were captured from inside West Africa and embarked through the various European coastal trading enclaves such as Gorée Island in Senegal, Cape-Coast Castle in Ghana, and the Bight of Benin. Consequently, according to Nunn (2008), who used statistical techniques, the estimated slave exports from 1400 to 1900 classify Mali as the fifth slave supplier in Africa, with 524, 031 deportees, behind Angola (3, 607, 402), Ghana (1, 603, 392), Nigeria (1, 410, 970), and the Democratic Republic of Congo (759, 270). The estimates are obtained by associating elements on the variable quantity of slaves shipped from African ports with figures from historical records reporting the ethnic identities of slaves taken from Africa “including records of sale, plantation inventories, slave registers, slave runaway notices, court records, prison records, marriage records, death certificates, baptismal records, parish records, notarial records, and slave interviews”. – this cause and effect analysis tries to identify and clearly articulate the causal links between Western Slavery and the Depersonalization and Acculturation of African slaves. To that effect, Ashcroft (2008:194) argued: “The European slave trade and plantation slavery not only uprooted Africans from their home environments, but, through centuries of systematic racial denigration, alienated, enslaved Africans from their own racial characteristics.”

We have chosen to investigate the topic of this study because there are problems that we have noticed. A key problem is that most of the written accounts of the *Triangular Trade* are limited to the coastal trading enclaves such as Gorée Island in Senegal, Cape-Coast and Elmina castles in Ghana, or the Bight of Benin completely forgetting some landlocked countries such as Mali. That is, in their function of loading platforms, these places indicate the showcase of the *Transatlantic Slave Trade*, but they were not the main breeding grounds for slaves. Another salient concern is that most of the contributors who have tackled the issue of depersonalization and acculturation in Africa blame colonization, without questioning its ‘mother’, the *Transatlantic Slave Trade*.

It is in regard to the foregoing problems that, through the narratives of Maryse Condé’s *Segu*, the study seeks to re-evaluate the scope and the incidence of the Western hinterland slave hunting so as to restore its true worth and merit in the inventory report of the Triangular Trade. In the same vein, through illustration, contextualisation, interpretation and discussion, the study

examines the extent to which Transatlantic Slave Trade perverted and distorted the mind of Africans in their perception and notion of their own self. In order to be able to do so, the study is undertaken in the postcolonial theoretical framework. This indicates that some postcolonial concepts or tools are mainly used to collect, analyze and interpret the study's data. For instance, postcolonial concepts such as Diaspora – in its approach as a forced displacement of peoples from their native lands – and Deracinate – referring to those who are uprooted from their native or social environment – are used to account for the causal links between Western Slavery and the Depersonalization of Africans.

1-Presentation of Maryse Condé and Her Selected Novel

Maryse Condé was born as Maryse Boucolon at Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe. In 1953, she studied at Sorbonne in Paris, where she majored in English. In 1959, she got married with Mamadou Condé, a Guinean actor. After graduating, she taught in Guinea, Ghana, and Senegal. In 1981, she divorced but, the following year, she married Richard Philcox, the English language translator of most of her novels. The novel, which is object of this study, was originally published in French as *Ségou* (1984), and was translated French by Barbara Bray, under the title *Segu* (1988). The subject matter of *Segu* lies in the following statement of Paule Marshall, who post scripted the novel: “With the dazzling storytelling skills of an African griot, Maryse Condé has written a rich, fast-paced saga of a great kingdom during the tumultuous period of the slave trade and the coming of Islam. *Segu* is history as vivid and immediate as today.” It explores the life of Dousika Traore, the author's ancestor, and his four sons: Tiekoro, who rejected his people's traditional religion and converted to Islam; Siga, who was firmly rooted in tradition; Naba, who is snatched by slave traders; and Malobali, who becomes a mercenary and halfhearted Christian.

2-Demographic Distribution of the *Transatlantic Slave Trade*: Illustrations and Statistics

In her impulse of providing a blow-by-blow account of her roots, Maryse Condé makes a flashback to the Kingdom of Segou (18th – 19th c.), in the heart of West Africa. The Kingdom of Segou covered Bamako, Mourdia, Hamdallay, Jenne, and the capital city, Segou. It was crossed by the rivers Niger (also called Joliba) and Bani but had no outlet to the sea. Among all their neighbouring countries, Mali and Burkina Faso are the only countries with no access to the Atlantic Ocean. Nevertheless, the following estimates show their importance in the supply of slaves during the Atlantic Slave Trade: Mali (524, 031) and Burkina (183,101) “supplied” 707, 132 slaves, whereas Senegal (221, 723), Guinea (242, 529), Mauritania (419), Algeria (0), Niger

(150) and Côte d'Ivoire (52, 602) provided together 517, 423. At first glance, this demographic distribution of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in this part of Africa may seem unrealistic because of the huge disparity between the hinterlands and the coasts (which are apparently more conducive to slave supply because of their geographic location). Nunn (2008: 24-30) tries to explain this semblance of disparity through a commercial strategic viewpoint:

Slaves shipped from the ports of a coastal country may have come from a country located further inland. [...] Countries that were initially the most prosperous and most densely populated tend to be the countries that subsequently exported the largest number of slaves. [...] The more prosperous areas were also the most densely populated, large numbers of slaves could be efficiently obtained if civil wars or conflicts could be instigated. [...] Europeans and slave traders also played a role in promoting internal conflict. Slave merchants and raiders formed strategic alliances with key groups inside villages and states in order to extract slaves.

The *Transatlantic Slave Trade* lasted from the 16th to the 19th centuries. These periods are significant in the history of West Africa, insofar as the 16th century marked the decline of the last West African Great Empire: Songhay (consecutive to Ghana and Mali); whereas the 19th century witnessed the *Scramble for Africa* at the infamous Berlin Conference, where Europeans balkanized Africa in the name of the no less infamous *Civilizing Mission*.

3- Depersonalization of Africans in *Segu*

In the incipit of the novel, there is also the Family Tree of the Traore (the author's indigenous Bambara family name), showing how African names were rejected by religion and slavery for Arab and European ones in the intention of identity distortion. Interpreting Maryse Condé's Family Tree, we realise that all the descendants of Doussika Traore (the author's ancestor) were submitted to identity theft, motivated by the encounter of Islam and Slavery: Tiekoro became Oumar, whereas Siga became Ahmed, after their conversion to Islam. As for their brothers, Malobali and Naba, the first became Samuel and the second Jean-Baptiste, on the spur of slavery. The latter, in his servitude, married a she-slave, Ayodele, who, in turn, became Romana. Their son, Babatunde, turned into Eucaristus.

All the above appellations, in lieu of African first names, are motivated by the aspiration of the invaders to pervert Africans by assimilating them to the cultural values of the occupying power. In doing that, Africans are uprooted and given over to acculturation and depersonalization. This phenomenon is still a topical issue in African countries, where the so-

called revealed religions of Christianity and Islam are established. Genuine African names are uncommon to the hegemony of Arab and European ones. In this respect, Condé observes that « The Muslims always saddle us with their names and so do the Christians. » p.198. Nevertheless, a significant number of members of some ethnic groups in Mali, such as the Bambara, the Dogon and the Bwa, are still remaining faithful to their indigenous names.

As far as *Transatlantic Slave Trade* is concerned, this depersonalization of the slave-captive is seen in his itinerary from one slave-owner to another, each one calling him the way he likes. That was the fate of Malobali, who was captured in Segou, and all along the route to the loading coast, he was sold to slave dealers. That way, he successively went to the Senoufo land of Kong (Côte d'Ivoire), before joining the Gonja district of Salaga in Northern Ghana, and then, rallied Kumasi, the capital city of the Ashanti, and Cape Coast, the main city of the Fanti. His expedition led him to Benin where he got acquainted with the Goun and the Yoruba of Porto Novo; the Fon and the Adja of Ouidah, and the Ewe of Abomey.

But the experience that marked Malobali for life was his forced conversion to Christianity described by Condé in these words: “To be converted! To deny the gods of one’s fathers and through them their whole culture and civilization – this struck Malobali as an unforgivable crime. He would never commit it, even under torture.” (p.228). Indeed, the traditional African religion, by nature, is tolerant of all beliefs. In contrast to the foreign religions like Christianity and Islam, the traditional African religion does not proselytise. Africans do not propagate and promote their beliefs but they protect their adherents from evil and misfortune. That is why, in Mali, despite the supremacy of Islam, people, in their great majority, remain fundamentally traditionalists.

Many passages of Condé’s account of the *Atlantic Slave Trade* depict the settlers’ strategy of depriving slaves of their genuine African names, without their consent. That was the case of Naba, expressed in this sentence: « If Jean-Baptiste looked up reluctantly it was because he hated the name, which has been given him during a semblance of baptism in the chapel of the fort. His real name was Naba. » (p.97). Through this passage, we observe that, through their process of depersonalising slaves, traders and owners were dedicated to rename the Black men, so as to eliminate all traces of their ancestry. Thus, they intend to forestall any potential amalgamation or family gathering of the diaspora. But this malicious intent is not always followed by the expected effect, as seen in the above illustration, where the hatred of Naba is evident towards his re-baptism.

The image of perversion is seen in the term « Sham marriage » used by the author to describe the semblance of ‘marriages’ « Frenchmen contracted with signares but which had no legal value » (p.102). The appellation “signare” is a corruption of the Portuguese “senhora”, designating African ladies who cohabited with slave traders as concubines, playing the role of “wives”. Here, Condé uses a biblical allusion – “Sham’s marriage” – to depict the marital relationship between slave-masters and their female slaves, who, paradoxically, considered their position as a privilege, hence their depersonalization. The last straw is that they consider this second-hand position of wife as a social advancement. The unconfessed goal of the so-called *Sham Curse* was to justify the subjugation of Blacks. This is where *Negrophobia* comes from, perpetrated by the European racist exegeses of the *Book of Genesis*, who were ideologically driven by white supremacy. The slave-trading nations of Europe have seized this "opportunity" to justify their crime against humanity.

This semblance of marriage, called “Sham’s marriage” by Condé, became a repercussion during the colonial time. Amadou Hampâté Bâ (1999) refers to it as “colonial marriage” which consisted of the illegal union between a colonial administrator and an indigenous woman of his choice. More explicit details about this state of fact are expressed in *The Fortunes of Wangrin*:

The Commandant decided to opt for a “colonial marriage” with a local woman. The bride, compelled to agree, was not referred to as “Madame”, an appellation reserved for white women only. The real victims were the children who were officially registered as children of “unknown fathers” and forgotten when the civil servants responsible for their birth left the country. (p.33)

The offspring of these circumstantial unions are doomed to public disdain after the progenitor's return to his country. This facet of the fallout from colonization is little explored and deserves repair. Maryse Condé uses another term: « house wife » to designate the status of ‘married slave girl’, who, « with her pretty little face and her youth will soon bear a string of half-caste bastards » (p.124). Here, « bastard » has the conceptual meaning of ‘abandoned’, instead of unknown father. Another image of depersonalizing the slave is reflected in his own attitude of introversion caused by multiple rejections. This is the case of Siga in the following passage: « Since his arrival in Fez, Siga had had no dealings with women except for the prostitutes in the public brothels: he was too proud to risk being rebuffed by a woman because of his color. » (p.183). The mind of the black slave is unhinged to the extent that he lives in a mood of retention and self-effacement. The Pride of Siga resides in the following: « Siga had

come to understand that a black skin made you a creature apart. But why? He could find no answer. The Bambara were as strong, proud and creative as any other people. » (p.196). In her attempt to describe the disgrace and the shame conveyed by slavery, Condé states: « Slavery turns a human being either into an apathetic lump or into a wild beast. » (p.203).

The depersonalization of Ayodele is seen in the many paradoxes that characterise her being: « She was only just over twenty, but her heart was that of an old woman, older than that of the mother who bore her, older even than her grandmother's; bitter as *cahuchu*, the wood that weeps » (p.203). This statement leads Maryse Condé to use six figures of speech together in one sentence: metonymy, simile, personification, borrowing, gradation and hyperbole to describe the feeling of Ayodele. The metonymy compares the heart of Ayodele with that of an old woman designates, not love or tenderness that characterise old age, but the emotion of despair, of anguish and of dread bore by a young lady who lost hope in life. The simile *as cahuchu* borrowed the Brazilian name of “rubber” – *Hevea brasiliensis* – to personify the bitterness and the tears of Ayodele's broken heart. The gradation *her heart was older than that of her mother, older even than her grandmother's* may seem paradoxical, but it alludes to pre-slavery period when our ascendants lived in peace and harmony. The hopelessness of Ayodele is also expressed in this assessment of Condé: “How was she to learn to live again when there was no more reason for living? Speak of tomorrow when there was no future; watch the sun rise when there was no more light?” (p.215). These rhetorical questions illustrate the dilemma to aspire for something that is no more.

Another image of slave depersonalization is rendered through the perversion of José: « José was a Nago from Oyo. Because of his extreme good looks the Portuguese had used him as a woman, and he had finally adopted their vice himself » (p.204). This euphemism contributes to show that some social mores of our time, such as homosexuality, take their roots in slavery. « José, the *ganhador* was sadly conscious of his degradation, and his heart was full of hatred toward the white man. He wasn't a Nago anymore. He wasn't even a human being. He was only a good-for-nothing pervert. ». pp.204-205 Condé depicts the image of powerlessness and helplessness in the feeling of José, who could do nothing but to give in.

The paroxysm of slaves' self-denial is seen in the attitude of Abiola one of Condé's characters: « The child hated his black brothers: they reminded him that his mother was a slave and he was half Negro himself. He hated being called Abiola, when his baptismal name was Jorge. Jorge da Cunha. For he was the master's son. » (p.208). Similar to the attitude of Jorge,

mixed-race children tend to have a preference for their white ascendance. Worst, Condé states that “the half-castes were more arrogant than the whites, trying to make people forget that half their blood was black.” (p.391). This self-disdain, self-contempt, self-scorn is broadly explored in Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952; translated from French 1967, 2008) through the ambivalence of the *Comprador*. The dilemma of this auto-disparager of his own African traditional values is justifiably described by Jacques Chevrier (2006, p.197) on three counts: “Errance Identitaire” (Identity Wandering), “Bâtardise Culturelle” (Cultural Bastardy), or “Confusion Mentale” (Mental Confusion).

Conclusion

The term “slave” should be treated with care. Traditional “slavery” in West Africa does not deserve this appellation, being a form of socio-professional group. People in such position were referred to as captives, and could easily work themselves into freedom. They could marry into their owners’ families. They could become rich. Sometimes they even became chiefs and kings, like *Mansa Sakuru* of Mali. African societies had “slaves” called captives in the hierarchical structure of the community in socio-professional groups called “castes” (not to be mistaken with the Western meaning of the term). For Europeans, castes are untouchable people, like dalits or outcasts in India. In Africa, especially in Mali, castes are not pariahs. They are custodians of secret knowledge and occult powers which must be preserved for the survival of the community. Members of “castes” are called *Nyamakala* in Bambara, i.e. “antidote of the *Nyama*”, the occult forces of evil inside everything.

There, across the Atlantic, slaves were treated like cattle. The European institutionalization of commercial slavery deprived Africans of all rights and human values. It is within this framework that Davidson (1994) came to the conclusion that “Slavery gave birth to Racism, at least in its modern form, just as Racism became the excuse for slavery excesses.” For hundreds of years, before the *Transatlantic Slave Trade*, Africans had dealt with Europeans and Americans as their equals. Slave trade pulled West Africa back and pushed Europe and America forward, thanks to the industrial revolution in Europe, with the invention of mechanical machines and guns, and the ambition to conquer the world. (Rodney, 1973). Africa became victim of its legendary hospitality. The former commercial partners, once clever enough, became harsh and pitiless invaders. As if that was not enough, instead of recognizing their crime of depriving Africa of its workforce, they gathered at the infamous *Berlin*

Conference and decided that Africa was a “primitive and wasted land”; therefore, it should be “civilised”. It was the *Scramble for Africa*, the logical consequence of Slave trade.

Slave trade, religious proselytism, and colonization left their indelible traces on African indigenous cultures and are the basis of many post-colonial conflicts on the continent. They are still the evil that eats away at our societies: “Nowadays, youngsters are in lack of reference points of identity, integrity and intellectual curiosity. This intellectual alienation takes its origin from Slavery and was projected in the colonial period, when the Literature and the History of the coloniser’s country were taught at the expense of the African ones. Thus our African very values are treated with contempt because of our foreign up-bringing.” (Sangho, 2016). Being unaware about their past, most of the youth of Africa seems “to be possessed by a deaf wish, a deep yearning to be engulfed and remoulded in the image of Europe.” (Zezeza, 1992:22)

Maryse Condé’s account of the fate of her ancestors is detailed, descriptive and historical. Through her narrative skills, the reader discovers how the cultures of West Africa merge and amalgamate, rise and tumble down, putting the slaves to question their identities. The main topic examined is that of subjugation and dispersal of a family (the Traoré) stripped of all its possessions: names, cultures, traditions and religions in the name of a stupid and sickening cupidity and gluttony.

As a concluding note, James Abner Peditwell (1939: 42, 91) suggests: “In order to determine what our University curriculum should be, we must first decide what our society should be. What we need to do is to give our youth more thorough grounding in the fundamentals. The great cultural verities are eternal, changeless; a certain indefinable something whose essence is timelessness.” The foregoing excerpt indicate that if students are taught the values of their tradition, it will help them avoid being indoctrinated by preconceived ideas. A better understanding of African identity will guide the students to assert themselves with dignity. Traditional values should be integrated in school curricula, in terms of stories, proverbs, and songs, with a deep analysis of the lessons contained in them, in comparison with modern values. Educators should focus on the similarities and differences between traditional and modern values and make a beneficial use of local knowledge, by resorting to relevant local materials. African scholars should be involved in the preservation of African values by making it their duty to promote African culture.

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