

Racial Haunting and the Postcolonial Self in the Story of the Cannibal Woman

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Abstract

*Postcolonial literature provides a critical platform for articulating racial injustice and exploring the complexities of self-identity experienced by colonial subjects within ongoing neocolonial structures. The works of Guadeloupean writer Maryse Condé exemplify this dimension of postcolonial expression. Set in post-apartheid Cape Town, Condé's novel *The Story of the Cannibal Woman* interrogates the intersections of race, memory, displacement, and desire in the construction of a fractured and haunted subjectivity. In *The Story of the Cannibal Woman*, set in post-apartheid Cape Town, Condé examines how race, memory, displacement, and desire come together to form a sense of self that is fragile, divided, and haunted by history. Through powerful, recurring metaphors like haunting and cannibalism, she shows how Black women are often consumed by social expectations and by the historical roles they are forced to play. This paper draws on the work of postcolonial and feminist thinkers such as Édouard Glissant, Homi Bhabha, bell hooks, and Rob Nixon to explore how race continues to shape not only public life but also private relationships and personal identity. The study further discusses that Condé does not offer easy answers or neat endings; instead, her novel sheds light on the deep emotional labour and isolation that come with being Black in a world still living in the shadow of colonialism.*

Key words:

Postcolonial identity, race, racial haunting, cannibalism.

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Introduction

Postcolonial literature provides a critical platform for articulating racial injustice and exploring the complexities of self-identity experienced by colonial subjects within ongoing neocolonial structures. The concept of race encompasses the categorization of people based on specific biological characteristics that distinguish them from other groups. These characteristics, such as skin colour, facial features, and hair texture, are often considered socially significant as they play a role in determining a race's societal position. By critically examining the social dimensions of race, it can be explored how historical ideologies and power structures have influenced perceptions of racial identity. Recognizing the complexities of race as a social phenomenon provides an opportunity to challenge stereotypes, combat discrimination, and promote inclusivity among communities. Maryse Condé's *The Story of the Cannibal Woman* (2007) is a haunting exploration of race, memory, and postcolonial identity set against the backdrop of post-apartheid South Africa. At its centre is Rosélie, a Caribbean woman living in Cape Town with her white partner, whose murder launches a psychological and cultural investigation into the legacies of colonialism and racial trauma. As a woman caught between multiple geographies, histories, and identities, Rosélie becomes a figure of dislocation—a witness to, and product of, racial hauntings that extend beyond national borders and into the psychic life of the postcolonial subject. This paper draws on the work of postcolonial and feminist thinkers such as Édouard Glissant, Homi Bhabha, bell hooks, and Rob Nixon to explore how race continues to shape not only public life but also private relationships and personal identity. The study further discusses that Condé does not offer easy answers or neat endings; instead, her novel sheds light on the deep emotional labour and isolation that come with being Black in a world still living in the shadow of colonialism.

Racial Hauntings: Memory and Colonial Ghosts

Race in postcolonial literature is a critical theme that examines how colonial legacies have shaped racial identities, hierarchies, and power dynamics. Postcolonial literature often addresses the construction of race as a tool for domination and subjugation under colonial rule and explores the ongoing impacts of

those racial constructs in the aftermath of colonialism. It delves into the ways in which colonial discourse has perpetuated stereotypes and racialised differences to justify the exploitation and oppression of colonised people. Key aspects of race in postcolonial literature aims at deconstructing racial hierarchies. Many postcolonial texts intent to dismantle the racial hierarchies established during colonial times. Authors critically examine how these hierarchies were constructed and highlight their arbitrary nature. Postcolonial literature frequently explores the complex identities of individuals who navigate between different cultures, languages, and racial categories.

Race, in Caribbean literature, reflects the region's intricate history of colonisation, slavery, and migration. Caribbean authors frequently address race within the frameworks of identity, colonialism, hybridity, and resistance, offering complex and multifaceted perspectives on the social and cultural realities of the Caribbean. The literature underscores the lasting impact of colonialism and slavery, revealing how historical injustices continue to influence contemporary Caribbean societies. Additionally, themes of resistance are prevalent, depicting how Caribbean communities confront and challenge the racial hierarchies imposed by colonial powers. By addressing these issues, Caribbean authors not only provide a critique of the past but also illuminate ongoing struggles for equality and justice. Their works serve as a powerful commentary on the resilience and agency of Caribbean people in the face of enduring racial and cultural challenges. Through this literary exploration, readers gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between race, history, and identity in the Caribbean, appreciating the region's rich and diverse cultural heritage. Through this literary exploration, readers gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between race, history, and identity in the Caribbean, appreciating the region's rich and diverse cultural heritage.

In *The Story of the Cannibal Woman*, Maryse Condé masterfully employs the trope of haunting to reflect the psychological burden of racial history. While writing a review of Maryse Condé's novel *The Story of the Cannibal Woman*, Marie-Hélène Kofi-Tessio mentions:

Published in its French version in 2005, Maryse Condé's *The Story of the Cannibal Woman* is a novel that explores themes familiar to its author:

ostracism, racial intolerance, and the dark side of nomadism: exile, loneliness, and isolation. To that list, we can add a sense of alienation from oneself and one's culture, destroyed lives, and distorted family ties. (7)

The Story of the Cannibal Woman centres round Rosélie, a black woman of African origin, "Daughter of Rose and Elie" (2), who has just lost her husband Stephen. In a state of loneliness and despair, Rosélie not only reminisces her memories with Stephen but also faces the world alone that unveils a lot of secrets related to Stephen of which she has least speculations. Like a 'stream of consciousness', several episodes run before her making her restless as she finds herself helpless. As the story moves, she remembers people like Dido, Faustin, Ariel, Fiéla, and many others. Being exposed to a colonial society, this woman called Rosélie fears white men, "What did frighten her were the men. White men" (3) as "She has always been a "handsome Negress"" (4). Despite being spotted in such a racial background, interestingly, sexuality neither follows nor maintains any racial rules. Rosélie decides to stay with Stephen Stewart whose father is an English and mother a French. Thus, Condé says that "All nature of people have climbed over their borders, pitched camp, and settled down in their midst" (8).

For Rosélie, the protagonist of the novel, the past is not a linear or resolved experience; instead, it manifests as a series of fragmented, ghostly memories that intrude upon her daily life. Her emotional and cultural dislocation in Cape Town is not simply geographic—it is the result of a deeply internalized legacy of colonialism, slavery, and racial exile. The narrative is less a murder mystery than an excavation of the invisible structures—social, racial, and psychological—that continue to shape the present. As the novel begins, a gloomy picture of Cape Town is created that "always slept in the same position, curled up in the muzzle of a gun" (1). Gun, here, not only symbolises power structure affected by colonialism but also intensifies a kind of tension and sense of fear and despair. A clash between powerful colonisers with guns and desolate colonised without guns is established here that in turn hints towards the obvious presence of racism in Cape Town. Cape Town, as Condé portrays, appears as a city to which blacks migrate in search of job and livelihood: "The feet of thousands of blacks in cheap shoes tramped towards the subaltern jobs that had always been their lot" (1). Cape Town highlights a stark

divide in opportunities and quality of life among its residents. For the white and powerful colonisers, the city offers an abundance of possibilities, fulfilment, and enjoyment. They have access to financial security, ample economic opportunities, and a higher standard of living. In contrast, the black population endures significant poverty and lacks financial stability. Their chances for a decent livelihood are severely limited, and they face constant marginalization and discrimination, struggling to find a secure and sustainable way of life in a deeply unequal society. In “Color-blind Racism in France: Bias Against Ethnic Minority Immigrants” Leland Ware observes that “The colonial society established by the French in Africa created two distinct communities: a superior caste consisting of French settlers and an inferior one consisting of Africans” (185). Rosélie’s condition of unbelonging can be understood through Rob Nixon’s concept of “slow violence”—a form of violence that is “incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (Nixon 2). Racial trauma in the novel does not erupt in spectacular moments; rather, it accumulates through Rosélie’s alienation, through the silences and racial tensions in her interracial relationship, and through her uneasy presence in a country that sees her as both Black and foreign. Her inner life is dominated by a feeling of being out of place, a ghost drifting through postcolonial ruins. She feels like an outcaste as she has to “choose between being excluded or being invisible” (37). She cannot go back to Africa as going back to Africa means “to observe how communities, once bitter enemies, learn how to live together” (35). This spectral image of Rosélie portrays her emotional alienation as well as the way Black postcolonial subjects are often rendered invisible or illegible within dominant social orders.

In *The Story of the Cannibal Woman* Maryse Condé employs a unique narrative style that uses vivid descriptions, mingling memory and imaginations to describe past as well as current events. She adopts storytelling as a method which helps the readers to keep engaged. This method is further enriched by skilful use of irony and symbolism. The narrative structure itself mimics the hauntological logic it depicts. Through the sudden appearances of Rosélie’s memories, with no chronological order, Condé depicts colonial violence, displacement, and childhood trauma. Her psychic landscape is littered with the detritus of empire: her family’s fraught class and racial background in the Caribbean, her mother’s death, her own

educational exile in Europe. These moments develop like uninvited ghosts, disorienting the linear temporality expected of traditional narrative. In this way, Condé formally enacts the experience of postcolonial haunting—disruption, fragmentation, repetition.

Rosélie's presence in South Africa deepens this condition. While she is racially marked as Black, her identity as a French-speaking Caribbean woman alienates her from the local Black South African population. She is neither a part of their struggle nor is she accepted by white society, which views her with exoticised suspicion. Condé writes:

Coloured marriages are a complex business. It's not just a matter of class and education, like everywhere else. Bourgeois with bourgeois. Graduates with graduates. Inheritances from parents or grandparents. Life insurance. Bank accounts. A plot of ground to build a house or a weekend cottage. In addition, it's a question of skin color. The golden rule is not to marry anyone darker than yourself. (256)

Her partner Stephen's social circle embodies a kind of liberal white guilt, polite in its inclusion of Rosélie but still operating within neocolonial power dynamics. Here, race operates not only as a visible difference but as a layered historical construct—where one's value, belonging, and even grief is filtered through colonial hierarchies.

In addition, the spectre of cannibalism—the novel's title metaphor—invokes another layer of racial haunting. Historically, Western colonial discourse used the image of the cannibal to justify conquest, framing colonised peoples as savage and in need of civilization. Condé reclaims and subverts this trope: the true cannibalism in the novel is metaphorical—the consumption of Rosélie's identity, her history, her agency. She is devoured by the expectations and racialised projections of others. In being consumed by the gaze of both white liberalism and Black nationalism, she becomes a palimpsest of colonial anxieties. As a result, "Rosélie never raised her voice. Never disobeyed, never rebelled. No preadolescent crisis, much less an adolescent one. The family cited her as an example to the cousins who got into bad days" (150).

Condé reveals that racial haunting is not a phenomenon of the past but a condition of postcolonial modernity. The ghosts that populate Rosélie's world are not supernatural—they are political, historical, and psychic forces that shape who she is and how she is seen. Her subjectivity is fractured by the weight of these hauntings, echoing Édouard Glissant's notion of opacity—the idea that the postcolonial subject cannot and should not be fully knowable or reducible to the narratives imposed by colonial regimes. In *The Story of the Cannibal Woman*, this opacity becomes a form of survival against the homogenizing and consuming tendencies of racial discourse.

In *The Story of the Cannibal Woman*, Maryse Condé examines public and political forms of racial violence and interrogates how race structures the most intimate aspects of human life—especially love, sex, and emotional dependency. Through Rosélie's romantic relationship with Stephen, a white South African academic, the novel exposes how desire is deeply racialised, entangled in legacies of colonialism, exoticism, and domination. Despite the personal nature of their connection, the imbalance of power in their relationship reflects broader systems of racial inequality that continue to shape the postcolonial world.

Despite being repeatedly betrayed by her partners, Rosélie never allows herself to cry. She understands how to mask her feelings, but that does not mean she is not capable of deep thought and reflection. In fact, Rosélie is strong and resilient enough to avoid reacting impulsively, choosing instead to adhere to societal norms. This demonstrates her profound inner strength and self-control, as she refuses to let her emotions dictate her actions. She realises that “It's sad, really to think that white men make the best husbands” (162). She consciously decides to maintain her composure and uphold her dignity, showcasing her true power and resolve in the face of adversity. Therefore, even during times of intense personal misery and profound loss, she is able to hold back her tears. Despite the overwhelming emotional pain she feels, she possesses a remarkable strength that allows her to keep her emotions in check. Her ability to remain composed and avoid crying reveals an extraordinary level of self-discipline and resilience. This strength enables her to face the toughest and most heartbreaking moments without succumbing to her sorrow, demonstrating a profound inner fortitude and an unwavering sense of control over her emotions:

Rosélie seldom cried. Tears are a luxury that only children and spoiled can afford. They know that a sympathetic hand is always there to dry them. She hadn't cried when Salama Salama cheated on her. She hadn't cried when she stood in front of her mother's body, eyelids finally closed, guarded by candles at the bottom of Doratour the undertaker's monstrous casket. She hadn't cried when Stephen died. (228)

Drawing on the work of bell hooks, we can read this relationship through the lens of what she calls "oppositional desire"—a desire shaped by racialised fantasies of dominance and submission. hooks argues that within white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, Black women's bodies have historically been sites of fetishization, control, and anxiety. Rosélie's experience mirrors this: she is both desired and distrusted, loved and feared. Her sexual and emotional availability to Stephen does not shield her from suspicion after his death—it intensifies it. In the eyes of the white public, her Blackness becomes inseparable from danger and deviance.

Rosélie's ambivalence toward Black South African men adds another dimension to the novel's meditation on racial desire. While she often yearns for a connection to the Black community, she is also wary of being claimed or judged by it. Her brief attraction to Kwame Oduro— a figure of revolutionary Black masculinity—is infused with anxiety, not liberation. Condé uses these moments to complicate any simple narrative of racial solidarity, suggesting that postcolonial intimacy is always inflected by the scars of both colonialism and modernity.

Thus, Condé shows that love, far from being a private refuge, is saturated with social meanings. Intimacy becomes another domain in which the postcolonial self is haunted—by stereotypes, by history, by the legacies of desire shaped under imperial rule. The novel refuses to idealize interracial relationships or position them as inherently redemptive. Instead, it insists on their complexity, showing how race continues to mediate even the most personal human connections.

The Postcolonial Self and Spatial Displacement

In this novel, Maryse Condé stages the postcolonial self as a fractured, unsettled identity—constantly shifting, never rooted, and haunted by histories of displacement. For Rosélie, spatial dislocation is both physical and psychological.

Her move from the Caribbean to Europe and ultimately to South Africa marks more than geographical transitions; it signals a deeper crisis of identity rooted in her inability to find a space of genuine belonging. As a diasporic Black woman, she is alienated not only from the land she inhabits but from the cultural frameworks that define race and nationhood within it.

Rosélie, however, struggles with this relationality. Her Caribbean heritage marks her as Black, but her Francophone background and history of exile distance her from the Black South African population around her. She is neither insider nor outsider, neither coloniser nor colonised in the traditional binary. Instead, she occupies an in-between space—a liminal subject navigating a post-apartheid city still structured by colonial logics of exclusion. Cape Town, the novel's primary setting, plays a crucial role in shaping this experience. While South Africa has formally abolished apartheid, the social and spatial hierarchies it created persist. Condé's portrayal of Cape Town emphasises the city's uneven terrain: its luxurious white enclaves stand in sharp contrast to the racialised poverty of the townships. Rosélie inhabits a white upper-middle-class neighbourhood with Stephen, but her presence there is never fully accepted. She is tolerated but also scrutinized. The neighbours' curiosity, their subtle Condescension, and their ignorance about her background all suggest a deeper racial discomfort. In this way, space itself becomes a racialised structure, one that disciplines who belongs and who remains a ghost within it. Rosélie affirms, "I like horror. I think that in a previous life I must have belonged to a pack of vampires. My long, pointed canines sunk into my mother's breast" (48).

This tension of being different is made more apparent in Rosélie's interactions with the Black domestic workers, street vendors, and taxi drivers who populate the margins of her daily life. While she shares racial heritage with them, there is a gulf of cultural and historical experience that separates her. Condé complicates any notion of easy solidarity based on race alone. Rosélie's education in France, her relative wealth, and her detachment from the struggles of apartheid-era South Africa all contribute to her sense of estrangement. As a result, her presence in Cape Town is marked by an absence of relationality—she moves

through the city like a ghost, barely tethered to its social or political realities realising that “Oh yes, my mind was elsewhere” (19)!

This disconnection extends to her relationship with Stephen, whose white liberalism masks an underlying paternalism. Their interracial relationship, rather than bridging cultural divides, often underscores them. Stephen represents a post-racial fantasy—one in which love and intellectual kinship supposedly transcend race. But this fantasy collapses under pressure, particularly after Stephen’s murder. Rosélie is quickly isolated and suspected, revealing how racial hierarchies persist even within intimate relationships. Her supposed integration into white society proves fragile and conditional, dependent on her silence and compliance.

Homi Bhabha’s notion of “unhomeliness” is useful here. Bhabha describes unhomeliness as the estrangement experienced when the private and the political collapse into one another—when the home, the space of supposed safety and identity, becomes alien. For Rosélie, the house she shares with Stephen becomes increasingly uncanny. It is filled with reminders of his former life, his old friends, his social class—all of which subtly exclude her. After his death, it becomes a space of surveillance, interrogation, and legal suspicion. The home does not anchor Rosélie; it unmoors her further:

She was no sooner inside than a deep malaise gripped her. It seemed she was committing an indiscretion. That Stephen would come in at any minute and ask her, amused:

“What are you looking for?”

Yes, what was she looking for? (227)

Rosélie’s identity is neither fixed nor liberatingly fluid—it is anxious, fragmented, and haunted. Her physical displacement mirrors an inner psychic displacement, making her a powerful symbol of postcolonial subjectivity: always in motion, yet never arriving. Condé thus portrays the postcolonial self as a being constantly shaped by space yet unable to be fully located within it. Still, she is hopeful that the Blacks will be able to realise their importance and fight for

themselves. Therefore, Condé says through Rosélie, “If we ourselves don’t like our color, how can we blame the whites for not liking it” (234)?

Conclusion

In *The Story of the Cannibal Woman*, Maryse Condé crafts a profoundly unsettling narrative in which the legacies of colonialism, racism, and displacement are not merely remembered—they are lived, embodied, and internalized. Through Rosélie, Condé portrays the postcolonial self as fractured, haunted, and constantly negotiating the violence of visibility and invisibility. The novel refuses the comforts of resolution or healing. Instead, it insists that the afterlives of empire linger not only in institutions and landscapes but in the very psyches of those who inherit its ruin. Racial haunting in the novel is not confined to supernatural imagery but embedded in the mundane: in conversations, silences, glances, and relationships. Rosélie’s identity is constantly destabilized by her foreignness, her Blackness, and the uneasy racial dynamics of her interracial relationship. Her subjectivity is constructed through a series of absences—she is made legible only through others’ expectations, suspicions, and fantasies. Condé’s most daring move, however, lies in the symbolic weight of the novel’s title. By invoking cannibalism, she confronts the reader with the violent metaphors that have long accompanied Western constructions of racial and colonial otherness. Thus, *The Story of the Cannibal Woman* reveals that the postcolonial self is not a site of liberation but of struggle—haunted by the past, shaped by racialised systems of power, and constantly in search of a space to exist fully. Through this layered, poignant portrayal, Condé says that the ghosts of race and empire that still walk besides, and often within, an individual.

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