

Identity and Belonging: Exploring the Multifaceted Journey in Maryse Conde's Novels

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Abstract

French novelist and critic, Maryse Conde was born in Guadeloupe in the year 1937 and has contributed a lot to contemporary literature, for her literary contributions she was awarded the Alternative Nobel prize in literature in the year 2018. Conde explores the themes of identity and belonging in many of her novels. This article explores the multifaceted nature of identity by examining the perilous journeys undertaken by Conde's characters due to many socio-political and economic factors. The analysis delves into socio-political factors like Colonialism and slavery, which exploited millions of Africans by displacing them to foreign lands. The experiences of the displaced individuals are studied to highlight the factors that lead to identity crises. The internal and external factors that influence an individual's sense of self and belonging are explored within the context of Conde's narratives. The importance of culture and the impact of cultural clashes in constructing an individual's sense of self are also explored. The intricate nature of an individual's identity and its relationship with the culture and society are explored, with a particular focus on the importance of one's sense of belonging.

Keywords: Identity, Belonging, Displacement, Diaspora, Maryse Conde, Colonialism.

Born in the French overseas island of Guadeloupe, located in the southern Caribbean Sea, Maryse Conde is a famed critic, playwright, and novelist who explores the African diaspora through many of her works. Her life and experience in the Caribbean, Paris, and many African countries provided her with a first-hand experience of what Colonialism does to people, this is reflected in her works. Sisonke Msimang says this about Conde **“I think she embodies the world. The breadth of her global experience, at a time when we didn't speak about Black women as belonging to the world, is remarkable.”** (Conde, Maryse). Through her capturing narratives and dynamic characters who travel across continents, Conde has explored the many conflicts faced by blacks during the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras.

Conde has highlighted the intricate and multifaceted nature of identity through her characters who undertake perilous journeys due to many factors that make life difficult for them in their homelands. The journeys they undertake often prove to be challenging, and their life in the foreign lands becomes more challenging, this makes it difficult for them to have a

sense of self and to understand their place in the world which is new to them. Through these characters, Conde explores themes like dislocation and an extreme sense of loss.

The storyline in most of Conde's novels is set in important times in the period of history, emphasizing the impact that slavery and colonialism had on people, in her earlier novels like *Segu* and its sequel *The Children of Segu*, she explores the impact of foreign religion on West Africa, in those two novels the invasion of Islam and its role in displacing individuals and communities are explored, along with Christianity's impact on Africans, particularly on those who were displaced. Her recent novels *Waiting for the Waters to Rise* and *The Wondrous and Tragic Life of Ivan and Ivana* is set in contemporary time, thus allowing her readers to explore the aftermath of colonialism and how it impacts people's life. Whether it be precolonial, colonial, or postcolonial era, her characters can be found grappling with societal forces like discrimination and racism. Her novel *Waiting for the Waters to Rise* is described by L'Avenir as **"A dense book, a novel with complex layers, a beautiful lesson of humanity in a hostile world."** (Conde, Maryse).

A sense of self and belonging is vital for people to understand their place in the world and live accordingly, deprived of these leads to an identity crisis, making it difficult for people to lead a meaningful life. Societal forces like colonialism and slavery have robbed millions of Africans of their sense of self and had a profound impact on their identity. The blacks who were displaced by force and exploited in foreign lands found it extremely difficult to construct their identity, this is explored by Conde through multiple characters in different time periods.

Africans who were displaced by force, particularly due to slavery were subjected to discrimination due to their ethnicity, they were not considered equal in foreign lands, and this ruptured their sense of self and belonging. Like racial discrimination, the clash between cultures made it difficult for the displaced blacks to construct their identity, not being able to let go of their past while not being able to adapt to their present in the foreign land made it difficult for them to find their place in the world. They were looked upon as outsiders, Conde has brilliantly portrayed this through her novels, in the novel *Segu*, the displaced blacks are looked upon as brutal savages, while Tiekoro, son of a nobleman who has converted to Islam and moves to a foreign land to learn more about Islam tried to get close to a girl he liked, she spat on him and shouted **"Hands off, you dirty nigger! ... Hands off! You're black, you stink – and do you really think I'd marry you?"** (Segu, 91). Though Tiekoro has converted to Islam and has left his homeland, he was still discriminated against, such discrimination and racial profiling made it difficult for the displaced population to fit into the society they had migrated to.

The racial discrimination that blacks were subjected to, continued though slavery and colonialism were no longer present. This is evident from the recent novels of Conde, where her characters belonging to certain ethnicities are racially profiled and deprived of equal access to resources and justice. In the novel *Waiting for the Waters to Rise*, through the character of Babakar, the discrimination faced by minorities is explored, though Babakar was an educated doctor, he was judged based on his ethnicity, through Babakar, Conde highlights the obstacles faced by individuals, particularly blacks in foreign lands. Such obstacles made it difficult for them to understand their place in the society they were a part of. As seen through

the works of Conde, the discrimination and disadvantages faced by the blacks were not limited to a specific social setting, instead, it was prevalent in all places where they migrated. **“African Americans have a history of experiencing structural racism through economic disadvantages and segregation, which have been existent since slavery.”** (Jones, Scott, Gwendolyn and Kamara, Richardson, Mozella).

Conde, through her novel's characters, highlights the internal and external conflicts faced by individuals when they try to construct their identities. The journeys undertaken by such characters mirror the lives of people who are constantly on a search to understand themselves so they can make better sense of the world around them. The feeling of self-uncertainty is common when an individual is displaced in a foreign land where the culture and beliefs are completely new to them, they lack a sense of belonging, and to overcome that they try to relate themselves to the society and the people in it, as it helps them adapt to their new social structure.

One effective method that reduces self-related uncertainty is the process of group identification and self-categorization; specifically, uncertainty-identity theory claims that strengthening group identification can attenuate uncertainty related to one's self, life, and future. (Hogg A Michael, 2017).

Adapting to a society where they are discriminated against is not a task that everyone accomplishes successfully, some keep trying, while most give up. The ones that give up are either tired of trying or do not find it worth trying for, like Naba in the novel *Segu* who ended by losing his life as he did not find life meaningful enough far away from his family and homeland, in his land of displaced he found life pointless. **“What was the point of life without liberty? Without self-respect? You might just as well be dead.”** (Segu, 216). Robbed of a feeling of self-worth, individuals find it meaningless to be part of a society that does not treat them as equals, this leads some to move from one place to another in the hope of finding meaning and purpose in their lives, so they can settle.

In Conde's novel *Desirada*, the prominent character Marie Noelle is seen going through multiple journeys to know the truth about her parental heritage, she finds it difficult to fit in or settle anywhere without knowing the truth about her parents. It is hard for her to create a bond with anyone, be it her mother, her husband, or any other, this is due to the internal conflicts she faces from not being able to construct her identity precisely. Noelle's journey highlights the internal conflicts and societal pressures that an individual has to grapple with when trying to construct their identity.

The desire for social acceptance and belonging often collides with the need to make independent decisions. Teenagers may face internal conflicts when they must choose between following their true interests and conforming to peer pressure or societal norms. Balancing their desire for acceptance with the pursuit of personal growth can be challenging. (School Dekho).

Like Noelle, every other character of Conde, who was displaced grapples with their individual identities. The societal conflicts and obstacles they face while in a foreign land make it hard for them to adapt to the culture and values of the society they are in. Like societal conflicts, their own internal conflicts caused by cultural clashes make the construction of identity a difficult task. This is a common theme in many of Conde's works,

where her characters struggle to find a sense of self when caught between the beliefs and values of their own culture and tradition, and that of the society where they have migrated. These conflicts mirror the internal and external factors which shape an individual's sense of self.

In Conde's works, which are set in different times in history, the clash between cultures and beliefs fuels every character's journey to find a sense of self and belonging. She has highlighted the impact that cultural clashes have on individuals and society. In her earlier works like *Segu*, changes caused due to societal forces like slavery, colonialism, and invasion of foreign religions affected Africans in their homelands as well as in foreign lands. Members of the Traore family in *Segu* find themselves in a dilemma where they have to adapt themselves to the needs and wants of foreign cultures while not able to let go of their own ancestral culture, they are torn between the cultural clashes in a world that is changing. The clash between cultures is explored in Conde's recent novels as well, where the characters feel obliged to preserve their past while wanting to adapt to the culture of the society they are in, so they can relate themselves to it. Not being able to relate to their present and not truly able to stay connected with the past leaves them with internal conflicts, that leads to identity crisis.

In Conde's narratives, cultural clashes play an important role in an individual's perception of self, her bicultural characters are often seen as confused and uncertain about what to embrace and what to let go. **"It is not uncommon for confusion and uncertainty to arise in individuals when their coexisting cultural identities clash"** (Drevitch Gary). Being away from their home and homeland and away from their ancestral beliefs and values makes it difficult for many to adapt to the culture of the land where they have migrated, to construct their identity in a foreign land, they have no choice but to accept the beliefs and values of that society. This clash between cultures causes feelings of confusion and uncertainty, which directly affects their sense of self.

Conde's characters are seen striving to find their place in a society that is foreign to them and discriminates against them. Discrimination based on ethnicity is not just faced by people who are displaced, but also by their descendants, though they were born and brought up there, they were still looked upon as inferior by the natives, and this makes it extremely difficult for them to construct their identity as they have no means of connection with the land of their ancestors, other than the knowledge passed upon them by their family or society, and they are not accepted as equals in the land where they were born and brought up in. In the novel *The Wondrous and Tragic Life of Ivan and Ivana*, the title characters who were happy with their life and identity, started hating it the moment they were subjected to racial discrimination. **"Ivan and Ivana realized they belonged to the most underprivileged category of the population, the ones anyone could insult as they liked."** (TWaTLoLaV, 27). Ivana wanted to uplift her life and that of her family, so she decided to move to a place that she knew nothing about. Life in a foreign land, where the beliefs and values are different from what one is used to will make it difficult for them to adapt, which deprives them of a sense of belonging.

Conde's characters' yearning for belonging reflects their need to adapt to the culture of the society they are in, so they can connect with that society and the people in it, such connections are important to construct a sense of self, without which one feels lost. Conde

highlights such human experiences through many of her characters who are striving to fit into the society where they have migrated. Some accept the identity they are provided with, like Ranelise from the novel *Desirada*, she was not bothered by the identity the society provided her with, she accepted it and did not bother going out looking to connect with her ancestral culture. Marie Noelle from the same novel was not happy with who she was as a person, she can not convince herself to settle anywhere though life was good, rather she wanted to know the exact truth about her parental heritage so she could construct her identity accordingly. Noelle's yearning for belonging set her on constant journeys in the hope of uncovering the truth about her father's identity so she could construct an identity for herself. Through her, Conde explores the importance of parental heritage in constructing an individual's sense of self.

Most of Conde's characters try to find solace by connecting with their own community rather than the one they have been displaced to, as it seems easier for them to define themselves in the context of their own cultural roots, rather than that of a culture that is foreign to them. To do that they have to go through journeys that are full of obstacles, as their ethnicity made it difficult for them to navigate through such journeys.

Conde by not limiting her narratives to a certain time or any specific location, allows her readers to explore identity and belonging on a global scale. Search for identity and belonging is not a task that is limited to slaves and their descendants, they have enduring relevance in the contemporary time as well, millions of people are getting displaced every year and are robbed of their sense of self. **“In 2022, the number of people forcibly displaced by persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and events seriously disturbing public order grew by 21 percent standing at an estimated 108.4 million at the end of the year.”** (UNHCR, 7).

Conde's powerful narratives and dynamic characters highlight the intricate nature of identity and belonging and explore how they could be impacted by societal forces and internal conflicts. The importance of parental heritage in constructing an individual's sense of self is explored in detail in the novel *Desirada*, and the importance of familial bonds and the role they play in creating a sense of self is explored in different time settings in her novels. Through her character's journey through difficult landscapes, she explores the impact colonialism, slavery, and similar societal forces could have on one's identity.

Conde's exploration of identity crises proves that the clash between cultures affects an individual's perception of self, as they would be torn apart between their ancestral beliefs and values and the demands of the society they are in. She also highlights the internal conflicts that result from being far from one's home and the people one cares for and its role in making the construction of identity difficult. The internal conflicts from being separated from one's culture and people lead to a profound sense of disconnection, some try to reconnect to the past while some try to understand themselves in the context of the society in which they are displaced, both to understand their sense of self. Conde's narratives highlight the multifaceted nature of identity and the factors that lead to an identity crisis.

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