

Discrimination, oblivion and history. Tituba in the literature of Maryse Condé

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Introduction

"It wasn't witches that burned. It was women. Women who were seen as: very beautiful, very cultured and intelligent. Because they had water in the well or a beautiful plantation. Women who had a birthmark, women who were very skilled with herbal medicine. Women who had a strong connection with nature, women who danced, women who sang or anything else minimal. Any woman ran the risk of being burned in the 17th century. They were even thrown into the water and if they floated they were guilty and executed. If they sank and drowned, they were innocent. Women were thrown off cliffs, they were placed in deep holes in the ground. It wasn't witches that burned, it was women."

Rosa Castro Santiago. With these words we introduce a study that aims to analyze racial and gender discrimination in the texts of the historical novel: "*I, Tituba, the black witch of Salem*" by the Guadalupe writer Maryse Condé, a work that belongs to the collection Latin American and Caribbean literature/168 of Casa de las Americas 2010,¹ with a foreword by Inés María Martiatu Terry and translated by Mauricio Wacquez. It is divided into two parts, the first with 12 chapters and the second with 15; in addition to the prologue, epilogue, historical note and Maryse Condé and her time.

The novel is narrated by the protagonist who makes known a name that until a few years ago was forgotten by the history of slavery in the Caribbean and describes, through pejorative phrases used by the author, the wretched life suffered by a slave in the events of Salem. It is a fictional reconstruction of Tituba's life, based on real data from archives found about the trials conducted during the Salem witch hunt during the second half of the seventeenth century,¹ which revealed that this was the first slave to be condemned as a witch. For this, Condé combines elements of fiction with Tituba's real existence. It is expressed through the influence received from foreign literature, including: *The Witches of Salem* by Arthur Miller where the work studied is contextualized to give life to a character that was minimized. It also uses phrases that reflect total discrimination towards slavery and women, being these the ones that marked its protagonist from her birth until her death.²

The true story tells that Tituba was an Indian woman, not as believed a black slave. She was originally from an Arawak village in South America, where she was captured as a child, taken captive to Barbados and sold into slavery. It was there that her life first became intertwined with the Reverend Samuel Parris.² In the past, history stripped women of their rights, abilities and social skills to include them more in their duties as mothers, wives and housewives. Although in today's societies feminist currents are increasingly growing in number and objectives of struggle, gender discrimination by conservative parties is strongly visible. Life has treated them very

hard, and in spite of that, the most powerful and courageous voices have been raised in defense of their values.³ But what about black women, the doubly discriminated against, because of their ethnic, socioeconomic conditions, shapes, sizes, etc. Those women who were torn from their lands, their goods and culture to be treated in others as slaves, to be despised by all, just because of their skin color. This reality is captured, in different ways, in literature. In novels written by black women able to understand the true meaning of discrimination and to show it in a clear and transparent way to the readers. In this case, one of the main novels of the author Maryse Condé will be analyzed, due to the historical context described and the real and fictional events captured in her texts, which narrates the cruel life of a slave who was one of the protagonists of the greatest witch hunt in history. One of the researchers who wrote about witches is Arola Castella Pujol, from the University of Catalonia where she focuses on heterodoxy or transgression of the normative that can be perceived as socially unacceptable and as such be persecuted, judged and punished.³

It is for this reason that the objective is to show how the author gives prominence to a forgotten character in history through expressions of racial and gender discrimination. This study shows that the world is capable of erasing the existence of many women who marked a before and after in society. Therefore, the importance of discovering other forgotten names is pending for future projects since "*the reason of the world is dictated by men, not women*".⁴ Maryse Condé, (1934-2024) born in Guadeloupe, was one of the most relevant figures of contemporary Caribbean literature. Deserving of an alternative Nobel Prize in 2018, she lived in the seventies in Africa, after passing through Paris she returned to her native Guadeloupe, then settled in the United States and died in early 2024 in a hospital in Apt, in the south of France. She was an honorary member of the Academy of Letters from Quebec and a recipient of the National Order of Merit, the Legion of Honor and the Order of Arts and Letters.⁴

"I write neither in French nor in Creole, I write in Maryse Condé."

¹The original documents of the proceedings are in the Essex County Archives, Massachusetts.

²<https://es.wikipedia.org>

³Arola Castella P. Tituba, katalintxe, hillary, judith... witches yesterday and witches today. aleph notebooks. Open University of Catalonia. 2022.

⁴Excerpt taken from the novel *I, Tituba, the black witch of Salem*. A thousand needles of fire under my skin.

Development

"I, Tituba, the black witch of Salem." Thus begins the novel with one of the unpleasant memories the protagonist had, her procreation. It is said that she was the product of a rape by an English sailor to her mother, who, from the beginning, regretted the fact that she had been born a woman: "my mother regretted that I was not a boy, it seemed to her that the fate of women was even worse than that of men"⁵. For these reasons she did not know her mother's love, but she did know the love of a man who adopted her and welcomed her as his daughter and named her Ti-tu-ba, to prove that she was the daughter of his desire and his love.⁵ With the passage of time she begins to visualize the colors of life, receiving the love of the person she recognized as father and only unpleasant memories from her mother, as she had well told her that the world was cruel to women and even more so being black, a fact she understood when she witnessed the death of her mother: "They hanged my mother, she had committed the crime for which there is no forgiveness. She had hit a target."⁶

Thanks to the welcome of a nago,⁷ acquires the knowledge for which she was condemned. She learns the language of the wind, the sea, the mountains, everything that has soul and life. She learns all about plants and their use in every occasion and above all to respect them. These were the happiest moments of her life, but like everything else, until it was the old woman's turn. After meeting the man who would be her husband, she begins a story of pain and anguish from the day she meets the man who would become her husband and drag her into a life of slavery. John Indio, his name was, and because of his love for a man, he returned to live in the white world: "My mother had been raped by a white man. She had been hanged because of a white man. And in spite of all this, I was thinking of going back to live among them".⁸

After unfortunate events, she and her husband were sold to a pastor named Samuel Parris, who together with his family moved to the other side of the sea, in the town of Salem, beginning the events that will lead to her damnation. So much for the first part of the novel, where the author gives meaning and life (fictional facts) to her protagonist and the reasons why she was considered a witch. In the second part, under a "Christian" family, Tituba learns the true evil.⁶ It is in these chapters that discriminatory acts gain strength, many expressions are shown such as: "It is true that the color of your skin is the sign of your damnation"; "We are black, Tituba! The whole world is against us!"; "You are a black, Tituba! You can only do evil. You are evil!"⁹

It is worth mentioning that not only Tituba was condemned as a witch, other women were also condemned. After a year of imprisonment, in 1693 the Governor of the time declared a general pardon to the prisoners and the doors were opened to the accused.⁷ She was bought by a Jewish merchant and together with her children she left to return to Barbaros, the land that welcomed her and anxious to see her beloved spiritual beings again. As soon as she settled in, spread that she had returned, reached the ears of the Maroons, who

immediately sent for her, and so she lived out her last days, alongside rebellions, until she was captured by soldiers in an ambush of the camp: "I was the last to be taken to the gallows. All around me, strange trees bristled with strange fruits". We have always heard about the Salem witches, but that a black woman had also been the protagonist of these processes, history had not told it. Wanting to hide facts like these does not make people suffer less, or that it is not important, because from small details the world was made and it is what it is until now. History must be told as it is, even if it hurts many.⁸

According to other sources, this was the first woman accused of witchcraft by Betty Parris and Abigail Williams and also the first to confess that she practiced it. This confession was obtained after being beaten by her master Samuel Parris and then other women from neighboring villages were accused, arrested and tried. Despite being a slave and having confessed to such crimes, Tituba was not executed, but sent to jail. According to data and some reports not told in the novel, she had a daughter in prison named Violet, who was kept by the Parris family.¹⁰ For a better analysis, the phrases and words used by the writer throughout the work were differentiated and these are the most significant, of course, there are many others that indicate the cruel discrimination against the protagonist, but only those of greater weight were chosen for their understanding. As can be seen, being black for many was already a crime, but being black: *black or white, life treats men too well!* History was told by men, wars were fought by men, knowledge and books could only be had by men. For women, knowing how to read and write was enough. There is a popular saying that goes: "God does not punish twice"; woman and black woman! These facts were not considered double punishment

Only Maryse Condé was able to bring to light a name forgotten by the people, and she captures it through acts of total violence and discrimination against black and slave women. In general, in the text of the novel, key words that describe the acts of racism can be appreciated, such as: *black, slave or witch* appearing constantly in its pages.¹¹ Other expressions are also shared, such as: *Don't you think it is a curse to be a woman?* Giving an answer to this question, it is not a curse to be a woman, but to have been treated as they were. It is also important to mention a certain coincidence in the texts of the novel, and that is that, on one occasion, John Indio (husband of the protagonist) refers to her: "They will say that your skin is black but that you wear a white mask"¹² coinciding with the title of a work by Frantz Fanon: *Black skin, white masks*. Published in Paris in 1958 where the author shows his psychoanalytical thinking by describing and denouncing racist colonialism and its consequences on the colonized blacks in France. By way of conclusion, there are many names of women who have been hidden by history, who have been deprived of all knowledge in society and who in spite of this have managed to establish their rights in the fundamental lifestyle of the black population. Even so, there are those who remember them and despite the passage of time have been responsible for bringing them to the world, Maryse Condé, was one of these, as an author, researcher and above all as a woman. Not only Tituba is one of her historical novels where she reconstructs, through fiction, facts of great magnitude, but also others such as: *Ségou Les murailles de terres and La terre en miettes* (1984 and 1985). *Desirada* (1997), *Célanire Cou-Coupé* (2000), etc., all of which have been awarded prizes. There are

⁵Condé MI. Tituba, the black witch of salem. a thousand needles of fire under my skin. editorial casa de las Américas; Havana. Cuba. 2010. pp.36.

⁶Condé MI. Tituba, the black witch of salem. a thousand needles of fire under my skin. editorial casa de las Américas; Havana. Cuba. 2010. pp.39.

⁷ This ethnic group lives in Benin, a country that was and still is the cradle of the Vodun and the Orisha of the Nation, whose culture and tradition is different from that of the Yoruba.

⁸Condé MI. Tituba, the black witch of salem. a thousand needles of fire under my skin. editorial casa de las Américas; Havana. Cuba. 2010. pp.54.

⁹Condé MI. Tituba, the black witch of salem. a thousand needles of fire under my skin. editorial casa de las Américas; Havana, Cuba. 2011. pp.81, 127, 131.

¹⁰<http://es.wikipedia.org>

¹¹Condé MI. Tituba, the black witch of salem. a thousand needles of fire under my skin. editorial casa de las Américas; Havana, Cuba. 2010. pp.33, 49, 50, 51, 59, 60, 62, 63, 69, 71, 78, 81, 93, 94, 95, 110, 123, 127, 131, 157, 173, 186, 200, 203, 225, 231, 260.

¹²Condé MI. Tituba, the black witch of salem. a thousand needles of fire under my skin. editorial casa de las Américas; Havana, Cuba. 2010. pp.69.

many others like this one, and for those interested, it only remains for them to investigate and delve even deeper into what has already been written, because the world is made of small details. Regardless of the historical context, or the field where they have excelled, women are always the protagonists of unforgettable feats. It is important to put aside all those racial and gender prejudices that categorize them, the fact of being a woman is not a sign of submission or weakness, and above all, being black is not synonymous with evil, because as the novel shows, those who committed the real acts of injustice were the whites.⁹

“ Between a woman’s legs run the ways of the world.”

Dya Kasambe, Angolan writer

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Conflicts of interest

The author declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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