A "TRAGIC MISTAKE?": VÉRONICA'S IDENTITY QUEST IN MARYSE CONDÉ'S *HÉRÉMAKHONON*

Daniel R. Morris

"Franchement on pourrait croire que j'obéis à la mode. L'Afrique se fait beaucoup depuis peu" (11), says Véronica Mercier, the black Antillean woman of Maryse Condé's novel, *Hérémakhonon*, as she leaves her white Parisian boyfriend to search for her identity in Africa. Her quest becomes a complex one, entwined in issues of race, gender, social class, cultural and ethnic background, and the political struggles of a post-colonial West African nation. Although Véronica eventually abandons her quest, calling it a "tragic mistake," Condé leads her narrator to universal conclusions on human identity which transcend racial, ethnic, and gender issues.

Véronica grew up in a black, bourgeois home. Although her genealogy tree, like that of most Antilleans, contains some white blood, her dark-skinned family does not belong to the privileged mulatto class. When she falls in love with the son of a wealthy, prominent mulatto family, both parents object, and Véronica is sent to France, presumably to study, veraciously to avoid scandal. She stays nine years in France without returning to Guadeloupe, adopting French attitudes and lifestyles, excelling in her education, and taking on a white French lover. She feels at home until she overhears criticism of her French boyfriend Jean-Michel for his relationship with her. The experience raises racial questions which haunted her childhood, and she flees to Africa, looking for black nobility in her preslavery ancestors.

Once in Africa, her plight only complicates. She becomes the lover of Ibrahim Sory, descendant of traditional African nobility and Minister of Defense in this unnamed, independent western African nation. At the same time, she befriends Saliou, a leftist, opposition leader and director of the school where Véronica teaches. Despite her efforts to ignore the country's political problems, when it becomes apparent that Ibrahim Sory is responsible for the arrest and presumed death of one of her students, she can no longer remain aloof. Later, Saliou is also arrested; the government reports that he has committed suicide in his prison cell. Véronica, recognizing this lie and unable to cope with the complicated web in which she has become entangled, abandons her quest, leaving Africa to return to France.

By presenting Véronica's identity problems in triangular structures, Condé both personalizes and complicates Véronica's quest. Véronica's

pilgrimage to Africa brings up multiple flashbacks and images of her childhood in Guadeloupe and her nine years in France, as all three geo-cultural milieux converge. She constantly compares the three in her efforts to find herself. As Arlette Smith has indicated:

> She feels trapped by the three dimensions of her cultural heritage--Antillean, French and African--which co-exist in her psyche without being able to blend harmoniously; she feels them to be irreconcilable. Her ethnic African heritage, her Guadeloupean socioeultural background, and her French intellectual training have transformed her into a person who is neither totally African, nor Guadeloupean, nor French. (50)

Each geo-cultural background contributes to her feelings of alienation and loss, while at the same time forming who she is.

The Guadeloupean society of Véronica's childhood forms a racial triangle of whites, mulattos, and blacks. While whites place at the top of this social order, mulattos also hold a privileged place. They are, she says, the gods of Antillean soeiety. They will not marry "négresses," for they consider blacks their "ennemis héréditaires" (230). Mulattos enjoy a freedom that Véronica and her black bourgeoisie do not have because, in mulattos, the "sang noir" is so diluted that they could deny its presenee, whereas Véronica says that the "sang noir . . . gonflait [s]es veines, circulait souterrain, secret mais omniprésent à travers [s]on corps dodu, bien nourri, bien soigné . . ." (231). Véronica is part of a black bourgeoisie that tries to portray raeial equality with whites or mulattos. The "négro bourgeoisie" of her mother embedded in Véronica present two conflicting attitudes: "avec la bouche, ses discours glorificateurs de la Race et au coeur, sa conviction terrifiée de son infériorité" (100). This underlying inferiority complex permeates Véronica's psyche and lies at the heart of her identity turmoil. Slavery has left its mark on her and other new world blacks, an indelible stamp buried deep within the subconscious as well as in the social strata of society. For Véronica, slavery is Antillean blacks' only historical heritage. They cannot escape three and a half eenturies of white dominance and oppression.

In her desire to elude her slave heritage, Véronica rejects all young black males her family presents to her. They disgust her because, she says, they are not free. She seeks freedom through the men she loves; first, in her mulatto boyfriend, Jean-Marie, later in Jean-Michel, her white Parisian lover, and finally, in Ibrahim Sory, her black African

lover of noble lineage. Again, Condé presents a triplex structure to emphasize Véronica's identity conflict. Véronica's problem is that she searches for freedom outside her own racial heritage by identifying through men with the two races her Antillean upbringing have taught her to be superior. In her affair with Jean-Marie, she rebels against her black bourgeois family, who believes that interracial marriages dilute the race and prevent the affirmation of a legitimate black identity. In her relationship with Jean-Michel, she tries to overcome her alienation and inferiority by adopting white European culture. Like the black, Antillean bourgeoisie whence she came, she mistakably believes that imitating whites will establish her racial equality. Such an attitude only promotes the notion of white supremacy. In Africa, she discovers solace in the companionship of Jean-Lefevre, a white, French "colon" who has remained in Africa after independence, and Pierre-Gilles, a French homosexual with a black lover. She feels more at ease with them than with other blacks, and escapes to their presence when pressures become too great. Ironically, both exemplify the white European exploitation that has caused her psychological dilemma. "Que veux-tu," she asks, "je ressemble à mes maîtres" (76). When Alfa, Pierre-Gilles' black boyfriend, refers to both Véronica and Pierre-Gilles as crazy whites, Véronica recognizes the extent of her "whiteness": "Pour être plus exact, il aurait dû dire: les Blancs et leurs élèves. Ou les Blancs et leurs créatures. Mais ce raccourci qui m'englobe n'en a que plus de force" (197).

Neither of Véronica's first two lovers was plagued by the bondage from the slave heritage that she feels:

> Ils étaient libres. D'être eux-mêmes. Vraiment. Profondément . . . Pas de quota d'intelligence à démontrer. . . . Rien à prouver, encore moins. Ils étaient ma Liberté. Je veux dire, j'y accédais à mon tour par eux. (72)

Recognizing that her relationship with Jean-Michel has failed to liberate her from racial prejudices and her own psychological subjugation, Véronica seeks salvation in the pre-slave African aristocracy from which Ibrahim Sory descends. Although Ibrahim is black, he differs from the blacks of her native Guadeloupe because he has not been stamped by the mark of slavery (74). He therefore maintains the same freedom that her white and mulatto lovers had. She hopes to find through him and his noble, African heritage, racial legitimacy unadulterated by white oppression. He represents freedom

from her alienation and new-world, slave heritage by allowing her to identify with a noble, black, non-slave, ruling class. However, Véronica is mistaken again; Ibrahim may represent African aristocracy, but his noble family has maintained power by collaborating with the whites through the slave trade and colonization. Once independence was secured, the government that Ibrahim is part of continues to rule in an equally oppressive manner as the European colonialists. Ironically, in trying to escape her slave heritage, she seeks salvation in a modern perpetrator of oppression, who not only rules the country in a tyrannical manner, but controls Véronica's life in a similar fashion. While Véroniea has spent her entire life fleeing her oppressed black heritage, she ean't help but sympathize with Saliou and her student Birame III, who represent the leftist opposition movement to Ibrahim Sory's government. They too are black, and as the oppressed, have more in common with her than she cares to admit. They befriend her, and although she wants to avoid the country's political conflicts, when Birame and then Saliou are arrested, she cannot continue to ignore Ibrahim's despotism. At the same time, she hesitates to end the liaison, hoping Ibrahim will provide the key to her identity.

Véronica fails to find in Ibrahim and in Africa the answer to her identity search because Africa does not live up to her image of a terrestrial paradise where people live harmoniously. Instead she encounters a country torn by political strife, in search of its own identity, and struggling to free itself from white dominance not unlike her own psychological bondage.

Véronica's perplexity does not involve only her race, but also her sexual identity. In an interview in 1984, Maryse Condé stated that "Etre femme et antillaise, c'est un destin difficile à déchiffrer" (Jacquey 22). She goes on to say that her heroines seek to affirm themselves both as women and as "colonisées." Véronica's sexual confusion began at birth. With two daughters already, her parents wanted a boy, and she suggests that if she had been a boy, everything would have been different (45). Her mother was a weak role model, living in the shadow of her husband and showing very little affection for Véronica. The family servant, Mabo Julie, fulfills an adoptive mother role, just as Véronica hopes to find in Africa an adoptive motherland.[1] Her sexual confusion also stems from the influence of her aunt Paula, a prostitute. Véronica constantly refers to herself as a "Marilisse," a term derived from an Antillean story of a black woman who slept with white men. Véronica cannot have children, and does not relate to the traditional African women like Oumou Hawa, Saliou's wife, who has several children and lives in submissiveness to her husband. She identifies

instead with the black prostitute she encounters in a bar, or with Ramatoulaye, who espouses white, western European materialism and attitudes. Véronica does play a surrogate mother role to Birame III and to the children of Abdourahmane. But she fails in this role also, sleeping with Ibrahim Sory the night Birame is arrested, and refusing to admit Ibrahim's involvement in Birame's fate until it is too late. Her inability to have children, her French education, and her self-imposed "Marilisse" mentality alienate her from other women of her race.

Maryse Condé also indicated that part of Véronica's problem is that she "cherche à se libérer à travers un homme" (Pfaff 65). Her affairs represent an attempt to escape her black heritage and determine her sexual identity. However, each male figure becomes more domineering. Véronica is trapped between her desire to be free and her submission to the men in her life. Ibrahim Sory is the most controlling--he sends his car for her when he wants her, expecting her to come at his will. Their affair complicates her sexual character; she continues to use men as a means of liberation to define her identity, but by compromising her sense of moral justice, this affair devalues the importance of her relationships with men.[2] She can't justify her association with Ibrahim when he perpetrates persecution of her friends.

Véronica therefore appears to have failed at her two main identity quests--a search to find glory, grandeur, and pride in the black race and an effort to affirm her sexual identity. She does not find an unspoiled Africa and the exalted race she thought would liberate her. Her sexual identity weakens; she fails as an adoptive mother and becomes even more of a "Marilisse" in her relationship with Ibrahim Sory.

Véronica's experience cannot be classified as a total failure, however. When, at the end of the novel, she calls it a tragic mistake, she quickly adds "Je me suis trompée, trompée d'aïeux, voilà tout. J'ai cherché mon salut là où il ne le fallait pas. Parmi les assassins" (312). Véronica may not have found what she came looking for, but she has learned two important lessons. First, that she cannot reconcile her identity problems through a modern Africa, replete with European influence, and dominated by repressive regimes no better than the white imperialist and slave mentalities which contributed to her identity confusion. The only way she can hope to resolve her problems is through her cultural heritage, her slave ancestors and black bourgeois social milieu of Guadeloupe. Her real mistake was not coming to Africa; her mistake was in placing hope in an idealistic image of an Africa which no longer existed.

More important than her recognition of the futility of her African venture is her devaluation of her identity search altogether. As the political climate heats up, and as her personal quest increasingly conflicts with a growing sense of moral responsibility, she subjugates personal interest to a higher standard. When the people around her are fighting not only for basic freedoms, but even for their lives, her psychological insecurities seem insignificant. Her humanitarian side defeating her personal quest for identity, she is unable to live with her own conscience, and she flees Africa to return to France. She resembles Condé characters in other novels who are "both acutely aware of their inner inconsistencies and of their own inability to reach a harmonious psychological and emotional balance" (Smith 387). Her flight represents a failure to resolve her identity problems but results from the shame her self-centered quest creates in view of the struggles around her.

The novel's title, *Hérémakhonon*, means "en attendant le bonheur" and is the name given to the house where Ibrahim Sory lives. Véronica came to Africa planning to receive, not to give. She wants happiness to come from outside, from affiliation with a country and a people foreign to her. She doesn't really hope to *find* her identity, but to *create a new identity*, escaping her past, her racial heritage. She learns a lesson that we all must learn--that we cannot find ourselves by ignoring the very social and cultural experiences which have created us, but rather that we must find our identity *in* those experiences. She also learns that she cannot discover happiness by ignoring those around her. Her happiness, like that of all humanity, depends upon the happiness of others. She has a responsibility to give as well as receive. Véronica must travel to Afriea to learn these lessons. Hopefully, others can learn from her quest.

Southern Oregon State College

NOTES

[1]For a more detailed discussion of the mother role in Condé's works see Arlette M. Smith's article, "The Semiotics of Exile in Maryse Condé's Fictional Works."

[2]In her interview with Françoise Pfaff, Condé indicates that "l'amour individuel n'a pas de place en Afrique" (66).

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