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On the Appraisal of the Trope of Rebirth in Maryse Condé's I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem

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This paper aims to explore the complex layers of the trope of rebirth. It highlights the various levels on which the notion of rebirth operates in *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* by the Creolophone writer Maryse Condé (Guadeloupean, American and French). Indeed, Maryse Condé resurrects Hester Prynne, the protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter* written by 19th century American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne. In so doing, Condé entails her rebirth. From this vantage point, Condé puts into effect a reversal in the main character's fate to re-question the status of women in 19th century Puritan American society, a status deliberately put between parentheses denying them the right to speak and defend themselves against the accusation of adultery. Subsequently, this paper strives to find plausible answers to the following questions: Is Hawthorne's underlying message (Had Hester sinned alone?) which is put between parentheses on page 71 within the narrative of *The Scarlet Letter* visible? Does his implicit message redeem Hester in his text? How does the characterization of Hester in *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* poeticize the trope of rebirth? Is the resurrection of a canonical character meant to creolize the American literary tradition?

The new textual adaptation of Hester's story in Condé's narrative is appraised as: (1) an intertextual tool through which the alteration of Hester's destiny becomes possible (Kristeva's concepts of intertextuality and transposition will be put to service to write back to New Critics, who are against mixing texts and genres), and (2) an attitudinal disposition to poeticize the trope of rebirth foregrounding a vision where works of art speak to each other through boundaries of literary traditions, spaces and languages. Building on this logic, genres can at last be mixed and canonical texts can be re-fashioned in a new light foregrounding thus the trope of rebirth.

From this vantage point, the novels under consideration are Condé's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. In *I, Tituba*, Condé strives to sustain a vital horizontal plot together with an increasing emphasis on the plural or cross-cultural characteristic of the novel. In contrast, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* has become the classic portrayal of Puritan America by sustaining a seemingly vertical plot and by depicting a marginal character in constant antagonism with her society. The intertextual links between Condé and Hawthorne thus are obvious. This is meant "to transform social and economic relations of inequality; the need to establish a new vision and a suitable literary form, one which is both traditional and subversive and yet open to a poetic of cultural crossovers" (Crosta qtd. in Haigh 160).

Indeed, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* reflects Condé's attempt to foreground the American literary reconfiguration of Caribbean literature. Condé strives "to unravel, amidst contemporary overtones and postmodern irony, the captivating fictionalized story" (Pfaff xi) of a 19th century woman marginalized by the official accounts of history and literature. Finding a way back to what happened long time ago, Condé retells the story of Hester, who has been accused of adultery in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and recasts "notions of 'ethnic history' as the genre of contemporary women's historical fictions accumulating an interethnic texture" (Rody 184).

To enter the world of comparison, the terms 'context' and 'intertextuality' must be brought to the bar of judgment to assess their roles in enacting the rebirth of a new literary

text out of the cloth of a canonical text. Context determines the production of any literary text and the issues a writer addresses in his text. Besides, context brings forth the constant interaction between certain referents. In its turn, intertextuality roots itself in literature. The inescapable dialogue between one literary work and another is at the heart of intertextuality. It is a methodology that deals with the text as having intricate relations with other texts. This well-formulated conception of the text was elaborated in the sixties by Julia Kristeva, who perceived the text as created in the meeting between the reader and the literary work:

The fact that the inventor of the term [intertextuality], Julia Kristeva, has objected to what she sees as the dispersal and devaluation of its meaning, and even sought at one point to replace it with the term 'transposition,' had done little to dampen the enthusiasm either of purists keen to preserve her original formulation. Fewer and fewer critics seem willing to address the theoretical problems which surround this seductively versatile concept. (Duff 54)

In other words, there must be repercussions to the act of blurring the borderlines between the text and other texts when the novelist places the literary text within a system of texts. In this regard, New Critics assert that texts and genres must not be mixed. This paper aims to challenge such a claim.

As such, the intertextual approach challenges the practices of New Criticism. The latter focuses on the internal structure of a text. New Critics perceive the internal structure of a text as the ultimate goal of critical interpretation. Intertextual approaches, in contrast, are concerned with the relations between texts rather than the individual text. "Kristeva's neologism has rapidly established itself as an intellectual buzzword" (Duff 56). It is associated with positive connotations, like originality, reconciliation with literary traditions, particularity and dialogism. Condé's merit lies in putting into effect an avant-garde flavor policing generic considerations of literary works and giving birth to an ardent character, like Hester, in *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*.

On the Poetics of Rebirth

I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem poeticizes the trope of rebirth through evoking an instance of bonding between oppressed women, namely Tituba, a Caribbean woman formerly accused of witchcraft in the famous Salem Witchcraft trials and in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, and Hester, an American woman formerly accused of adultery in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Condé has revealed the other side of these women's stories to redeem them historically and literarily. Condé portrays Hester as aware of her relationship with the Black creole, namely Tituba. Unlike Puritans, she does not resist mixture. Hester also questions the level to which the 'self' and its 'other' can be mobilized (Brown-Rose 59). For instance, in the exchange between Tituba and Hester in the cell, the narration demonstrates the ways in which "one experience can be imposed upon and dominate another" (Brown-Rose 59).

In other words, and paraphrasing Brown-Rose's idea, Tituba's historical experience has taken place on the margins of mainstream American literature (59). She presents Hester's experience as particular to and a product of a Caribbean traverse (Brown 59). Besides, Condé portrays Tituba and Hester as trans-literary characters. Condé ascribes to trans-literariness "traits of continuous negotiation and conflict" (Brown-Rose 60). As newly reborn characters, Tituba and Hester testify that the trope of rebirth can be perceived as

stable and “self-enabling” (Brown 71). The trope of rebirth allows Condé to question the assumption that women are represented as blacks and whites before being perceived as women and as mothers. Condé recreates Hester and Tituba as women and mothers. Their racial identities are not set in opposition with their gender difference.

In this way, Condé theorizes a subjectivity specific to femininity as a category standing by reference to itself (Driver 240). In *I, Tituba*, Hester and Tituba show agency. They are represented as “simultaneously vulnerable and sensitive, but also asserting themselves in a world which is dominated by men” (Vogt 125). Condé recreates Hester as an ardent feminist. The new Hester dares to speak freely about her body, her sexuality and her relationship with men. As a representative of white women, Hester is now strong to admit adultery and to unveil the identity of her daughter’s father. In many ways, she challenges conventions. Paraphrasing Vogt’s words, the rebirth of Hester echoes the fact that Condé has been inspired by various influential feminists (192). Among them, one can cite Hélène Cixous and her feminist literary theory known as *Écriture Féminine*. Similarities can also be found between the writings of Caribbean women writers and black American writers of the 1980s and between the findings of academicians, such as Louise O’Brian and Kirsten Holst Peterson (Vogt 192).

It is undeniable that women are doubly marginalized. The recognition of this double marginalization led to a dual identification of feminism. Feminism is seen as a political struggle of race and gender (Vogt 193). Daymond et al. put it in this way: “While songs and stories do not provide unbroken access to the past, they do provide information about how women were – and still are – expected to behave as daughters, wives and mothers” (6). Feminists are determined to deal with the scars of patriarchy and history in more efficient terms. The rebirth of formerly oppressed women is strongly women-driven. Within the scope of *I, Tituba*, womanism and feminism are variants rather than models of women’s struggle for freedom and equality. They are no longer in opposition. They are cast as a woman’s perception of herself.

In sync with this idea, Alice Walker believes that womanism is a prolixity of feminism (qtd in. Vogt 196). A womanist is defined as a black feminist, who preserves the heritage of brave black activists. A womanist supports comprehensive social change. She liberates the ‘Other,’ and more broadly, the whole of mankind (Walker, qtd. in Vogt 196-197). Simultaneously, the term womanism has religious connotations emanating from the spiritual side of women. Womanism overlaps with another term, namely, motherism. The latter was coined in 1983 by black American writer Alice Walker. Vogt explains that supporters of motherism do not focus exclusively on women related topics, their experiences and struggle for liberation. Other important topics for motherism are partnership, cooperation, tolerance, love, understanding and patience (Vogt 193). Above all, scholars who cherish motherism speak on behalf of all people regardless of their skin colour, race, religion or origin. Audre Lorde pointed out the necessity of celebrating difference. According to Lorde, difference must not be divisive, but a source of empowerment and of a deeper bond (qtd.in Vogt 193). Daymond, et al. assert the following:

Women need to place themselves as “women” in order to function politically as part of such a grouping, even while they may not actually share among themselves the same conception of womanhood. Gender must always be defined through race, class, ethnicity, culture, and other coordinates in order to achieve any meaning. (Daymond et al. 1)

In her own peculiar way, Condé strives to show how the new Hester lives in a postcolonial time since she used to be completely overshadowed. The androcentric idea that Hester should be seen and not heard must be re-questioned. Condé believes that Hawthorne's literary representation of Hester is dictated by the codes of the American patriarchal society.

Although Condé's work may seem to carry cultural values, I believe that her main attempt is to give a voice to Hawthorne's protagonist. Condé has an unwavering confidence in the role of literary criticism in redeeming oppressed women, like, Hester since literature "is endowed with the diverse charms of multi-tasking for the asking" (Murray 26).

Literary Criticism in *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*

This section is concerned with the changes induced by Condé at the level of characterization of Hester to write back to Hawthorne. As a marginal subject, Hester in *I, Tituba*, resists cruelty and insists on her right for equality with men. Indeed, as a female victim of the strict religion of Puritans, Hester is committed to unveil and defy the hypocrite behavior of Puritans. Indeed, Condé's novel foregrounds Hester's oppression. Subsequently, subjugation and literary resistance are inextricably related. To echo critic Zuhlke, literary resistance is an inevitable consequence of oppressive systems (5).

The title of the novel is a significant one. The "I" in *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* is extended in the second part of the narrative to reflect upon Hester's individual self. It confirms that Hester can exist as a free-willed woman, and indicates that the focus is on both the individual and the collective self. Hester is proud to re-tell her story. She used to be invisible in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne portrays her as an echo. He does not grant her a voice. The new Hester is audacious. She dares to call things by their names. When asked by Tituba about her accusation, Hester defiantly responds in this way:

There is something indecent about beauty in a man. Tituba, men shouldn't be beautiful! Two generations of visible saints stigmatizing carnal pleasure resulted in this man and the irresistible delights of the flesh. We started meeting under the pretext of discussing German pietism. Then, we ended up in his bed making love and here I am. (*I, Tituba* 98)

As one can easily infer, adultery loses its meaning within the narrative of Condé. It is substituted by the notion of love.

It is worthy to note that the affirmation of the "I" is Hester's tactic to reclaim her voice. Condé's re-writing of Hester's story is thus historically and literarily relevant and critical. A brief synopsis of Hester's story as it appears in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* seems to be compulsory at this stage of analysis. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* opens with the following scene: Hester Prynne is standing on a raised platform with the letter A on her bosom. This refers to the way criminals are punished in Puritan America. In this scene, Hester appears as a lonely figure living in a hostile society. One of the female attendees says the following: "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die; is there not law for it? Truly there is, both in the Scripture and the statute-book" (*The Scarlet Letter* 44). But, Hester remains silent. Hester has a baby from an unknown father, whose name remains secret. The letter 'A' on her bosom is equivocal since it has a plethora of meanings. It can refer to the act of adultery, to art, or to Hester as an angel.

The father of her daughter Pearl turns to be a priest, Mr. Arthur Dimmsdale,

a young clergyman, who had come from one of the great English universities, bringing all the learning of the age into [the] wild forest land. His eloquence and religious fervor had already given the earnest of high eminence in his profession. He was a person of very striking aspect, with a white, lofty, and impending brow; large, brown, melancholy eyes, and a mouth which, unless when he forcibly compressed it, was apt to be tremulous, expressing both nervous sensibility and a vast power of self restraint. (*The Scarlet Letter* 56)

Hester and Dimmsdale meet in the forest after 7 years. The meeting drives them back to the heart of Puritan society. The end of Hawthorne's novel shows the minister standing on the raised platform where he confesses his sin. Nevertheless, throughout the novel, the minister has been a hypocrite since he has hidden his love for Hester. There is a stark contrast between Hester, who assumes her act, and the minister, who rejects his deed.

In *I, Tituba*, however, Condé lets equivocation undo the common divisions between her narrative and Hawthorne's. As mentioned above, she portrays Hester as a strong woman. This is the niche Condé cuts for herself by inducing divergences from Hawthorne's monological discourse. As such, Condé de-naturalizes Puritan America and its established literature. The novel suggests that the prevailing accounts of literature must be revised and new histories, or even stories, must be unearthed giving birth to new texts. More importantly, the novel interrogates the basic ideologies of the societies that were later to become the independent nation states of Barbados and the United States of America (Pitt 10). In the next section, I want to explore the confluences between *Tituba* and *Hester*. Such confluences readily highlight the cross-fictional dialogue between writers and characters thanks to the trope of rebirth.

Maryse Condé's Cross-fictional Dialogue with Nathaniel Hawthorne

In *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, Condé re-questions historical and literary injustice. She sympathizes with *Tituba*, who is accused of witchcraft. Condé also retrieves Hester from the archives of American literature. Both *Tituba* and Hester are mistreated by the white Anglo-Saxon master. However, Condé re-conceives both *Tituba* and Hester as "female heroines, epic heroines" (Armstrong 201). According to Rody, they are lifted up to become 'heroic ancestresses' for Caribbean and American women (Rody 186).

In creating a dialogue with Hawthorne, Condé affirms literary, and perhaps more importantly, spatial and temporal continuity. Salem, Massachusetts, is the native country of Nathaniel Hawthorne, who makes it clear that Salem is connected to the Caribbean, the native home of Condé. Salem is, indeed, linked "to the peninsula with Gallows Hill and New Guinea at one end, and a view of the alms-house at the other-such being the features of [Hawthorne's] native town" (*The Scarlet Letter* 10). Salem thus is a striking example of spatial, historical and literary intertextuality. It is connected to the Caribbean archipelago, its history and its literature. Through *Tituba's* and *Hester's* stories, Condé presents her more compelling theme of "threatened and salvaged historical and [literary] continuity" (Pitt 11). In this way, the narrative structure is unified developing a peculiar thematic polarity: "that of continuity salvaged, of culture preserved and sustained at a primal, mythic source" (Brown-Rose 71). In taking *Tituba* and *Hester* back to Salem, Condé foregrounds Hawthorne's confession:

At all events, I, the present writer, as [Puritans'] representative, hereby take shame upon myself for [the victims'] sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them- as I have heard, and as the dreary and unprosperous condition of the race, for many a long year back, would argue to exist may be henceforth removed. (*The Scarlet Letter* 11)

To better accentuate her thematic polarity of literary continuity and inscribe intertextuality, Condé evinces that Hester and Tituba can be recreated in a new light.

As mentioned above, intertextuality is Condé's structural device to resurrect Hester's story. Using the structural device of the journey as a voluntary movement across space and time, Condé's novel reverses and revises the historical journey of forced migration of the English, Africans and Caribbeans to the New World. These places reflect Hester's development and mark her identity. Therefore, places become vital links in the expression of Hester's rebirth affirming historical and literary continuity. Unlike Hawthorne, who fictionalizes and romanticizes the tradition of English Puritans at the detriment of a passive woman, Condé allegorizes an ambivalent standpoint. Hester's re-creation is due to a historiographic desire to show that the oppressed female heroine can write back to her creator, that is, Hawthorne to unveil the deliberately suppressed truths.

I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem poeticizes the rebirth of Hester. It examines Hester's relationship with her daughter in a poetic way. The mother/daughter diad interacts and affects Hester. Scholars suggest that this mother/daughter diad evokes a love/hate relationship. That is why, Hester tries painstakingly to convey knowledge to future daughters about how to survive in a racist and sexist world. In her own turn, Tituba rejects her grand-mother and mother's experiences as invalid. Mother Abena constantly remembers her own mistakes, yearnings, dreams, successes and failures when she looks at Tituba. The latter often sees herself as a reflection of her mother. Sometimes, Tituba rejects her mother's values. These are inappropriate to be applied to her reality. For instance, Tituba could not forsake John Indian when her mother and grand-mother urge her to do so. In this way, Tituba is autonomous. She has embraced an independent racial and sexual identity. Therefore, Tituba is not an extension of her mother. Yet, Tituba calls on her mother's spirit whenever she needs to heal other women.

As a mother, the new Hester is different. Condé rewrites Hester's and Pearl's relationship as it appears in *The Scarlet Letter*. Condé could not stand Hawthorne's deliberate humiliation of Hester when he allows her child "to take some eel-grass and imitated, as best she could, on her own bosom the decoration with which she was so familiar on her mother's" (*The Scarlet Letter* 147). Pearl is represented as the fruit of adultery. Humiliated, Hester is forced to further dwell on the significance of the letter on her bosom and explain its meaning to Pearl. Hester's pain and suffering is doubled when Pearl answers: "'Truly do I!' looking brightly into her mother's face. 'It is for the same reason that the minister keeps his hand over his heart'" (*The Scarlet Letter* 148). However, Pearl's thorny questions remain unanswered. These questions reflect the child's earnestness in the face of a cruel world. From this vantage point, Condé insightfully "scants the original novel's trauma of sexual trespass, and appropriates *The Scarlet Letter* as a 'history' not of tormented American conscience, but of oppression and containment of an American mother" (Rody 195).

As such, Condé re-creates a revolutionary woman, who is not easily controlled or manipulated by patriarchy, and who fights continuously to reclaim back her womanhood.

The new Hester refuses to accept ready-made definitions of womanhood. Hester is on a quest to dismantle limiting concepts of womanhood. That is why Condé figures out Hester's identity in terms of an ongoing daughter-mother relationship. In *I, Tituba*, Condé deploys maternal imagery to describe the vicissitudes of Hester's emotional life. In the prison cell, Hester is depicted as a tough mother who is seeking moral justice. Unlike Hester, Tituba is portrayed as a motherless daughter struggling to return to her motherland. "Like a child running to hide in her mother's skirts" (*I, Tituba* 138), Tituba feels the welcoming physical embrace of maternal spirits and hears a "soft murmur" (*I, Tituba* 141): "She is back. She is here, the daughter of Abena, the daughter of Mama Yaya. She will never leave us again" (*I, Tituba* 142-7).

Tituba's encounter with Hester, an equivocal woman with whom she undergoes instances of female bonding, is praiseworthy. Kicked out of a cell by her racist sister "witches" and chained in a prison passageway, Tituba hears a kind voice saying, "there's room here for two. Let that poor creature come in" (*I, Tituba* 95). It is Hester who shows compassion for Tituba. Condé, indeed, outrageously redraws American literature's first great heroine. As explained above, the adulteress is turned into an ardent American feminist, who hates her Puritan society. This is made evident when Hester says: "It's not my society. Arent I an outcast like yourself?" (*I, Tituba* 96). Besides, Hester's main dream is to write a book, but she mockingly avers that "Women don't write books about a model society governed and run by women" (*I, Tituba* 101). As one can easily infer, Hester, as portrayed by Condé, is not the same passive woman the reader encounters in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*: "I will not speak!" answered Hester, turning pale as death" (*The Scarlet Letter* 58). In Condé's narrative, Hester is determined to kill herself and the daughter she is carrying. In this way, Hester defies Puritan strict religion.

A mid-wife to fiction, Condé ensures the rebirth of the character of Hester in a subversive way. Condé's genius lies in making out of Hester a rebel. She thus transforms the celebrated white heroine of *The Scarlet Letter*. "When Condé's black slave finds Hawthorne's heroine in the next cell, she exposes, behind the walls of U.S. literary propriety, the prison life of Hester Prynne, offering a Foucauldian view of the female gulag between the lines of the American canon" (Rody 194). Both Hester and Tituba are represented as rebels. "Through their unlikely pairing," Carol Ann Duffy writes, "the politics of this complicated encounter between first and third-world feminisms is artfully staged as an interesting and complex dialogue rather than a stark or reductive dichotomy" (qtd. in Peukert 101). This study, however, avers this encounter and entails a reconciliation between feminism and womanism. As an ardent feminist, Hester understands and loves Tituba even if the latter is a lenient womanist. These categorizations are further blurred when Hester remarks "what a magnificent color she's got for her skin and what a wonderful way she has of covering up her feelings" (*I, Tituba* 95). Hester displays an ability found in no other 'white' character to see the inward beauty of Tituba (Rody 195).

However, the womanist and feminist standpoints of Tituba and Hester can be apparent in their opinions towards men. Tituba's lenient criticism of men is set in stark contrast with Hester's ardent criticism of men: "You're too fond of love, Tituba! I'll never make a feminist out of you!" (*I, Tituba* 101). Tituba does not deny Hester's accusation: "I myself have loved men too much and shall continue to do so" (*I, Tituba* 178). However, Tituba and Hester mutually refuse motherhood.

As illustrated above, Tituba and Hester, newly born characters, have met in the cell of intertextual literary space. This shared space allows them to confess mutual infanticide. Condé “has brought to consciousness is profound, mythic and transgressive female’s will to imaginative mastery of motherhood, and thus of the power to make meaning in history” (Rody 194-5). Hester, in the most striking revision of Hawthorne, kills herself while pregnant. Subsequently, this Hester rejects Hawthorne’s authorial voice. Hester tells Tituba that her unborn child “must simply die with me. I have already prepared her for that when we talk to each other at night” (*I, Tituba* 98). Here Condé invokes a maternal dialogue. This dialogue blurs the line between literature and space. Such a dialogue symbolically pays homage to the mother figure. Unsurprisingly, when Tituba later learns that Hester has hanged herself, she says:

I screamed down the door of my mother’s womb. My fist broke her bag of waters in rage and despair. I choked and suffocated in this black liquid. I wanted to drown myself. Mother, will our torture never end? If this is how things are, I shall never emerge into the light of the day. I shall remain crouched in your waters, deaf, dumb and blind, clinging like kelp to your womb. I shall cling so tightly you’ll never expel me and I shall return to dust without you, without ever having known the curse of day. Mother, help me! (*I, Tituba* 111)

Therefore, mother/daughter’s relationship vacillates between killing babies and weeping for dead mothers. According to Rody, maternal feeling is thus stronger than death. It is even truer than official accounts of history (197). He further asserts that “these ‘other’ encounters along the way back to the mother matter are not merely substitutes after all, but something new and valuable in the world” (Rody 198). The rebirth of characters entails transformation and change.

It seems that Condé has deliberately made use of the magic mother-daughter paradigm. She does so by unearthing imaginatively the idea of a heroine lost to American literary tradition. Tituba’s and Hester’s voices are reclaimed back in a triumphant way. They have survived cruelty and oppression.

Conclusion

In brief, Condé’s desire to re-fashion Hawthorne’s protagonist is peculiar since it appraises the trope of rebirth. Condé invents an enabling heroine. This can lead to a total demystification of former lies about Hester. As an enabling heroine, Hester as characterized by Condé, is the epitome of a woman who unchains the manacles of her androcentric society and sets herself free. Hester reclaims back her womanhood in the service of future women’s self-definitions. She constructs a new sense of perception for future daughters. Also, one might say that Tituba and Hester evoke “the potential of women’s cross-cultural camaraderie, and in contemporary terms, of the cross-cultural narrative” (Rody 208) to entail the re-birth of new protagonists out of the stitch of former heroines. As such, Condé’s writing goes beyond any simple expectation. For Condé, writing must resurrect and give birth to new characters. That is why she brings Tituba and Hester together.

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