

# In What Ways Might Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* Be Read As a Metafictional or Postmodern Novel?

Rebecca Parmenter

University of Essex

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## Abstract

Maryse Condé's 1987 novel *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* presents a fictionalised account of the historical events of the 1692 witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts. Unlike most fictional and non-fictional accounts of these events, Condé's novel uses the perspective of a non-white person. This particular choice can be considered political appropriation, an idea which Condé deconstructs as she uses. This paper examines the ways in which this novel can be considered postmodern. It uses postmodern theorists such as Lyotard, but predominantly Baudrillard and his ideas of Simulation and Simulacra, to elucidate ways in which Condé's novel questions the ways in which reality is understood and depicted in fiction. In addition, an examination of the feminist angle of the novel, and the way in which this clashes with its historical setting, suggest an unconventional approach to the representation of oppressed groups. This paper argues that the postmodern form and style of Condé's novel is intrinsically linked to its representation of oppressed groups, encourages critiques of historical narratives, and is revealing in ways that a more naturalistic style could never be.

**Keywords:** Maryse Condé, Postmodern, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Witch trials, Salem, Novel

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## Article

Maryse Condé's 1986 novel *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* is one of a number of texts which concerns the events of the 1692 Salem witch trials. Condé combines this historical background with elements of magic realism, in a revealing, first-person narrative, that explores issues such as feminism, slavery, religion, and race. What stands as the most interesting feature of the novel is the interaction of this content with its postmodern form and style. This essay shall explore the ways in which *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* can be considered postmodern, specifically through the characterisation, the interaction with and use of history, and through the blending of fact and fiction into something that defies genre conventions and questions the nature of reality.

An important way in which *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (abbreviated from now on to: *Tituba*) can be read as postmodern is through the use of characters from other texts. Condé transplants Hester, from Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*, into her text, and has her interacting with Tituba. This technique is metafictional in the way that it draws attention to the constructed nature of the text as fiction. Condé also transplants a large amount of characters from Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible*, such as Tituba, Samuel Parris, Sarah Good, Abigail Williams and Ann Putnam. This intertextuality not only draws attention to the construction of Condé's work, but to the constructed nature of Miller's and Hawthorne's fictions.

However, only a certain amount is borrowed from Miller, since Condé is putting real historical figures into her text. The names Tituba, Samuel Parris, Sarah Good, Abigail Williams etc. all belonged to real people who were involved in the Salem witch trials of 1692; Tituba was even recorded as having a husband named John (Breslaw, 1996, p. xxi). Condé uses extracts from the transcript of the 'real' Salem witch trials, in chapter three of part two, also known as "The Deposition of Tituba Indian". This shows an interaction and intertwining of history and fiction, as these factual words fit in amongst the plot events of Condé's novel. However, Condé censors the date used at the beginning of the first chapter, where Tituba describes her conception, "one day in the year 16\*\*" (1986, p. 3). What is particularly interesting about this is that readers are given the century in which Tituba was conceived, to give a feeling for the sort of historical background that

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is used to frame the narrative, but the specifics are left out, possibly to allow for historical inaccuracies and distance her characters from the 'real' events. In addition, this also acknowledges that little is known about the figure of Tituba that Condé adapts. Elaine G. Breslaw states that with regards to Tituba, the "Salem records provide very sparse details" (1996, p. xix), and so in terms of the grand narrative of the Salem witch trials, Tituba plays a very small part. Condé's novel is postmodern in the way grand narratives are treated. Jean François Lyotard stated that the "grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (1984, p. 37). *Tituba* acknowledges the inadequacies of history to properly document this key figure in the Salem witch trials, and by extension, highlights the inadequacies of master narratives with regards to minorities and oppressed groups.

Understanding the historical figures in *Tituba* is the key to recognize Condé's postmodernism. The character could be read as Condé's re-contextualization of a historical figure, putting her in a contemporary time and place, but giving her dialogue and thoughts suited to a different period in time. This can be seen through Tituba's sexual understanding and her liberal attitudes towards sex at the beginning of the novel, which can be considered a very modern, feminist viewpoint. Tituba acknowledges that she only wants John Indian for sex; she says: "I knew all too well where his main asset lay" (Condé, 1986, p. 19). Also, Tituba is aware of her own body and what gives her pleasure; in a masturbatory scene which may seem out of place, Tituba not only locates her "pudenda" but uses it until she "gushed a tidal wave that flooded [her] thighs" (Condé, 1986, p. 15). Tituba's sexual exploration and self-awareness ruins the reader's suspension of disbelief and clashes with their previous expectations of what historical fiction is. *Tituba* is postmodern to the extent that it takes someone left out from certain grand narratives, because of their race, gender and culture, and gives them a voice. It is surprising to get the inner thoughts of a historically oppressed figure, but also surprising to get such intimate thoughts that are unrelated to their oppression. Condé is quite literally giving Tituba a voice through her use of first person narrative. Perhaps Tituba is being re-written in *Tituba* as a way of giving this underrepresented person from history the feminism she desperately needed.

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Regarding grand narratives, it is important to note how the Puritan characters in *Tituba* are represented. Zubeda Jalalzai argues that "Condé regards her depiction of Tituba as a fantasy, but takes quite seriously her depictions of the Puritans that makes a reclamation of Tituba an urgent artistic and political choice" (2009, p. 413). There is a lot of evidence to suggest that Condé's choice of Tituba as subject, and her particular representation, is highly political. But Condé's Puritans are not entirely free from politicised alterations. While most of Condé's Puritans seem to behave in a manner appropriate to the time in which the novel is set, our first impression of Elizabeth Parris is somewhat different. Elizabeth talks openly about her sex life and her menstruation, stating that her husband "takes me without removing either his clothes or mine, so hurried is he to finish with the hateful act" (Condé, 1986, p. 42). Elizabeth's character is only partially 'believable' in this sense, since our modern perception of Puritan women from the 17<sup>th</sup> century is one of modesty and restraint. In addition to being open with a woman of a different race and class, Elizabeth is also surprisingly self-aware of the attitudes she and the other Puritans possess, since she stopped talking 'as if she had said too much' (Condé, 1986, p. 38). She says too much for other Puritans and too much to suspend disbelief. It could be argued that the text exhibits here what Baudrillard calls second order simulation, where something "masks and perverts a basic reality" (1988, p. 423).

However, how possible is it to truly know what the Puritans and Tituba would have been like? How far can we assume the plausibility of character from over 300 years ago, and how could it possibly be known what they would have thought? Postmodernism suggests that the nature of reality is questionable because the difference in individual experience means that there are no universal experiences, and thus, no way in which to represent anything considered a universal experience. By extension, it means that one person cannot fully understand the experiences and viewpoint of another person. So it is futile to attempt to understand the characters in *Tituba* as historically (in)accurate or 'of their time,' because they are not only historical figures, but Condé's fictional creation. Condé could even be highlighting the problematic nature of attempting to understand reality by the confines of cause and effect, reality and fantasy. What real obligation is there for Condé to make her characters historically accurate, other than conforming to genre conventions?

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Another way of reading Condé's character is as though she is one of many possible versions of Tituba, simultaneously existing in the realm of fiction with other Titubas. Since the historical records are so lacking in certainties for her, there may be an acknowledgement that since people now will never know what the 'real' Tituba was like, that fictional appropriations are the most suitable way in which to understand her. Arguably, the particular Tituba that is found in *Tituba*, one who exhibits and questions a lot of 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist ideas, is not supposed to represent the final word on the 'real' Tituba, or be the *only* Tituba. If Condé's Tituba is one of many, then attention is drawn to the construction of this character, and thus to her being fictitious, which brings us to metafiction. The suspension of disbelief in *Tituba* is shattered early in the novel with many characters speaking and acting as if they exist in a different time period than the one Condé appears to present. Despite the recognisable historical background, Condé's characterisation and narrative style highlight what Patricia Waugh considers the most fundamental aspect of metafiction, that "composing a novel is basically no different from composing or constructing one's 'reality'" (Waugh, 2002, p. 243). This aspect of the novel is postmodern because of what it suggests about the nature of reality. Exploring one of many possible versions of one person suggests that 'reality' cannot be fully understood since no experience of it is universal, reality is subjective, and thus there is possibly no such thing as 'reality'. Condé's Tituba is as 'real' as Miller's Tituba, or the historical Tituba. *Tituba* is less about considering which version of Tituba is most 'real' and accepting that all of them are creations, even the historical Tituba, who has been formed in our minds by (an absence of) historical records from the time, and framed by the societal attitudes she faced and that we use. To re-visit Baudrillard: "It is no longer a question of false representation of reality, but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real" (1988, p. 424).

In fact, it is because Condé gives her novel a historical background that we can consider it especially interesting as a postmodernist text. There are arguments that suggest that Condé is applying pastiche to her representation of Tituba. Pastiche is an important technique in postmodern art, found not only in literature, but architecture, sculpture and photography. Jalalzai argues that the work "illustrates significant problems in such appropriations of history for particular purpose or artistic aims" (2009, p. 413). It is certainly true that the character of Tituba problematizes the idea of appropriation for political purposes – in this case, feminist – due to her displacement in time. Condé creates a deliberately jarring disparity between the setting of the novel and a select few of

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the characters. This not only draws attention to the text's fictional nature, but is ridiculing the idea of giving late 20<sup>th</sup> century feminism to an historical figure alive more than 300 years prior; it is more satire, or parody, than pastiche. *Tituba* may be referring directly to *The Crucible*, which appropriates the Salem witch trial narrative for the purpose of critiquing McCarthyism. There is a certain irony and knowingness in Condé's representation of Tituba; we, the readers know she is a character and not 'real' (unlike Miller's representation), Condé knows she is not real, and the character Tituba is very aware of her feelings and actions, that may suggest she is in on the joke too. In addition, Condé is refusing to conform to the boundaries of what most readers consider to be historical fiction, in which we would assume characters that are based on real people would act as we suspect people of that time would, or were at most 'ahead of their time.' Nonetheless, while Condé is using this appropriation to highlight the problems in such a technique, she is still using it. The feminism of *Tituba* may create dissonance within the text, but whatever Condé's intentions are, she is still asking questions about feminism and bringing it to a certain readership. Arguably, *Tituba* has been appropriated for the purposes of highlighting the flaws in appropriation, which is postmodern in its self-reflexivity.

But, it is not only historical figures that Condé appropriates. Her postmodern reference to Hester from *The Scarlet Letter* is similar to her use of Tituba. Hester is a feminist figure in *Tituba*: she feels that "life is too kind to men, whatever their color" (Condé, 1986, p. 100) and she recognises the hypocrisy of her situation since "the man who put this child in my [her] womb is free to come and go as he pleases" (Condé, 1986, p. 97). Hester's feminism transplants her outside of her historical and social context, into some place more modern, much like Tituba. Hester even uses the word "feminist" (Condé, 1986, p. 101) around 1692 in the chronology of the text, but 'feminism' was coined over 100 years later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the term 'feminist', meaning an advocate of women's rights, only existed from around 1893.

Hester is partially a point of comparison for Tituba. Condé could be using the interactions between these two characters to demonstrate that modern feminism is conflicted on some issues. Tituba is aware that Hester disagrees with her opinion of relationships, since she avoids talking about John Indian because she 'knew only too well what she would say, and... wouldn't be able to stand it' (Condé, 1986, pp. 100-101). Also, Hester is used to reveal further intertextuality, since it could be

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argued that Condé is likening Hester towards Charlotte Perkins Gilman, when she says that she would like to write a book “where I'd describe a model society governed and run by women” (Condé, 1986, p. 101), a passing reference to *Herland* (1915). Also, there is humour in Condé's Hester, when Tituba addresses her as mistress Hester says “don't call me mistress” (Condé, 1986, p. 95). There is dramatic irony in that the reader knows Tituba would address an authority figure as mistress, but that Hester would know it to mean a woman, like herself, that was part of an extramarital affair. Hester, in Condé's novel, is written with a self-awareness that can be described as postmodern, relying on Hester being characters in more than one piece of fiction.

Ultimately, the most postmodern aspect of the characters of Hester and Tituba is that they receive the same treatment by Condé, despite one being ‘real’, and the other ‘fictional’. Interestingly, Hester has a ‘real’ past in the form of *The Scarlet Letter* which shapes her future in a different text, and yet the more historical Tituba has a *fictional* or at least uncertain past, shaped by her treatment (or the lack thereof) by grand narratives. What this achieves is a blurring between what is ‘real’ and what is ‘fictional’ in such a way as to question the nature of reality. Condé does not preserve Hawthorne's representation of Hester, though they have a lot in common. It is the simultaneous presence of the fictional and ‘historical’ pasts of Condé's characters that provokes questions about what we consider to be ‘real’. There is the argument that neither has any reality, only it is perhaps more legitimate for Condé to appropriate Hester for her own purposes, for she only ever existed in fiction. Unlike with Tituba, she cannot be accused of trying to re-write history, by appropriating figures from the past for her own political purposes. But postmodernist thought suggests that her Tituba can be one of many. Condé is not trying to change any ‘real’ Tituba, for that Tituba never truly existed. Arguably, *Tituba* could be considered 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> order simulation. Considering whether the novel “masks the *absence* of a basic reality” or “bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own simulacrum” (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 423), there are arguments for either side. For the former, the absence of a basic reality can relate to the absence of a reality for the ‘real’ Tituba, which Condé fills with her particular feminist creation. And there is strong evidence to suggest that this creation is a simulacrum which bears no relation to any reality, since *Tituba* is such a bricolage of fictional characters, historical figures, genres (magical realism, historical fiction, satire etc.), different ideologies and cultures, not tied down to their particular context, that there is no reality it could possibly be based on.

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Finally, as a counterpoint to this argument, it could be argued that Condé *is* making a clear distinction between 'real' and 'fictional'. Her character of Tituba can be read as a humorous take on what the 'real' Tituba could never have been, by exaggerating her feminist tendencies. In addition, Tituba's magical powers could be used in an argument against any 'reality' in the text. Though a lot of Tituba's magic is implied, readers get the sense that she makes Susanna Endicott ill with her powers ("an inconvenient and humiliating sickness? Which one would I choose?" [Condé, 1986, p. 30]), and uses animal sacrifices to conjure the spirits of Mama Yaya and Abena. While I feel this argument is significantly weaker than any argument that suggests that Condé is questioning the nature of reality, it must be acknowledged that this is one of many possible readings.

In conclusion, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* can be considered postmodern because it is an example of metafiction, it uses intertextuality, it plays with genre conventions, it interacts with history, it questions history and its grand narratives and especially because it questions the nature of reality. *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* allows for multiple interpretations, and when applied, these interpretations are paradoxical. Condé's novel can be read as either 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, or 4<sup>th</sup> order simulation. It can be taken seriously, or as a parody. It should be re-read because it demands that we as readers think about the nature of fiction and history's use of narratives, as well as how people, images, and stories can be appropriated for political purposes. Through challenging the perceived difference between 'historical' and 'fictional' narratives, this novel makes us think twice about history's treatment of oppressed groups.

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