

Counter-Narratives And Hidden Histories: A Postcolonial Reading of Maryse Condé's *Traversée De La Mangrove* and Patrick Chamoiseau's *Solibo Magnifique*

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Abstract

Original Research Article

Modern Caribbean Literature is dominated by the theme of cultural identity search. Evidently, postcolonial French Caribbean Literature also gives special consideration to voices and stories historically marginalized by dominant discourses. This is what the second generation French Caribbean writers refer to as the subversion of traditional discourses. In the light of postcolonial theory, this book chapter seeks to show the counter-narratives and the hidden histories of Caribbean peoples as presented in *Maryse Condé's Traversée de la mangrove* and Patrick Chamoiseau's *Solibo Magnifique*. The research method employed for this study is documentary in which Patrick Chamoiseau's *Solibo Magnifique* and Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove* are primary sources of information along with other academic materials as supporting secondary sources. These two are Creole writers of the Caribbean literary movement of Creoleness which seeks to establish Creole cultural identity through two major counter-discursive practices. The first is creolisation of French language whose objectives is to counter the imperialist language. The other one is history re-writing, which is achieved through plural voices and popular speech. In *Traversee de la mangrove*, Maryse Condé subverts traditional discourse through a counter-narrative style based on plural voices. This is order to narrate the Caribbean hidden history influenced by slavery and colonisation. In *Solibo Magnifique*, however, Patrick Chamoiseau employs a literary style in which French and Creole language interplay in a discourse that subverts the literary canon. The study concludes that Caribbean hidden history is retold by Chamoiseau and Condé in two different styles: Creolisation of French and plural voices respectively.

Keywords: hidden histories, counter-narratives, plural voices, creolisation, postcolonial literature.

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Introduction

With the emergence of Edouard Glissant's Caribbeaness (1958) and Creoleness (1989) by Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphael Confiant and Jean Bernabé to challenge Aimé Césaire's Negritude

(1939), modern Caribbean literature is born. This literature is made up of Francophone Caribbean writers that are generally classified as second generation writers who emerged to counter Aimé Césaire's literary style as expressed in Negritude.



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The uniqueness of modern Caribbean literature, which is composed of such writers like Edouard Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau, Simone Schwarz-Bart, Maryse Condé and Raphael Confiant, resides in the fact it is characteristically based on postcolonial theory.

Postcolonial literature examines the effect of colonialism. According to K.H. Anithalakshmi (2022, p. 615), “Postcolonial literature refers to a body of literary works produced by authors from countries and regions that were once colonized by European powers: Postcolonial literature covers a wide range of genre and “is generally characterised by its exploration of themes related to colonial history, cultural hybridity, resistance, and identity”.

Patrick Chamoiseau and Maryse Condé are both postcolonial writers whose works belong to the second generation group of Francophone Caribbean writers. Even though the two writers differ in their literary styles, they share similar postcolonial literary ideologies. Whereas Chamoiseau is one of the three initiators of the literary movement of Creoleness which proposes creolisation of French language, Condé leads a group of female Caribbean writers that oppose that literary style. Condé prefers cultural hybridity as opposed to Chamoiseau’s linguistic hybridity.

Based on postcolonial theory, this paper shall examine Maryse Condé’s *Traversée de la mangrove* (1989) and Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Solibo Magnifique* (1988). This is in order to bring to light the themes of counter-narratives and hidden histories so as to show to what extent these postcolonial novels counter Western colonial narratives and imposed histories on the Caribbean people.

1. Research Methodology

This research work shall employ the documentary research method for analysis. Condé’s *Traversée de la mangrove* and Chamoiseau’s *Solibo Magnifique* shall be the primary sources for data collection for the work. Secondary sources for information used for analysis shall be obtained through some critical and creative materials as well as peer-reviewed academic sources obtained from

the library and internet sources that are related to the chosen works.

2. Literature Review

There is an abundant literature on counter-narratives and hidden histories in connection with postcolonial literature. It is essential to briefly review these writings in order to elucidate our chosen topic.

Anithalakshmi establishes link between postcolonial theory and the modern Caribbean literary style of counter-narratives and the concept of hidden histories. In his article “Postcolonial Literature: Voices of Resistance and Identity”, Anithalakshmi (2022, p. 616) is outright in referring to these literary concept. He also points to the fact that the main objective of postcolonial literature is identity research. According to him,

Postcolonial literature holds immense significance in global literary landscape as it challenges the dominance of Eurocentric narratives and amplifies the voices of marginalized and silenced communities [...]. By presenting alternative perspectives and histories, postcolonial literature offers a critical examination of the legacy of colonialism and its enduring impact on societies and cultures worldwide. Moreover, it serves as a platform for fostering inter-cultural dialogue and understanding, bridging the gaps between the West and the rest [...].

Moreover, Anithalakshmi points out that postcolonial literature, to which belong the works of Chamoiseau and Condé, investigate “how authors from postcolonial regions use their literary works as a means of resistance against oppressive colonial structures and as a vehicle to explore and assert their cultural, national, and individual identities” (p.616).

In the same vein, Kishan Swaroop Rana (2021, <http://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2021.6.5.06>) also adds his voice to the characteristics of postcolonial

literature. In his article titled, “Exploring the Elements of Postcolonialism and Its Exponents”, he affirms that,

Marginalization, Identity, Multiculturalism, Hybridity, Mimicry, Migration etc are elements of postcolonialism. Marginalization occurs when some groups of society are kept on the edge by a dominant group. People may be marginalized socially, politically, or economically. Marginalized people have to struggle for their livelihood, don't have their fundamental rights and are exploited by society. They are deprived of opportunities and access to all those things that enable one to improve the quality of one's life.

Concerning the concepts of counter-narrative and hidden histories in Maryse Condé's works, Lázara Bolton's doctoral thesis is very explicit. In her work titled “(Re) Writing History in Maryse Condé, Femi Euba, and Reinaldo Arenas”, the idea of creolisation is specifically introduced as relating to postcolonial literature. According to Lázara Bolton (2016, p.4),

Rather than accepting the notion that the hegemony of dominant colonial cultures completely shapes the oppressed, who passively assimilate and adopt the values and worldviews of the oppressors, scholars of African Diaspora have documented more complex processes of cultures merging and being reshaped, which is often referred to as the process of creolization.

Regarding the notion of hidden histories, the work of Kaiama Glover is elucidating. In “Confronting the Communal; Maryse Condé's Challenge to New World Orders in *Moi, Tituba*”, Glover (2012,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23597714>) observes that,

In her 1986 novel *Moi, Tituba, sorcière...Noire de Salem*, Guadeloupean writer and theorist Maryse Condé rewrites and recontextualizes the events of 1692 Salem witch trials by focusing her attention on one of the incident's most central, yet most marginalized, players - the West Indian slave-woman Tituba. Inspired and “permitted” by Tituba's disappearance from the official historical record to freely imagine her post-Salem story, Condé traces a detailed journey for her heroine - from the Caribbean islands to New England and back. In so doing, she not only paints a provocative portrait of 17th-century puritan culture, but also interrogates multiple contemporary New World communities.

Interestingly, this Glover's opinion on hidden histories in Marysé Condé's work conforms to the objective of this study on the fact that hidden histories are exposed through recontextualisation of events. These events are re-written from the perspective of the marginalized people instead of that of the colonial power. Moreover, the literary style of subversion is normally involved.

Furthermore, Joella Adia Chao Jones also adds her opinion to the concept of hidden histories in Maryse Condé's novels. In her thesis titled, “Crossed Tongues: Reclaiming Black Antillean Female Subjectivity within the Narratives of Maryse Condé”, Joella (2011, pp. 75-6) asserts in the chapter two of her work that,

Condé writes of her own experience by weaving a series of somewhat independent anecdotes together that although personal, ultimately speak to a large autonomous subject who engages

in an act of historical reclamation. Condé memoir is the convergence of history and memory. The pluralism that scholars have argued is implicit in Antillean identity can be recognized in Condé narrative.

Additionally, “Through the recollection of individual experience, Condé engages a communal past. This narrative strategy mimics her ability while writing fiction to locate the multiplicity of Antillean identity within a “confluence of individualities” (Jones, 2011, p.76).

Multiplicity and cultural plurality are the two large poles of Condean literary style. This is the idea on which lies the opinion of Nara Araujo in her preface to *L'œuvre de Maryse Condé: Questions et réponses à propos d'une écrivaine politiquement incorrecte*. According to Araujo (1996, p. 10),

La multiplicité et la relativité sont deux constantes de son univers romanesque. Multiplicité qui s'exprime par la variation continue des lieux et espaces, par la prolifération des personnages, par l'ample spectre des situations humaines, par la richesse des instruments d'expression, par le vaste horizon de sujets et de thèmes. La relativité, associée à cette multiplicité, se voit renforcée par la méfiance d'une voix énonciative qui se veut distanciée.

[Multiplicity and relativity are two constants of her fictional universe. Multiplicity which is expressed by continuous variation of places and environments, by proliferation of characters, by spectacular presence of human situations, by richness in expressive tools, by vastness of horizon of themes and topics. Relativity, associated with this

multiplicity, is evidently reinforced by a disregard for an expressive voice which is intentionally withdrawn].

Counter-narratives and hidden histories are also present in the works of Patrick Chamoiseau as much as in those of Condé. In “The Works of Patrick Chamoiseau: Writing in Palimpsest?” Savrina Chinien (2012, <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pulm.8598>) asserts thus:

Likewise, Chamoiseau, one of the leaders of the literary movement of *créolité*, has embraced the same goal in his works, that of redefining the excolonised Black Martinican man by going back to his origins to confer an identity upon him, and thereby provide him with a symbolic space within which to transcend his traumatic history and at the same time reject (neo) colonialism, the cultural, intellectual, racial and moral hegemony of the West.

Furthermore, according to Chinien, “As a scriptwriter, Chamoiseau’s discourse, while often a counter-discourse to official History, is in itself an agent of History in so far as it contributes to a social and historical awareness” (<https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pulm.8598>).

With regard to counter-narratives in Chamoiseau’s writings, Lewis Seifert is more interested in pointing out the existent difference between Chamoiseau and Anglo-American writers. In “Orality, History, and “Creoleness in Patrick Chamoiseau’s Creole Folktales”, Seifert (2002, <https://www.jstor.books.pulm.8773>) affirms that,

Unlike many Anglo-American writers who deliberately eschew a single, coherent, and omniscient narrator in favour of multiple, sometimes dissonant voices, Chamoiseau casts his narrator as a Creole storyteller from the

seventeenth- or eighteenth-century French Antilles. While he by no means limits himself to historical authenticity, his narrator-storyteller is given a psychological and contextual coherence that would seem to go against the grain of postmodern literary fairy tales.

3. Summaries of the Works Under Study

3.1 *Traversée de la mangrove*

Traversée de la mangrove tells the story of Francis Sancher, the hero of the novel, who suddenly arrives at Rivière au Sel in Guadeloupe. Nobody knows about this man, including from where he is coming. However, he has come and stayed with them and has continued to live in the community. The people of Rivière au Sel are small-minded people with jealous aptitude who are living in an isolated community. As a result of this, Francis Sancher as a stranger in the community has drawn a lot of people's attention. There are different accounts and opinions about Francis Sancher but no one is sure who the man is. The novel is narrated in plural voices with every character given an important voice. Interestingly, all these voices from the characters connect to Francis Sancher.

Sancher is in love affairs with the young Mira. Her father consents to this relationship but the brothers of the girl are opposed to it. However, Mira is highly passionate about Francis Sancher and so she has to meet him. Mira meanders her way to meet Francis Sancher in the night. Sadly, the night that Mira has affairs with Sancher, he is found dead. He dies like a dog, stampeded and horribly killed. Mira's brothers are furious. However, Mira says that she is the one who willingly meets Francis Sancher.

Sancher is eventually buried. His massive body is wrapped in a black cloth and lowered into the tomb at a cimentary in Rivière au Sel. Again, there are varying voices from different characters concerning Sancher's death. Some are contented with his death, others are not happy, especially about the manner he dies.

3.2. *Solibo Magnifique*

In *Solibo Magnifique*, Patrick dresses a storyteller called Solibo the Magnificent. He suddenly dies one day while in a public performance in Fort-de-France in Martinique. The cause of his death is not clear. People wonder if he has died as a result of self-strangulation or murder. All evidence point to Bateau Français popularly known as Congo who could have poisoned Solibo. Philémon Bouaffeuse and Evarice Pilon are two policemen who are investigating the matter. After careful investigation, the two policemen conclude that Solibo dies from voice choke in his throat.

4. Re-Writing Hidden Histories through Plural Voices.

Plural voices is a narrative technique used by Maryse Condé in *Traversée de la mangrove* in re-writing the hidden histories of the Carribean people. Just like Seifert earlier observed, unlike like Anglo-American writers, Maryse Condé uses multiple voices in *Traverseé de la mangrove* to recontextualise events. This is known as history re-writing, as Caribbean history has been fragilised by years of colonialism and slavery. In this regard, in this novel, each character retells a story of the Caribbean society in one way or another.

Man Sonson, an old woman, is the most important character through whose voice the most essential historical re-writing is done. Her speech commences by revealing how long she has been living in the community. According to Condé (1989, p. 81), Man Sonson narrates thus:

Cela fait soixante-trois ans que j'habite ici à Rivière au Sel. C'est ici que je suis née. C'est ici que je fermerai mes deux yeux.

[I have been living here at Rivière au Sel for sixty-three years. It is here that I was born. I will close my two eyes here].

Then, she goes on to narrate, from her personal experience, the reality of cultural and racial

hybridity, a key literary feature of Condean vision. She says that,

Mon fils Robert le deuxième s'est marié en métropole avec une femme blanche qu'il a connue dans le bureau de poste où il travaille. Une femme blanche ! J'ai pleuré toutes les larmes de mon corps. C'est que nous ne sommes pas n'importe quelle qualité de Nègres. Les yeux des Blancs n'ont jamais brûlé les nôtres (pp. 81-2).

[Robert my second son married a white woman in France whom he knew in post office where he is working. A white woman! I cried profusely. This is because we are not special black people. The eyes of white people do not meet ours].

Man Sonson also retells the story of slavery from the account available to her by her late first son, Simeon. According to her:

Siméon, mon défunt, racontait comment quelques années après l'abolition de l'esclavage son grand-père, Léopold, avait été cravaché à mort par un Blanc auquel il n'avait pas voulu céder le passage. Cette affaire-là avait mis la région en émoi, car les amis de Léopold avaient voulu le venger. Le sang avait coulé. On avait compté des morts. Les champs de canne s'étaient embrasés et leur fumée était montée haut dans le ciel. Une femme blanche dans notre famille ! (p. 82).

[Simeon, my late husband, used to narrate how a few years after

abolition of slavery, his grandfather, Leopold, was knocked dead by a white man for whom he refused to give way. This issue put the whole place in turmoil, because Leopold's friends wanted to take revenge. Blood spilled. There were bodies everywhere. Sugar cane fields were set ablaze and their smoke rose high up to the sky. A white woman in our family!].

It is a thing of artistic beauty to see how the personal event in the life of Man Sonson is retold to be woven together with historical reality of slavery.

In another striking re-writing of history, Man Sonson retells the 1928 cyclonic disaster in the Caribbean, connecting it with the Second World War. According to her, her mother had witnessed the two events:

Ma maman, avant moi, voyait. Elle a vu le cyclone de 1928. Un matin, le jour s'est levé noir de colère, des plis au milieu du front, et elle a dit :

- Aie ! La Guadeloupe va chavirer aujourd'hui ! Elle a vu la guerre de 39-40 et que deux de ses propres garçon rencontreraient leur mort dans un pays lointain (p. 82).

[My mother, before me, saw. She saw the 1928 cyclone. One morning, the day became black with rage, with sweat in the middle of her forehead, she said:

- Oh! Guadeloupe is going to be in trouble! She saw the 39-40 war and that two of her own sons met their deaths in a distant country].

From the point of view of Joby another character in *Traversée de la mangrove*, Condé continues her historical recontextualisation. In fact, historical recontextualisation is a very essential technique to

Maryse Condé. Loulou, another of her characters in *Traversée de la mangrove*, is important in this regard. Her personality and speech help to recontextualise certain events in the novel. Through her, Condé brings to light the historical relationship between Britain, Queen Elizabeth and Latin America. According to Condé (1989, pp. 121-2), Loulou, who has the opportunity to meet with Queen Elizabeth II, affirms that:

La reine d'Angleterre, Elizabeth II, sa couronne de diamants plantée droit sur la tête, est assise au bout de la longue table rectangulaire, couverte de fleurs de chez nous [...]

La reine d'Angleterre me sourit, elle a une dent en or de Guyane dans sa mâchoire inférieure, et me dit :

-C'est vous qui cultivez toutes ces fleurs ?

J'incline la tête affirmativement et elle me demande :

-Comment s'appelle vos Pépinières ?

Je répons :

- Mais, depuis 1905, elles portent le nom de notre famille. Ce sont les Pépinières Lameaulnes.

Alors, la reine d'Angleterre me dit :

Bravo ! Désormais, vous serez notre fournisseur ! By appointment to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

histories, Patrick Chamoiseau prefers creolisation as a counter-discursive technique for historical recontextualisation. Whereas language is at the heart of Chamoiseau's Creoleness, Condé chooses cultural plurality. In this regard, in the programmatic manifest of Creoleness, *Éloge de la Créolité* (1989), Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant (1989, p.92) affirms that, Creolisation

refers to the brutal interaction, on either insular or landlocked territories [...] of culturally different populations; Europeans and Africans in the small Caribbean islands; Europeans, Africans and Indians in the Mascarene Islands; Europeans and Asians in the certain areas of the Philippines or in Hawaii; Arabs and black Africans in Zanzibar, etc. Generally resting upon a plantations economy, these populations are called to invent the new cultural designs allowing for a relative cohabitation between them.

Consequently, Creolisation results to linguistic hybridity, the coexistence of two or more languages in a community.

Using the literary style of Creolisation, Chamoiseau mixes French with Creole in his fictional expression. He does this to counter French linguistic imperialism. This is done either by directly mixing French and Creole together or by creating new words out of one's imagination. Chamoiseau believes that Black writers should create their new language in expressing themselves in a language that is not that of the imperialist.

In this regard, in *Solibo Maginifique*, in order to express the oppressive situation in Martinique regarding police brutality, Chamoiseau (1988, p. 84) asserts thus:

5. Creolisation as a Counter-Discursive Technique for History Re-Writing

If Maryse Condé favours fictional plural voices as means of re-writing Caribbean hidden

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