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Gendered Silence and Racial Memory: Reclaiming Black Womanhood in Maryse Condé's *Victoire: My Mother's Mother*

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Abstract
Maryse Condé is a remarkable name in French Caribbean literature who received The New Literary Prize in Literature in the year 2018. Condé's characters often react in defiance and raise voices in resistance to establish their racial and gendered identity. Victoire: My Mother's Mother is a work of auto-fiction where she imagines the life of her maternal grandmother. The novel is a literary act of historical reclamation that interrogates the intersections of race, gender, and class in colonial Guadeloupe. Through a first-person narrative voice that straddles the boundary between author and descendant, Condé reconstructs the fragmented life of her grandmother Victoire, a Black woman whose existence is marked by domestic servitude, racial hierarchies, and unspoken trauma. Drawing on postcolonial theory, Black feminist criticism, and memory studies, the paper argues that Victoire's life—defined by silences, subjugated desire, and constrained agency—reveals subtle forms of resistance and survival. By centering Victoire's quiet strength and reweaving her story into a matrilineal framework, Condé not only personalizes history but politicizes memory, asserting the enduring significance of Black women's lives, even when history has tried to forget them. This paper is an attempt to study how the novel Victorie: My Mother's Mother` reclaims Black womanhood by dealing with gendered silence and racial memory.
Key words*: Postcolonial, race, gender, identity, resistance.*

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I. Introduction

Maryse Condé, who was awarded the New Academy Prize in Literature in 2018, holds a distinguished place in the canon of French Caribbean literature. She began her literary journey at the age of eleven, later publishing her first novel, *Hérémakhonon* (1976), which explores the internal struggles of a young West Indian woman in search of her cultural and personal identity. Across her body of work, themes of race and gender emerge as recurring focal points, particularly within the context of postcolonial societies. Condé's narratives frequently expose the layered oppressions experienced by her characters, especially Black women, who are doubly marginalized—both racially and sexually—within patriarchal and colonial frameworks. Her protagonists often resist these structures through acts of defiance, reclaiming their identity in the face of historical and cultural erasure. In *Victoire: My Mother's Mother*, Condé crafts a hybrid of autobiography and fiction to imaginatively reconstruct the life of her maternal grandmother. Through the intertwined stories of Victoire and her daughter Jeanne, Condé illuminates the intergenerational tensions and contradictions surrounding race, gender, and identity, illustrating how both women navigate, confront, and are shaped by the colonial legacies that define their existence.

II. Victoire as a Postcolonial Subject

Treatment of race, gender and search for identity are the major concerns of postcolonial literature. Postcolonial literature offers the platform for the embodiment of oppression and resistance realized as consequences of colonization in a neocolonial structure. Postcolonial literature subverts the very idea of 'centre'; an idea that gives not only a prestigious and privileged aura to the colonizers but also delimits and undervalues the importance of the colonized at the same time. *Victoire: My Mother's Mother* is centered on the conflict between colonisers and colonised where the master-slave binary makes the life of Victoire blessed at one hand and poisons the life of her daughter Jeanne on the other hand. The story of this mother-daughter duo further intensifies the 'us-them' divide considering the masters as 'us' and treating the slaves as 'them'. The

representatives of two generations are thus juxtaposed between racial and gendered identities. Here, gender is viewed from the perspectives of feminist literary theories.

In her autobiographical essay What is Africa to Me?, Maryse Condé asserts, "…I write from experience" (18). This sentiment resonates strongly in *Victoire: My Mother's Mother*, where the narrative unfolds through a first-person perspective—presumably that of Condé herself—as she seeks to reconstruct and reflect upon the life of her maternal grandmother. Victoire stood apart in her society, notably due to her skin color, describes as bearing "Australian whiteness" (1), which paradoxically marked her difference within a racialised social order. To support herself and raise her daughter, Victoire sells her labor to white families, navigating the constraints imposed on Black women in the colonial French Caribbean. In that society, it was considered a rare privilege for a girl to carry the name of her father—an honor not afforded to all—while women were socially conditioned to serve the desires of men and bear their children. Victoire's employment as a cook in the household of Boniface Walberg and his wife, Anne-Marie, signifies a pivotal transformation in her life—a shift that is both professional and deeply personal. Though she enters the household in a subordinate, servile position, Victoire soon develops a long-lasting emotional and sexual relationship with Boniface, her white employer. This relationship, which spans decades and is notably tolerated by Anne-Marie, operates within the boundaries of colonial power dynamics but also complicates them. While it might be superficially understood through the lens of exploitation, Condé presents the bond as emotionally complex, even suggesting Victoire's agency within its limits. However, her involvement with Boniface exposes her to ongoing criticism and social condemnation, as her transgression of racial, gender, and class norms unsettles the deeply conservative mores of Guadeloupean society. People accused her stay with the Walbergs by saying that Victoire was in fact securing the life of her daughter.

We note that each time reference is made to the world "faithful". We might very well ask ourselves to whom Victoire was faithful. Was it to Anne-Marie? To Boniface? Or was she pursuing her own private ambition that centered on Jeanne? Only Jeanne? Let us add that in the Antilles there is a time-honoured practice where the white male marries the white female, but takes his pleasure with every mulatto or black girl he can lay his hands on. Slavery or no slavery. (61)

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, Victoire's position must be read in light of the historical legacy of slavery and colonialism, where Black women's bodies were often sites of both labor and sexual control. Scholars such as Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have critiqued the tendency to view women in postcolonial societies solely through Western feminist paradigms, arguing instead for a contextual understanding of agency that recognizes how subaltern women negotiate power under constraint. Victoire's relationship with Boniface, while shaped by structural inequalities, also resists easy classification as passive victimhood. Her endurance, her emotional attachment, and her refusal to conform to the moral expectations imposed by society suggest a quiet but persistent form of resistance. She defies the dichotomy of victim and agent by inhabiting a liminal space in which survival, affect, and transgression coexist.

In this way, Maryse Condé's narrative does not simply recount a forbidden love story; it actively interrogates the racialized sexual politics of the French Caribbean. By giving Victoire depth, vulnerability, and emotional truth, Condé resists colonial historiography that would reduce her grandmother to either a scandal or a stereotype. The relationship with Boniface becomes a lens through which Condé explores the complexity of Black female experience in a society that continuously seeks to define and confine it. Through narrative, Victoire is re-humanised—not as a symbol or victim, but as a woman negotiating love, survival, and identity in a deeply unjust world.

Her daughter Jeanne, who was once close to Boniface started despising his after coming to know that her mother is a mistress of the master. But, throughout his life, Boniface is grateful to Victoire for providing him what he wanted. Pramod K. Nayar observes that "In many cases bonds and groups based on sexual preferences overcome racial or ethnic barriers (such as gay-lesbian rights that might overcome the race divide)" (161). Despite being worn down by the monotonous hardships and emotional disappointments of life, Victoire does not assume the role of an overt rebel or political activist. Onde writes, "Her trip to the market was her daily escape, her little moment of liberty in the tyranny of her hardworking days. Nobody on her back" (20). Rather than directly challenging the oppressive structures that define her existence, she conforms outwardly to the societal norms of colonial Guadeloupe. She sacrifices her own aspirations, desires, and emotional fulfillment, choosing instead a path of quiet endurance. Yet, this silence should not be mistaken for submission. Victoire's unwavering commitment to securing a better future for her daughter Jeanne reveals a different form of resistance—one rooted in maternal resilience and strategic survival. She has chosen motherhood above love and death:

> On the ship back home, she almost threw herself into the sea a hundred times. When the shores of Guadeloupe came into view, she wanted to die. Suddenly her decision to return seemed absurd. She was sacrificing herself for a child who would soon have a life of her own, from which perhaps she would be ruthlessly excluded. (95)

As a single mother and a mulatto domestic worker, she transcends the limitations imposed by race, class, and gender to carve out opportunities for the next generation. In doing so, Victoire emerges not as a passive figure but as a powerful symbol of resistance—embodying the struggle of Black women who, through acts of care, sacrifice, and perseverance, defy the constraints of a colonial and patriarchal order.

III. Race, Domestic Labor, and the Reproduction of Inequality

Victoire's role as a cook in a wealthy mulatto household reflects the rigid racial and class divisions of early 20th-century Guadeloupe. Though she is born free, her dark skin and African features confine her to a life of servitude. "Her mother was a cook. She became a cook. In those days, Black women had no other destiny" (Condé 18). Here, Condé underscores the intergenerational transmission of structural inequality—how race and gender predetermined one's position in the colonial hierarchy.

Victoire's labor is central to her survival but also a form of constrained agency. Cooking, often dismissed as domestic or feminine, becomes a source of reputation and pride for Victoire. She is known for her skill and even commands respect from those she serves. Yet her worth remains contingent on her utility to others—a condition that recalls Silvia Federici's argument that domestic labor under capitalism (and by extension colonialism) is both indispensable and invisibilised. Victoire's identity is tied to this paradox: her labor is both vital and devalued.

By assigning Victoire the role of a cook, Maryse Condé grants her protagonist a form of agency and a voice within a world that otherwise renders her invisible. In Victoire: My Mother's Mother, food and the act of cooking emerge as powerful tools of expression and autonomy for Victoire, an illiterate domestic servant. "Cook! Let us confess it was a bold claim, since at the Jovials, we may recall, all she ever did was help Danila. Yet from the very first day her destiny took shape. She proved to have an incomparable gift" (43). Through her mastery of the culinary arts, Victoire carves out a space of control and creativity in a society that affords her little power elsewhere. Her exceptional ability to prepare French cuisine with precision and excellence becomes both a form of self-assertion and a source of tension between her and her daughter, Jeanne. While Victoire expresses herself through taste, labor, and tradition, Jeanne aspires to assimilate into the French colonial ideal by mastering the French language and mimicking metropolitan cultural norms.

Food in the colonial Guadeloupean context is not merely nourishment but a site of cultural dominance. The imposition of French culinary traditions on colonized subjects—particularly domestic workers like Victoire—illustrates how colonial power infiltrated even the most intimate spheres of daily life. French food was associated with prestige, refinement, and racial superiority, whereas local tropical produce such as mangoes or avocados was devalued in favor of imported goods like apples. Within this framework, cooking French dishes became both a form of subjugation and a performance of colonial assimilation. However, Condé subverts this power dynamic by transforming food into a metaphor for survival, adaptation, and feminine creativity. In the confined domestic spaces of colonial Guadeloupe, the kitchen becomes a site where Victoire not only negotiates her position but also subtly resists the erasure of her identity. Thus, food in Victoire operates on multiple levels: as a tool of colonial control, a symbol of cultural alienation, and ultimately, a space for emotional resilience and female agency. Through Victoire's relationship with food, Condé underscores the complex intersections of race, gender, class, and colonial power that shape Black women's lives in the Caribbean.

Feminist movements have been reading and rereading the act of relating women's work and labour, be it cooking or gardening or embroidery, to some vocations which are customarily associated with a quintessential woman irrespective of time, class, race or caste. From the days of Elizabeth Barret Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983) to Maryse Condé's *Victoire* (2006), cooking, gardening and embroidery have been playing significant roles to ensure work and labour for women. In case of *Victoire* food is not merely related to a dish prepared but food, here, is a weapon, a passport, an agency of a woman for assertion of her identity.

IV. Gender, Desire, and Illegitimate Motherhood

Victoire's experiences as a woman are profoundly shaped not only by race but also by the gendered expectations and sexual politics of colonial society. Although her official role in the Walberg household is that of a cook, Victoire occupies a far more complex position, particularly in relation to Anne-Marie, the wife of her employer and lover, Boniface. Anne-Marie, despite being aware of the intimate relationship between Victoire and her husband, chooses not to acknowledge it openly. Instead, she cultivates a personal bond with Victoire, often confiding in her as a form of emotional release. This curious dynamic reflects the complexities of female relationships within the patriarchal confines of colonial Guadeloupe. Rather than reacting with jealousy or resentment, Anne-Marie expresses a kind of gratitude toward Victoire—for maintaining Boniface's presence within the family unit, thereby preserving the social stability that having a husband guarantees for a woman in that context.

Condé subtly critiques the gender norms of the period, suggesting that regardless of race—be it white, Black, or mulatto—a woman's social worth was largely determined by her association with a man. Marriage, in this framework, was less about emotional fulfillment and more about economic and social security. Yet, the relationship between Victoire and Anne-Marie, marked by emotional intimacy and mutual dependency, becomes a subject of local gossip. In response to these speculations, the narrator explicitly denies the possibility of a sexual relationship between the two women. Condé attributes such suspicions to the prevailing anxieties and stereotypes surrounding homosexuality in the Antillean context. By confronting these societal assumptions, she exposes how non-normative female bonds are often misread through the lens of patriarchal and heteronormative discourse.

In exploring the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, Condé complicates binary understandings of power and intimacy. Victoire, though marginalised, holds emotional influence within the household, while Anne-Marie, despite her whiteness and social standing, finds herself dependent on Victoire's presence. Through this layered portrayal, Condé challenges colonial hierarchies and reimagines domestic spaces as sites of both subjugation and subtle resistance:

> As for imagining an intimate relationship between Anne-Marie and Victoire, I refuse to believe it. If some people have no trouble going there, it is because the tradition of both masculine and feminine homosexuality is well established in the Antilles. There is abundant research to prove that the masters entered into such passionate and stifling relations with their domestic slaves that most of the latter preferred to work in the fields rather than in the house. At the end of the nineteenth century female homosexuality was still thriving. (61)

Later, Victoire bears a child—Condé's mother—outside of marriage, a decision that results in social ostracism. Yet Condé does not portray this as a moral failing but rather as an act of defiance and self-assertion. Despite the prevalence of polygamy, the burden of child-rearing invariably fell upon the mother. Consequently, when Victoire became pregnant, she was denied the presumption of innocence and subjected to moral scrutiny. Through Victoire's story, the text foregrounds the systemic victimisation of women, revealing it as a deeply entrenched and normalized aspect of colonial gender politics: "Victoire was not the first and would not be the last to push in front of her the belly she got on credit. It was a mode that was here to stay, and stay for a long time, that is for sure" (42).

As an illiterate mother Victoire suffers a lot, but she didn't cry. The wry criticism that she receives from people in the society contributes towards her realization of the importance of education and she becomes determined to educate her girl child so that through education her daughter can have a secured future. Condé writes:

> Was it then through her tears, that she swore to her daughter she would watch over her and give her every possible chance in life so that nobody would ever tremple on her daughter like they had trampled on her? Education, education, swear to God, would be her emancipation. Her daughter would be educated. She would sacrifice herself for that. (47)

Condé's own presence in the narrative further complicates this dynamic. By writing herself into the story as the narrator and descendant, she constructs a matrilineal history that resists the patriarchal norms of inheritance and legacy. Victoire, despite her silence and marginality, becomes the origin point of a resistant genealogy—one that culminates in Condé's own voice and authorship.

V. Narrative as Resistance: Rewriting Matrilineal History

Victoire is not simply about recovering the past; it is about rewriting the terms through which that past is understood. Condé's choice to center a domestic servant as the protagonist of a historical narrative is itself a radical gesture. She displaces the traditional subjects of colonial history—governors, landowners, priests—and replaces them with a woman whose life was lived largely in kitchens and bedrooms, in spaces traditionally deemed insignificant. By doing so, Condé aligns herself with feminist historians and postcolonial scholars who have argued for the importance of "history from below." Her narrative strategy resists linear chronology, incorporates oral traditions, and embraces speculation—all techniques that foreground the emotional truth of Victoire's life over the factual completeness the archive cannot provide.

As the narrator reflects, "Such as it is, here is the portrait I have managed to trace, whose impartiality or even exactitude I cannot fully guarantee" (4). This emphasises the collective dimension of Condé's project. Victoire is not just a personal tribute; it is a political intervention that speaks to the shared histories of Black women across generations and geographies.

VI. Conclusion

In *Victoire: My Mother's Mother*, Maryse Condé offers more than a personal memoir. She creates a textured, critical portrait of race and gender in colonial Guadeloupe, drawing attention to the ways Black women's lives have been shaped—and often silenced—by intersecting systems of power. Victoire's silence, domestic labor, and unspoken desires are not signs of submission but strategies of endurance and forms of

resistance. By writing her grandmother's story, Condé refuses historical erasure and asserts the political value of Black women's memory and matrilineal inheritance. Through a blend of imagination, testimony, and critique, Victoire stands as a powerful intervention in postcolonial feminist literature and a tribute to the resilience of those whose names were never meant to be remembered.

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