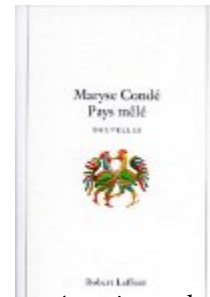


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Maryse Conde. *Pays mele: nouvelles*. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1997. 218 pp. 129 FF (cloth), ISBN 978-2-221-08417-5.

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After a dozen novels (all of which have been translated into English) Maryse Conde, the leading woman writer from the island of Guadeloupe, has published a collection of short stories, *The Mixed Country*. In all of them, the main protagonist is a woman—usually a lonely woman with an unhappy past, longing for love and closeness. Such is the main character in “Solo,” who is an unloved, undesired bastard whom her mother blames for the refusal of her father to marry her, though in the meantime the mother has given birth to several boys out of wedlock with the same man. Upon obtaining her teaching license, the character goes far away from her mother, into a small village, where she is accepted by all the inhabitants and her pupils. There, she meets Solo, the village madman, whom she accepts and cures with affectionate care. Solo’s story is similar to her own. He, too, is a bastard, whom his mother expelled from home once she married, and after her newborn boys passed away—presumably due to Solo’s evil spell. But the village cannot accept this new situation. After a short-lived happiness, the main character is expelled from the village after Solo leaves her. The only solace she has is the baby she is expecting from him!

In “The Three Women from Manhattan,” Conde gathers three black women of different social states: the employer, who is a successful black woman writer, her maid, and a third lady who is expelled from her country due to political reasons and whom the maid assists and simultaneously amuses with anecdotes about her employer.

Another solitary woman is Leticia in “Variation of the same topic: No woman, no cry.” Unloved by villagers who suspect her unknown past and who blame her for her solitary wandering through dense forest around the village, Leticia shocks the town when she starts a sex-

ual relationship with an unknown young American who could be her son. The turbulent, fully satisfying love affair finishes as abruptly as it starts. The American goes back to his country and Leticia accepts the marriage proposal of her long-standing lover, who disregards village rumors to satisfy his deepest desires.

The story “Kakador” has some supernatural traits. The hero of the story, enjoying darkness since childhood times, has kept his longing for night strolls even in his adulthood. One evening, he picks up a strange man at the gate of the gas station, promising to take him to his home; in spite of the passenger’s bad smell, his taciturnity, and a growing unease the driver feels, he takes him to his desired destination, an indefinite solitary place in the vicinity of the graveyard’s fence. Telling his night adventure to his old father, the main character learns that the man had been dead and buried for a long time.

Ayisse (from the story of the same title) is the imam’s beautiful daughter, coveted by all men. Even the general captain of the armed forces falls in love with her but is rejected. The captain is a cruel man, mistreating the villagers, beating them, humiliating them in order to extract taxes and dues. But when Ayisse, pregnant by her husband-to-be who has left her, tries to commit suicide, the captain gallantly offers to marry her. This beast of a man in his profession becomes an excellent father and husband.

In the story “The Chestnut and the Bread Fruit,” the narrator at the age of ten leaves her God-fearing mother for another island in search of her father, who has a multitude of bastard children. There, she learns that her mother, a maid, was raped by her father. Despite this fact, she admires him and helps him in his continual chase of women of all hues and ages. Only when he is

severely beaten by the husband whose wife he is courting, and therefore physically destroyed, does her admiration for him start waning.

The title story "The Mixed Country" is the longest. It describes several generations of women, who must struggle alone for their offspring born out of wedlock. Their common denominator is unhappiness, poverty, humiliation, hard work and finally death, as if none in that series could escape the fate predicted to her prior to her birth.

"Wayang Kulit" describes the first grief of a school boy to whom his teacher entrusts a newly-arrived black girl Oumou from Nigeria. He looks after her and defends

her from cruel teasing of other pupils, but once invited to her home he is chased away by her father without any protection from Oumou in return.

Conde's narration runs smoothly like a slow river, and her texts are pitiless. Maryse Conde is the recipient of the prestigious French award Le grand prix litteraire de la Femme, and on the basis of her novel *Segu* (a best-seller in France) a movie was made.

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