

“YOU’LL SUFFER A LOT, BUT YOU WILL SURVIVE”: MARYSE CONDÉ’S *I, TITUBA, BLACK WITCH OF SALEM* AS A *BILDUNGSROMAN*

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RESUMO

Enquanto a pergunta de Spivak sobre a voz do subalterno é ainda o centro de muitos debates acadêmicos, a presença deste nos estudos pós-coloniais não pode ser negada ou ignorada. A reescritura de Tituba nas mãos de Maryse Condé dá voz à uma mulher cuja história foi apagada e esquecida. Levando em consideração que *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* aborda questões de identidade, sexualidade e gênero, esse trabalho analisa o romance como um *Bildungsroman* no qual Tituba finalmente é capaz de descrever o seu coming of age e suas experiências.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Maryse Condé, Tituba, Bildungsroman.

ABSTRACT

While Spivak’s question regarding the voice of the subaltern is still the topic of several academic debates, the presence of the subaltern in postcolonial studies cannot be neglected or overlooked. Maryse Condé’s rewriting of Tituba gives voice to a woman whose history has been erased and forgotten. Taking into consideration that Condé’s *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* foregrounds issues of identity, sexuality and gender, this paper analyses the novel as a *Bildungsroman* in which Tituba is finally able to describe her coming of age and her experiences.

KEYWORDS: Maryse Condé, Tituba, *Bildungsroman*.

In "Reading Subaltern History", Priyamvada Gopal, a professor of postcolonial literatures at Cambridge, tells the story of "a young widow who becomes pregnant during an illicit affair with her brother-in-law" and who later decides to have an abortion, supported and arranged by her mother and sister. During the procedure, the young widow, Chandra, passes away and her family is arrested. "The depositions are later archived and anthologized with other documents" as Gopal tells us. While this story might not interest many people, what caught Gopal's eye is the treatment of history regarding the case. Had Chandra decided to have the baby, she would probably have been cast out from society, being condemned to be a dead person in a living society. What is at stake, in Gopal's reading, is *how* to read subaltern history, especially in terms of *how* this history has been written, who is the one in charge of interpreting, *what* documents and archives have been ignored or overlooked, *when* and *how* these archives have been read. (GOPAL, 2012, p. 139)

History as we know it is nothing but a construct, a reading among several others, a reading which has been privileged in favour of others. Gopal contends that "[if] historical events are only available to us through narrative, [it is the] the case for the historian's responsibility to write contextualized and full narratives". (2012, p. 140) While it is not our main objective here to discuss historiography at any level, it certainly adds to the discussion how history/ies has/have been available to us through documents – and also how many (hi)stories have been swept under the rug and left out. It all leads to the question proposed by Spivak in her famous essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

While Spivak's negative answer to the question has been much discussed, the presence of the subaltern in cultural theory and postcolonial studies cannot be neglected or overlooked. Increasingly, art has been making room for these previously unheard voices, allowing them to express themselves and bring to light issues which had remained dormant for years. Deepika Bahri says that "a postcolonial feminist perspective requires that one learn to read literary representations of women with attention both to the subject and to the medium of representation." (2012, p.200) What needs to be questioned is how "those with the power to represent and describe others clearly control how these others will be seen", that is, the power of representation is easily identified as an ideological tool. (BAHRI, 2012, p. 205)

The case of the novel we will discuss here would easily draw criticism based on the fact that Maryse Condé wrote *I, Tituba* after being approached by Mme. Gallimard of the Mercure France publishing house. The idea was to write about a female heroine of the writer's region, the Caribbean, as Condé says in the interview published with the 2009 paperback edition. The Caribbean author thought of Suzanne Césaire and Celia Cruz, but later dropped both in favour of Tituba, whom she "met" while a Fulbright scholar at Occidental College in Los Angeles. While two critics to be discussed here, Ann Scarborough (2009) and Jane Moss (1999), criticise Condé's portrayal of Tituba because she might have gone overboard in terms of the religious and spiritual powers of the character and taking liberties as to include a Jew or even a fictional character, Hester Prynne from *The Scarlet Letter*, I would like to argue that Condé's rewriting of Tituba does not need to respect so-called historical facts.

Being a fictional piece of art, *I, Tituba* offers readers a reading of Condé's concerning a woman whose past has been erased. It echoes what Bahri states as far as representation and fiction are concerned: "Representation is always fictional or partial because it must imaginatively construct its constituency (as a portrait or a 'fiction') and because it can inadvertently usurp the space of those who are incapable of representing themselves." (2012, p. 207). At no point is Condé's Tituba an essentialist character as Moss' and Scarborough's criticisms may suggest; neither is she representative of a group. What *I, Tituba* offers is the opportunity for a woman who has often been portrayed in negative light or not given much attention to share her own accounts of her life.

Maryse Condé allows Tituba to have a story of her own and perhaps more than that. Condé's Tituba has the opportunity to speak for herself and share her insights regarding her life. Having been born out of a cruel act of rape, Tituba learns from her early days that life is not to be easy on her – she falls in love with a man who eventually leaves her, she loses all the people she cares about, she goes to jail accused of witchcraft during the Salem trials. However, one thing Mama Yaya teaches Tituba from the very beginning is that she will survive. Tituba manages to overcome life's obstacles and acquires privileged knowledge, especially if we are to consider how "easy" it is for her to go from the master's house to the plantation and other places. Being a woman-in-between gives Tituba some chance to be in several places.

Condé's giving a voice to an often overlooked character in history evokes two aspects which John Marx develops when discussing postcolonial literature: the first one which affirms that "postcolonial literature is held to repudiate the canon" and the

second which suggests that “postcolonial literature has been shown to revise canonical texts and concepts”. (2012, p. 83). Knowing how difficult it is to ignore how imperialism and colonialism have changed history, writers from former colonies have learnt how to appropriate and revise canonical works and concepts. What we would like to develop here is the argument that Condé manages to appropriate the *bildungsroman*, a genre often associated with male characters, to create a story in which a female protagonist, Tituba, narrates her own life and is in charge of her own courses of action.

The *Bildungsroman* has often been associated with male writers and male characters. It focuses and centres on the growth of a male character from the time he is a young boy to maturing as a man and accepting his role in society. Perhaps the best known example is Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* which centres on the eponymous hero undertaking a journey when he realises bourgeois life has nothing to offer. Eventually, his love for the theatre and arts fail him and he decides to go back – that is, he has a taste of life outside and learns from it that he must accept his role in society.

Cristina Ferreira Pinto notes that the *Bildungsroman* may or may not be considered a literary genre, especially when one considers that the modern novel has a hybrid aspect which allows it to be, for instance, both a historical, a psychological or social novel and a *Bildungsroman* at the same time. According to Pinto, the *Bildungsroman* is also characterised by its thematic elements and not its formal structure, therefore what matters the most is the main character’s *Bildung* – the development, the formation.

Pinto also calls attention to the fact that the *Bildungsroman* used to bear a pedagogical intention behind its plot. Pinto quotes Karl Morgenstern who wrote in the 1820s that the *Bildungsroman* was supposed to "further the reader's Bildung to a much great extent than any other kind of novel" (1990, p. 11). The reader was to learn as much as possible from the reading of the novel, so the latter should contribute to one's formation as a person.

In addition to that, Pinto also contests the idea that the *bildungroman* portrays the process through which one learns how to be a "man", that is, [the genre] depicts the development of a male character." (1990, p. 11) In other words, Pinto exposes how the genre used to be inextricably linked to male characters. She mentions authors such as Esther Labovitz and Jerome Buckley to discuss the widely accepted definition of the *Bildungsroman* as describing a "young male hero [who] discovers himself and his social role through the experiences of love, friendship and the hard realities of life" (PINTO, 1990, p. 11). The point is of such importance that Pinto points out that Buckley, in his *Season of Youth: the Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*, published in 1974 by Harvard University Press, dedicates a whole chapter to the study of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and fails to mention that it was the main character's *Bildung*, Maggie's *Bildung*, that was the centre of the novel. Instead, Buckley focuses on the development of Maggie's brother. This leads Pinto to question why there is this silence regarding the woman as the main character in the *Bildungsroman* tradition (1990, p. 12)

Ellen Morgan was probably the first critic to shed some light on the absence of female protagonists in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*. In 1972, Morgan stated that "the *Bildungsroman* is a male affair" (apud PINTO, 1990, p. 13) which leads Pinto to

discuss how most of the *Bildungsromane* written by women seemed to limit themselves to the household, especially focusing on marriage and motherhood.

It is therefore no wonder that both Morgan and Pinto express their dissatisfaction with the male tradition while exploring the examples of female characters who managed to break free from the household to delve into issues of sexuality and power. According to both authors, the few examples of female *bildungsromane* which centred on the personal development of a female character often had tragic endings.

The female protagonists who did grow as selves were generally halted and defeated before they reached transcendent selfhood. They committed suicide or died; they compromised by marrying and devoting themselves to sympathetic men; they went mad or into some kind of retreat and seclusion from the world. (MORGAN, 1972 apud PINTO, 1990, p. 13)

This train of thought suggests that a woman's *Bildung* is to take place in the house, limiting itself to household issues while a man's is outside, experiencing what the world can offer. Morgan is quoted by Pinto (1990) as saying that women are seen as "static" rather than "dynamic". On the other hand, Nancy Armstrong suggests that, even though women lacked in economic and political terms, they still retained some considerable power, "not only in writing fiction, but also in assuming a place at the center of a modern household" (ARMSTRONG, 2008, p. 105)

Although Armstrong's article does not deal specifically with *Bildungsromane*, she develops her argument that the notion of lack which used to be mainly part of male protagonists has shifted to enable critics and readers to think about the lack when it comes to female characters and women writers. (2008, p. 99). Back in the day, argues Armstrong, novels used to be read novelistically, that is, critics would read the novel in

search of something that would fulfill the character's lack. What shifted the focus from male to female was the feminist movement, which allowed critic and readers to question how gendered such a lack used to be. Armstrong states that the lack in terms of agency is the most identified one, even though "critics rarely seek a remedy for this lack" (2008, p. 99-100)

One important aspect in the first female *Bildungsromane* is that the female characters' development started after they became adults. Pinto calls attention to the fact that few are the examples which depict a woman's growth since her early years. Only after these female characters realise their dissatisfaction with societal expectations are they able to understand what they have not yet come to terms with.

Annie Pratt, author of *The Voyage In*, tries to define the female *Bildungsroman* by suggesting a few characteristics and features: the character's childhood, generational conflict, "the larger society", self-development, relationship problems, search for life's meaning and purpose and some philosophy which may lead the protagonist to leave everything behind in favour of new experiences and an independent life (PINTO, 1990, p. 14). The presence of these characteristics, however, is not mandatory as *Bildungsromane* need not possess all of them. Another point raised by Pratt is that there should be a difference between what a *Bildungsroman* is and what a novel of female development is. Although we do not share views with the author, it is worth discussing it briefly.

Pratt distinguishes the *Bildungsroman* from a novel of female development based on two aspects. One difference is that, while the former should depict the childhood and adolescence, the latter should busy itself with older and more mature

female characters, women in their thirties and looking for self-fulfillment. The second difference deals with how a novel of female development allows the protagonist to fulfill her dreams and have so-called happy endings whereas a *Bildungsroman* does not offer self-fulfillment as the genre expects the protagonist to comply with societal rules and find their place in society. Pratt understands that if a female character integrates into society and abides by its rules, she does not have room to express herself and have her own voice – such experience may also be deemed a failed *Bildungsroman*. Despite Pratt's suggestions, we understand *I, Tituba* as a *Bildungsroman* for its making room for Tituba to share her story and narrate her life, regardless of any age restriction.

The very first chapter of *I, Tituba* exemplifies how difficult life is going to be for Tituba: readers are briefly introduced to Abena, Tituba's mother, and get to know the context behind the narrator's birth – "Abena, my mother, was raped by an English sailor on the deck of Christ the King one day in the year 16** while the ship was sailing for Barbados. I was born from this act of aggression. From this act of hatred and contempt" (CONDÉ, 2009, p. 3). The very first lines set the tone of the rest of the novel, one that shows that Tituba is going to suffer and overcome several difficulties as she is told by Mama Yaya – "You will suffer during your life. A lot. A lot' [Mama Yaya] uttered these terrifying words perfectly calmly, almost with a smile. 'But you'll survive'" (2009, p. 9).

From the very beginning, Tituba's life is marked by several hardships – being born out of a rape, her mother being hanged, her being cast out of the plantation where she had been living. However, Tituba finds solace in Mama Yaya who teaches

her about the sea, the mountains and the hills – “ (...) that everything lives, has a soul, and breathes. That everything must be respected. That man is not the master riding through his kingdom on horseback” (CONDÉ, 2009, p. 9).

Further into the story, Tituba meets and falls for John Indian, a slave owned by Susanna Endicott. Tituba leaves her freedom behind to be part of John Indian's life, under the supervision of Endicott. After the latter is taken ill, supposedly by Tituba's own doings, she decides to separate Indian from Tituba by having him sold to Samuel Parris who is moving to Boston. Distraught by such horrifying news, Tituba is left with two options, either staying in Barbados where she is free or going away with Parris to Boston. She chooses the second and moves to Boston with Parris and his family.

Aboard the ship on the way to Boston, she befriends Elizabeth, Parris' wife, who seems to share her disgust for her “new master”. After that, both develop a friendship and exchange several ideas and all may have been said to be fine until the first signs of the witch hysteria which takes over Salem.

Another important aspect Condé manages to elaborate is Tituba's awareness and interest in her body and sexuality. A female *Bildungsroman* makes room for the main character to delve deep into her own sexuality as a means of discovering, understanding and coming to terms with her own self and identity. When Goodwife Parris asks Tituba not to tell children some stories of hers on the grounds that these make children dream and “dreaming is not good”, Tituba replies by asking Goodwife Parris why dreaming should not be good as it is better than reality. Pondering on Tituba's words, Parris inquires whether Tituba thinks there is a curse on being a

woman, which Tituba steadfastly disagrees by saying that nothing is more beautiful than a woman's body – especially “when it is glorified by man's desire” (2009, p. 43).

Goodwife Parris may not share Tituba's views regarding sexuality as the latter is more inclined to understand it as something important, part of life. After Tituba is bought by Benjamin d'Azevedo, a Jew who has a lot in common with Tituba in regard to her diasporic life, she learns again to surrender to desire as much as d'Azevedo himself does.

I believe the first time it happened he was even more surprised than I was, since he thought his penis was out of working order and was amazed to see it aroused, stiff and penetrating, swollen with seed. He was surprised and ashamed, he who taught his sons that fornication was a terrible sin. So he withdrew, stammering apologies that were swept away in another wave of desire.

(...)

In the evening Benjamin Cohen d'Azevedo joined me in the attic, where I slept in a brass bed. I must confess that when he undressed, revealing his crooked, pasty body, I couldn't help thinking of the dark-brown muscles of John Indian. A lump would rise in my throat and I would choke back the sobs. But that didn't last and I pitched and heaved just as well on the sea of delight with my misshapen lover. (CONDÉ, 2009, p. 126-127)

The female *Bildungsroman* allows its characters to be open about their selves and Tituba manages to do so in curious ways. Despite feeling at a loss and unsure of “the odd situation of being both a mistress and servant”, Tituba learns to appreciate the possibility of being with someone who she can share something with – she mentions that the sweetest moment between them were those when they talked – about themselves.

Tituba's being able to understand and seek pleasure exemplifies how a female character develops in a *Bildungsroman*. *I, Tituba* explores issues of identity and sexuality, enabling the main character to develop herself before the reader's eyes.

However, unlike general male *Bildungsromane*, the novel does not depict Tituba seeking her place in society or trying to make herself accepted – instead, Tituba's "autobiography" shows how she is more concerned about being truthful to herself rather than accepting other people's ideas. Perhaps her stubbornness is what allows her to survive and overcome several obstacles. Such down-to-earth thinking leads her to understand that she would not like to have children so as not to have her offspring suffer as much as she has. Shortly before the Salem trials start, Tituba and John Indian have an argument as he pleads with her to testify to everything the magistrate wanted so that she would keep herself alive.

I pushed him away. "John Indian, they want me to confess my faults. But I am not guilty."

He shrugged his shoulders and took me in his arms again, cradling me like an unruly baby. "Guilty? Oh, yes, you are and you will always be in their eyes. The important thing is to keep yourself alive for yourself, for me... and for our unborn children"

"John Indian, don't talk about our children, for I shall never bring children into this dark and gloomy world" (CONDE, 2009, p. 92)

Her choice not to bring children into this world may remind readers of other slave mothers such as Sethe, from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, who murders her young daughter so that she is not taken away from her and enslaved. At this point in the novel, Tituba had already suffered a miscarriage and had already dwelled on the facts why she would not like to be a mother, even though motherhood is celebrated by John Indian as a blessing. Tituba's miscarriage took place a year after her move to Boston and before the Salem trials. Her conscious effort to explain herself and to understand why she would not be a mother may be examples of her awareness that she is control of her own life. She could have had children regardless of her own opinion, but her

refusal exemplifies at least some minimum control over her own life, an issue of value when it comes to female *Bildungsromane*.

Pinto points out that, even in more recent writing at the end of the 80's, when female characters are able to break free from societal limitation, the woman writer is still incapable of defining the main character's ending, unless it has to do with some negative aspect such as suicide or alienation (1990, p. 24). More recent female writing has suggested this scenario is likely to change as female characters are being able to go through their ordeals and achieve their goals instead of being subjected to the realm of their oppression as the only way out, as can be observed in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*.

Traditionally, it can be seen that most female *Bildungsromane* endings would depict the character's accepting their place in society and abiding by rules or understanding that such a thing would be unbearable and that death would be a better way out. Such self-effacement is an important feature in what is termed by Pinto as "failed *Bildungsroman*" – one in which the character's *Bildung* does not fully take place due to several reasons. It does not make one wonder that most *Bildungsromane* written in the 18th and 19th centuries are nowadays classified as "failed" as they were also supposed to "[inculcate] the norms of womanhood into young readers, mixing fiction and prescription" (PRATT, 1981, p. 13 apud PINTO, 1990, p. 17). While these novels would serve as models to teach young female readers in order to achieve their main pedagogical aim, the main characters were frequently aware of their lack of opportunities to leave. Failed *Bildungsromane* may also be called truncated *Bildungsromane*.

What *I, Tituba* does then is to deconstruct these ideas as a so-called "witch" is given a voice and a life by the hands of Condé. It may be argued that Tituba's death at the end of the novel would probably suggest that *I, Tituba* is a failed *Bildungsroman*. However, what we would like to argue here is that Tituba's coming of age is fully exploited by Condé – Tituba falls in love, she learns about the world around her, she learns the pleasure of her body, she goes to prison, she is subjected to societal judgement.

At times in the novel, Tituba surprisingly acknowledges in hindsight that she would be forgotten and left behind in history.

I felt I would only be mentioned in passing in these Salem witchcraft trials about which so much would be written later, trials that would arouse the curiosity and the pity of generations to come as the greatest testimony of a superstitious and barbaric age. There would be mention here and there of a "slave originating from the West Indies and probably practicing 'hoodoo.'" There would be no mention of my age or my personality. I would be ignored. As early as the end of the seventeenth century, petitions would be circulated, judgments made, rehabilitating the victims, restoring their honor, and returning their property to their descendants. I would never be included! Tituba would be condemned forever! There would never, ever, be a careful, sensitive biography recreating my life and its suffering. (CONDÉ, 2009, p. 110)

Tituba may seem worried that her name is unlikely to receive any attention after the Salem witch trials, a thought which is not at all incorrect as documents regarding her life post-trials do not provide much information regarding her later whereabouts. However, Jane Moss disagrees with Tituba's arguments on the grounds that several films and novels have dealt with the Salem trials and Tituba as well (1999, p. 5). Moss goes on to quote some of these and expand their contribution to the creation of Tituba as we know her nowadays. Writers such as Henry Longfellow, Williams Carlos Williams, Arthur Miller and Ann Petry have devoted some room for

Tituba. What we are not reluctant to disagree with Moss is that, apart from Ann Petry's novels perhaps, most of what has been written regarding Tituba has not been done the same way Condé has. Tituba had not been given a voice and a history as a woman in search of her own self amidst the hardships of her life. Petry's version, according to Condé, has a different perspective as the former decided to turn Tituba's history into a story for teenagers. (CONDÉ, 2009, p. 200).

Still according to Condé, her interest lies not in what Tituba's real life could have been, but rather on what she could offer Tituba. She gave her a childhood, an adolescence and an old age. (CONDÉ, 1999, p. 201) Condé admits to having few historical documents and allowing herself to invent Tituba – a fact which Moss apparently misses and criticizes *I, Tituba* for its “fantastic and anachronistic events that strain the credibility of her text” (MOSS, 1999, p. 9). The way Moss reads the novels probably leads her to believe it should be a historical novel when, in fact, *I, Tituba* is fiction, perhaps a historiographic metafiction as proposed by Linda Hucheeon, especially when one takes into account the use of historical documents such as the deposition of Tituba which is available in the Essex County Archives. Condé uses this document to emphasise and stress how the past has been represented and narrativised. They have “the potential effect of interrupting any illusion, of making the reader into an aware collaborator, not a passive consumer” (HUTCHEON, 2002, p. 85).

What must not be ignored in *I, Tituba* is Condé's words regarding why she decided to write the novel. In the afterword to the 2009 edition, an interview with Ann Scarboro, Condé states that she “wanted to offer her revenge by inventing a life such as [Tituba] might perhaps have wished it to be told” (SCARBORO, 2009, p. 199).

Offering another perspective, different from all the other versions of Tituba which literature and films had offered throughout times, does not alleviate what History has done to Tituba, but definitely evokes how postmodern works are political in the sense they busy themselves with detoxifying representations – as Hutcheon puts that representations “are anything but neutral” (HUTCHEON, 2002, p. 3). Postmodern representational practices often “frustrate critical attempts to systematize them” because they “refuse to stay neatly within accepted conventions and traditions and (...) deploy hybrid forms and seemingly mutually contradictory strategies” (HUTCHEON, 2002, p. 35). Then, *I, Tituba*, as a postmodern work and an appropriation of the *Bildungsromane*, makes room for the ‘other’ to speak and counter imperialist and patriarchal discourses which have hitherto represented this other.

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