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Resistance and the Reclamation of Racial Identity through Spirituality and Witchcraft in I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem

Rupasree Dutta[1], Dr. Nityananda Pattanayak[2]

[1]Research Scholar, Deptt. of English, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon, Assam, India
[2]Professor, Deptt. of English, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon, Assam, India

Abstract
Guadeloupean writer Maryse Condé's I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem reimagines the silenced historical figure of Tituba, an enslaved Black woman accused of witchcraft during the Salem witch trials in colonial Massachusetts. By giving Tituba voice, agency, and spiritual power, Condé transforms her from a marginal character into a defiant symbol of resistance. She uses Afro-Caribbean spirituality and witchcraft not only as narrative devices but as instruments of racial reclamation and resistance. Drawing on Black feminist thought, ecofeminist theory, and postcolonial critique, the paper is an attempt to discuss how Tituba's practices of healing and ancestral communication resist the racialised, gendered, and religious violence of colonial modernity. Through close readings of Tituba's spiritual inheritance, her subversive use of the natural world, and her ironic narrative voice, the paper reveals how Condé constructs an alternative history of survival—one that foregrounds Black female subjectivity and spiritual resilience beyond the constraints of colonial archives.

Keywords: Race, racial identity, resistance, resilience, subjectivity

Introduction

Maryse Condé's I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem is the novel by Maryse Condé which was published in French in 1986 and it was translated into English by Richard Philcox. Condé creates Tituba not as a peripheral character, but as a conscious Black woman who asserts agency through the very practices of spirituality, healing, and witchcraft. Through these practices, Tituba resists both colonial and patriarchal structures. She also uses these practices to reclaim racial identity in defiance of the cultural erasures of slavery and European moralism. This paper argues that Condé uses witchcraft and spirituality not only as symbolic tools of resistance, but as means to asserts her humanity, to challenge racial oppression, and to recover her diasporic identity.

Methodology

In this study the novel under consideration is regarded as the primary source. As secondary source books, journals and research papers published in print and web are used. The study is both critical and analytical and it adopts postcolonial theories, feminist theories, and gender studies as primary theoretical concern.

Witchcraft as Counter-Epistemology: Rewriting History through Spirit and Voice

In I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem, Tituba gives us an account of an entire history of oppression, but significantly Tituba emerges every time as an individual sensitive towards her feelings, desires and actions. More than a rebel, she is a voice in defiance. In the Afterword to I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem, Maryse Condé mentions, "Writing Tituba was an opportunity to express my feelings about present-day America. I wanted to imply that in terms of narrow-mindedness, hypocrisy, and racism, little has changed since the days of Puritans"(203). In the same interview she further says, "Every black person living in America will tell you that racism still exists. A few success stories that are told over and over again for propaganda reasons must not hide the fact that for the majority of the blacks, life is still hell" (203).

The title of the novel unveils the racial theme and introduces the readers to the black race and makes them ready to explore the excitement to be found in the life of a black witch called Tituba. The original French title of the novel is Moi, Tituba, sorciere…noire de Salem. 'Noire" means black. The binary is already established. The name of the protagonist Tituba is not a name common among the Ashantis, and it might have been invented by Yayo, another slave.

Condé's I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem reclaims witchcraft from its disapproving colonial associations, transforming it into a framework for knowing, healing, and resisting. Central to this reclamation is the idea that witchcraft is not superstition but an alternative epistemology rooted in Afro-Caribbean traditions. Tituba has learnt these practices from Mama Yaya who takes care of her like a mother after the death of her biological mother Abena. This alternative knowledge system challenges the dominant Christian, patriarchal order imposed by colonialism and slavery. Witchcraft, in Condé's hands, becomes what decolonial scholars such as Walter Mignolo would term an "epistemic disobedience"—a refusal to think and live according to colonial logics (Mignolo 45).

From the outset, Condé presents Tituba's initiation into spiritual knowledge as a sacred and embodied inheritance. Mama Yaya, a wise woman and healer, imparts to Tituba the ability to commune with spirits, read signs in nature, and use herbs to heal and protect. These are not framed as fantastical abilities, but rather as deeply practical and spiritual tools rooted in African diasporic traditions. Tituba recalls:

From that moment on Mama Yaya initiated me into the upper spheres of knowledge. The dead only die if they die in our hearts. They live on if we cherish them and honor their memory, if we place their favorite delicacies in life on their graves, and if we kneel down regularly to commune with them … Mama Yaya taught me the prayers, the rites, and the propitiatory gestures. She taught me how to hange myself into a bird on a branch, into an in-sect in the dry grass or a frog croaking in the mud of the River Ormond whenever I was tired of the shape I had been given at birth. And then she taught me the sacrifices. Blood and milk, the essential liquids. Alas! shortly after my fourteenth birth-day her body followed the law of nature. I did not cry when I buried her. I knew I was not alone and that three spirits were now watching over me. (10)

The knowledge Tituba receives is not textual but oral, experiential, and spiritual. It stands in sharp contrast to the Puritan religious dogma she later encounters in Salem, which is rigid, punitive, and male-dominated. Where Puritanism is obsessed with sin and damnation, Tituba's worldview emphasizes healing, interconnectedness, and ancestral wisdom. This tension is underscored when Tituba is asked by the Puritan authorities whether she serves the devil. She responds, not with denial, but with irony and resistance: "I have no accomplice, since I have done nothing" (91). Her rejection of their theological binaries exposes the absurdity of their worldview and marks her as a figure who exists outside their epistemological boundaries.

Maryse Condé's Tituba is a character based on history but opposite to the historical character. Condé portrays Tituba in her own way and makes her a female hero. Condé's Tituba has a fictional childhood and moreover she is radical to understand the white supremacy over the blacks. She realizes that her mother does not like her as her face reminds her mother about her rape by a white man. She says, "my mother did not love me… I never stopped bringing to mind the white man who had raped her on the deck of Christ the King while surrounded by a circle of sailors, obscene voyeurs" (6). This realization paved the way for the 'rebelling' Tituba who later on became an embodiment of protest and resistance. She, too, has learnt how to answer back:

I then needed to protect myself, which I had neglected to do. I had to render a blow for a blow. An eye for an eye. Mama Yaya's old humanitarian lessons were no longer valid. Those around me were as ferocious as the wolves that howled at the moon in forests outside Boston and I had to become as ferocious as they were. (73)

The story also establishes a link between American History and the history of Barbados while providing a critique of slave trade and colonization. She becomes the embodiment of subjugated blacks by virtue of being a black and also by being a woman. Thus, she is doubly marginalized. But what makes her important is her denial to remain so. At her level, although miniature, she raises a voice without being influenced because she realizes that "there will be an end to this"(178).

Tituba's own life story, which she narrates by means of the novel, provides slaves the dreams and narratives they need to challenge both the marital and ideological privilege of the planters although her tale is not readily included in the history of Salem. The written historical record relegates her to a marginal note:

"Tituba, a slave originating from the West Indies and probably practicing 'hoodoo.'" A few lines in the many volumes written on the Salem Witch Trials. Why was I going to be ignored? This question too fad crossed my mind. Is it because nobody cares about a Negress and her trials and tribulations? Is that why? I can look for my story among those of the witches of Salem, but it isn't there." (149)

While historical accounts of Salem suppress Tituba's life story, Tituba becomes a "legend among the slaves" (160) even before her death for her healing powers and for escaping the Salem witch hunt alive. What Tituba cannot do normally in a colonial world, she is able to do all those once she acclaims the supernatural. This is the irony of I, Tituba, Black Witch from Sale**m.**

This act of storytelling is itself a form of witchcraft—a summoning of buried histories and denied subjectivities. As Édouard Glissant writes in Poetics of Relation, the histories of the Caribbean are not linear or unified, but archipelagic, submerged, and fragmented. “The past,” Glissant asserts, “is not to be recovered but reimagined through relation” (Glissant 64). Condé takes up this call by imagining Tituba’s life not as a static victimhood but as a living, shifting process of relation: between herself and her ancestors, her land, and the spiritual forces she channels.

Moreover, the act of naming Tituba as a “witch” becomes a central trope of epistemic violence in the novel. In Salem, the word “witch” is not used to describe someone who practices ancestral spirituality—it is a racialised and gendered tool of social control. Tituba realises, “I then need to protect myself, which I had neglected to do. I had to render a blow for a blow. An eye for an eye.” (73)

Witchcraft as Ancestral Knowledge and Spiritual Resistance

Witchcraft in I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem functions as an alternative knowledge system that opposes Enlightenment rationalism and Christian dogma, both of which were deeply entwined with colonial domination. Condé does not romanticise these practices but presents them as modes of resistance to

epistemic violence—the erasure of non-European ways of knowing. In the Puritan world, Tituba's healing abilities and her connection to the spirit world are not seen as knowledge but as dangerous deviance. However, within her own cultural framework, these practices are acts of care, survival, and empowerment. Her ability to communicate with the dead creates a transhistorical dialogue that defies temporal and physical boundaries. When Tituba finds herself devastated, Mama Yaya comes as the source of motivation and strength:

Finally, it was Mama Yaya who spoke. "There's no need to be frightened, Tituba. Misfortune, as you know, is our constant companion. We are born with it, we lie with it, and we squabble with it for the same withered breast. It eats the codfish from our calabash. But we're tough, us niggers! And those who want to wipe us off the face of the earth will get their money's worth. Out of them all, you'll be the only one to survive." (85)

This spiritual connection allows Tituba to construct an identity rooted in continuity with her ancestors, thus reclaiming a racial identity. Through her spiritual work, she not only heals others but reclaims a sense of belonging and historical continuity denied to the enslaved.

Resistance through Subversive Femininity and Sexuality

Condé's Tituba resists the intersectional oppression of race, gender, and class not just through spiritual means, but also through her embodiment of subversive femininity. As a sexually autonomous Black woman, she defies Puritan norms that equate Black female sexuality with sin and moral corruption. Tituba's sexual relationships—whether with John Indian, Benjamin Cohen D'Azevedo, or Yao—are not merely romantic or erotic but political acts that assert her control over her body in a system that seeks to commodify and violate it.

Her defiance of white patriarchal authority is most evident in her refusal to accept the moral and legal codes of Puritan society. Unlike the white women around her, Tituba does not internalize shame or guilt for her sexual or spiritual choices. Instead, she challenges the hypocrisy of a society that condemns her while exploiting her body and knowledge. In her subconscious mind, Tituba answers back to her master's wife Susanna Endicott:

"No, Susanna Endicott!" I could retort. "I may be John Indian's woman, but you haven't bought me. You have no deed of ownership listing me with your chairs, your chests of drawers, your bed, and your eiderdowns. So you can't sell me and the gentleman from Boston will not lay hands on my treasures." (36)

This dual rejection of racialized patriarchy and white feminism positions her as a uniquely postcolonial feminist subject—one who refuses to conform to Eurocentric norms of womanhood and respectability. Tituba, later decides not to give birth to her child. Her rejection of motherhood is another way of expressing her resistance and an attempt to assert her postcolonial identity. She tells her husband, "John Indian, don't talk about our children, for I shall never bring children into this dark and gloomy world" (92).

Thus, Condé offers a vision of Black female resistance that is rooted not only in historical justice but in ecological relation. Tituba's spirituality is not merely personal; it is communal, intergenerational, and earthly. In reclaiming her power through the land, the spirits, and the body, Tituba reclaims a history of care violently denied by empire. Her resistance is not loud, but it is enduring—and in its sacred quietness, it teaches us another way to live.

Conclusion

In I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem, Maryse Condé restores voice and agency to a Black woman historically silenced by the colonial archive. Through spirituality, witchcraft, and ecological connection, Tituba becomes a symbol of resistance and reclamation. Condé presents witchcraft not as superstition but as a form of healing, memory, and ancestral wisdom. Myths and rituals in the novel serve not merely as cultural details but as tools for rewriting history and expressing the aspirations of the marginalized. The supernatural reflects a belief in the power of Black magic to fulfil what reality denies, particularly for subaltern women. Though controversial, these practices remain deeply embedded in Caribbean consciousness. This theme also recurs in The Story of the Cannibal Woman, where myth and ritual shape the narrative's exploration of memory and identity.

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