
Black Magic Evident in 'The Conjure Woman'

The Conjure Woman by Charles Chestnutt is a frame narrative, retelling a story within a story and incorporating valuable information about the traditional African *fetishism* practiced by the slaves against their slave masters. *Fetishism* or *Voodoo* provides a source of empowerment and gives the slaves, as a result, a feeling of mastery over their cruel masters. John assumes that black magic that the slaves practiced were old meaningless and therefore powerless however, he receives the opportunity to witness how the traditional Negro doctors could heal a wound or remove a spell. John determines that the slave's medicine was "the powers of darkness" and classified Christianity as the "powers of light." (Chestnut 2008). The dichotomy of characterizing slaves as black, darkness, or evil and white as light and good is a pattern in language that John perpetuates in his story. However, Old Uncle Julius proves him wrong as he demonstrates that it is the slaves who overcome the darkness of slavery through the use of their voodoo. John labors under the assumption that blacks are inferior to him "for we like to speak of the low morality of the inferior races" (Chesnutt 2008).

The text contains the common racial assumptions and stereotypes of Blacks at the time which marginalises them. For example, on being introduced to a black boy John states that his "first impression of Tom proved to be correct. He turned out to be very trifling, and I was very much annoyed by his laziness, his carelessness and lack of responsibility. (Chesnutt 2008). However, in *Mars Jeems Nightmare*, the coin is flipped and it is the white who understands life on the opposite side of the fence. Mars Jeems suffers under the cruelty of the slaveowner who usually would call the slaves lazy since it appeared that the work was not being done quickly enough. The story's own narrator Uncle Julius was not lazy for he was of the stock of plantation slaves, a "toiling field-hand" (Chesnutt 2008); therefore, this image of the lazy, carefree Negro has to be abolished.

John observes that Black "relics of ancestral barbarism are found among all peoples, but advanced civilization has at least shaken off the more obvious absurdities of superstition. We no longer attribute insanity to demoniac possession" (Chesnutt 2008). Here he relegates the Afrocentric religion to vain, useless superstition which testifies to a barbaric people. In John's dealings with Uncle Julius, the former is condescending and although treats him better than the typical Black man, still has these preconceived notions of the Negro race as uncultured and substandard in American society. The efficiency of the superstition is highlighted in *Mars Jeem's Nightmare* where the master was recompensed for his treatment towards his slaves. Uncle Julius, the storyteller "never indulged in any regrets for the Arcadian joyousness and irresponsibility which was a somewhat popular conception of slavery." (Chestnut 2008). Back in the days of slavery it was popularly thought that the period was a time of carefree joys,

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pleasures, and nostalgic delight as slaves enjoyed the oppression under their white masters. Julius set about to squash this theory by painting graphic pictures of cruelty, exploitation, and dehumanization. The figure of the black minstrel was beginning to rise where the blackness was primitive and comical. Black Minstrelsy gave the Negro the stage literally and figuratively to communicate joy and sorrow, humor and pathos, joke and criticism. The minstrel was often portrayed grinning, playing drums or singing, always insensitive to his suffering. The oral narrative of Uncle Julius nevertheless also gives the Negro the literary power to express himself when education was denied to him. The narrative is relayed in simple, dialect which bespeaks the narrator's lack of formal education but the simple language betrays a profundity that even John has to admit-blackness does not equate to being unlearned or uncultured. It is through John that Uncle Julius' story survives and is immortalized for future generations.

The issue of motherhood is central in the novel, *The Conjure Woman*. As a matter of fact, motherhood features paramount in Voodoo and African paganism, modelled after Mami Wata, the Mother Goddess of the Waters and Mother of Nature-Earth. Mami Wata is a charming, beautiful, seductive and serpentine woman who deceives and betrays many. Painted mostly as a mermaid, she jealously reigns over other water spirits. Due to her maternal attributes, her petitioners seek her protection, nurture, wisdom and wealth. The principal stock character mothers figured in these novels are the tragic slave mother, the bereaved children, and the slavery institution which orchestrates the separation of the family. Slavery has had both a negative and positive impact on the African American and the family structure. Although family ties survived during slavery, they remain brittle in the African American community. WEB Du Bois attributes this tendency to slave owners who first would separate families whenever they decided to sell slaves and to break up uprisings in the home and plantations. Through the family, white slave owners had the ability to classify slaves since slave-born babies had to take after the status of the mother. Chesnutt's "Po' Sandy" and "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," are united in theme dealing with the separation of the Negro family. Nevertheless, it is conjuration that comes to the rescue in keeping the family together. The slave mother was one to be pitied since she had to face the peril of eternal separation from her children at the whim of her slave master. The separation was conducted in such a way that it was made almost impossible for families to be reunited. Jacobs explains that 'to the slave mother New Year's Day comes with peculiar sorrows. She sits on the cold cabin floor watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning' (Jacobs 2003).

The classic song, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home" rings true in these slave narratives for there is that period of homelessness, displacement, and longing for a love that is usually the first that one encounters after being born. The slave children all feel disconnected and in one way or another hope and seek for that compassion and tenderness which characterize a mother. In the days of slavery, not only were the slave children torn from the wombs of their mothers (literally and figuratively) but sometimes the mothers never survived

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to see her child's growth and development. At other times, in the case of Mag Smith in *Our Nig*, the mother chooses to put her child up for adoption seeing her incompetence to provide care.

Similar to *The Conjure Woman*, *The Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, a mother figure, the grandmother, steps up to the plate and supplies the vacuum created when Harriet Jacob's mother dies in her early years. It should be noted here that the name "Harriet" means "she who governs the household". However as soon as slavery is abolished, the first priority is to reunite with her long-lost mother. She resolves "as soon as I am able I will begin to search for my dear mother. I will advertise for her in the papers and hunt for her in the churches...What a cruel thing it was to separate us!" (Harper 2008). Slavery was so inhumane and dehumanizing that the slave mother was like a factory producing more property to be auctioned, shipped and exported, rupturing deep ties. The innate desire for one's mother is clearly evidenced in the novels, as the characters search for their maternal roots. Lola celebrates her success in rediscovering her mother for by the novel's end she returns "bringing with her, her mother, grandmother ...these once severed branches of our family" (Harper 2008). The aim of the reconstruction after slavery served to reunite the lost fragments of the African American family for during slavery this reconciling and reuniting are not easily achievable.

In *Our Nig*, Frado suffers under the weight of loneliness because her mother abandons her. She laments "Oh I wish I had my mother back" (Wilson 2011). She feels unsheltered and uncared for in her foster home where the mother and daughters treat her like the proverbial Cinderella, forced to do hard, menial work to thankless mistresses. The height of Frado's motherless brokenness is expressed when she fears "I got to stay out here an' die. I ha'n't got no mother, no home, I wish I were dead" (Wilson 2011). Lifelessness is the consequence of the absence of a real mother figure in a mulatto slave girl's life. Her emotional needs are however unsatisfied.

Figuratively the oral tradition embodies the slave mother who gives birth to the narrative, her only heritage to her orphan descendants. These novels bring to the surface African American oral tradition seen through the eyes of the downtrodden slave. The works advance the cause for civil rights and the demands for equality which would form an integral part in the years of Reconstruction that follow bondage. The common denominators in all four works are the fixation on the state of the slave, his culture, and the family structure. The authors infuse parts of their biographies into the narratives. *The Conjure Woman* structured as a frame narrative (a story within a story) further emphasizes the importance of the story however; it is related in two different perspectives with the bias of the white man and the simplicity of a slave. Story-telling is a very important tradition for African Americans who passed down tradition and history during these occasions.

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