

# OBEAH AS A CARIBBEAN CULTURAL MARKER AND SYMBOL OF REVOLT

Ms. R. VALARMATHI  
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR & RESEARCH SCHOLAR  
RESEARCH DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
BHARATHI WOMEN'S COLLEGE, CHENNAI, INDIA

**Abstract :** This study analyses the origin and characteristics of the Caribbean supernatural belief called Obeah, brought by African slaves into Caribbean islands during the Slave trade. Rooted in the West African ancestry, Obeah is primarily a practice of harnessing the supernatural forces and spirits for one's own purpose. Apart from being a cultural practice, Obeah played a significant role in providing immense source of strength and clandestine resistance to the black society in Caribbean. This study also focuses on the literary contributions of Caribbean writers who focussed on various Caribbean cultural themes including Obeah. The practice of Obeah was outlawed by British mainly because the British considered Obeah to be a clandestine form of rebellion and threat to the white supremacy, apart from being a Caribbean cultural marker.

Caribbean is an archipelago of small islands colonised and ruled by various European powers mainly the British, Spanish, and French right from the discovery of Columbus in 1492. For more than hundred years after the discovery of Columbus, every powerful European power was invading into the region and claiming ownership of every small island thus making the whole of Caribbean as a colonial appendage of Europe, with no indigenous population left behind to claim their rights over the islands.

Columbus's arrival in the Caribbean in 1492 and his subsequent attempts to exterminate the native population brought in negative effects on the plantation economy of Europeans. As there were shortage of labour force in the sugar plantation estates, there began transplantation of caravan loads of African slaves across the Atlantic Ocean to fill in the labour gap, later followed by indentured labourers from countries like China, India and elsewhere. The Africans were forcibly brought as slaves to work in plantations. The slaves constantly revolted against slavery until the Emancipation act was passed in 1834. Even after the declaration of emancipation act, the act of slavery did not come to an end in Caribbean, but continued in another name and form. The freed slaves were replaced by indentured labourers brought from all over the world, mostly from India and China to work in plantations with no better treatment.

As a result of the forced and voluntary migrations, Caribbean was populated by the Europeans (including British, German, Scottish, Irish, French, Portuguese etc.), Africans, Caribs, Indians, Chinese, Javanese, Lebanese and Syrians. Interestingly, the Caribbean became a melting pot, where an array of different groups of people from different parts of the world coexisted and created a complex yet interesting blend of cultures and races.

The inextricable and intertwined processes of acculturation and amalgamation amidst the colonizers and colonized gave rise to complicated relationships and compulsory coexistence which resulted in the emergence of new hybrid races. The continued process of migration also reshaped and rearranged the physical landscape and its indigenous inhabitants. The final outcome of the process of colonization was the ultimate mixture of people of African, European, Asian and indigenous descents which came to be termed as Creolization.

While Creolization and interculturalization taking place all over the islands among the many races, there was also a strong conviction among every single race that it was their sole responsibility to preserve and value their own cultural beliefs and practices. Being a majority race, the unique cultural practices of the Africans such as the carnival festivals, the folk tales, the folk songs, the religious and supernatural belief systems etc., continued to be practiced in the host land Caribbean, simultaneously creating a great impact on the society. Among the many supernatural practices of the blacks, Obeah was considered to be a strong form witchcraft, practiced for both healing and destroying. The practice of Obeah took a strong hold in the society by creating fear among the other races, especially the Europeans and feeling of security and comfort among the blacks.

Obeah occupies a unique place in the literary renderings of many Caribbean writers, predominantly highlighting the mysterious and multilayered perceptions of the belief system. While attempting to record the true colonial experiences of the displaced slaves in the Caribbean islands, many Caribbean writers have focused on various themes including the history of slavery, the process of Creolization and the inexplicable religious practice of Obeah. Though the writers of different races write on various issues, Caribbean literature is the general term accepted for all the literatures produced in various territories of the Caribbean region as they all depicted the socio-cultural, historical and colonial experiences of displaced individuals. Caribbean literature includes both the oral and written forms of literature, preserving the memory and vision of the Caribbean people. Caribbean experience itself becomes true literature as the resentment and remorse of the heirs of colonialism are transmuted

through powerful words and thoughts. One of the most important, unique and pervasive characteristic of Caribbean literature is the use of dialect forms of the national language, often termed as Creole.

Among the many writers of Caribbean literature who focused on the Colonial Caribbean experience, the most important writers are Nicholas Guillen, Derek Walcott, Jean Rhys, Marlon James, George Lamming and Harris Wilson. These writers focused on the historical issues of enslavement and forced migration, home and exile, and impact of colonisation and decolonization in their works. The most widely used themes of the Caribbean writers include the social and cultural practices of the different racial groups in the region, the exotic landscape, the supernatural belief systems, the Carnival festivals etc. Their works also addressed many universal questions such as identity, sexuality, family life, pain, joy, alienation etc. On the whole, the Caribbean Literature celebrates and glorifies its ritualistic supernatural beliefs such as Obeah, Myal, Voodoo and supernatural elements like Zombies, Duppies, Soucristants, tricksters, ghosts and so on.

Many Caribbean writers have dealt with the theme of Obeah practices in their works and some of the best examples would be Marlon James's "The Book of the Night Women", where the Obeah practitioners are portrayed as both healers and destroyers. Jean Rhys's "Wide Sargasso Sea" is another significant work which depicts the Obeah-woman Christophine as a strong and powerful character, who extends moral support to the white Creole protagonist Antoinette. This work of Jean Rhys gives clue to the readers that even the whites believed in the magical effects of Obeah during the colonial period. Derek Walcott and Jamaica Kincaid have also widely used the theme of Obeah in their writings.

Obeah is one of the many Jamaican traditions rooted in the West African ancestry. It is primarily the practice of harnessing the supernatural forces and spirits for one's own purpose. According to the modern historians, Obeah was a common practice originated from Ashanti and Koromantin tribes on the Gold Coast of Africa, which was later brought to Caribbean islands by African slaves as early as 17<sup>th</sup> Century. The Obeah practitioners, both men and women functioned as community leaders and preachers of African folk cultural heritage. Apart from their powers to control supernatural powers, Obeah men and women were also bestowed with knowledge of herbs and poisons which enabled them to cure or cause death to anyone.

People, who went in search of Obeah men to cast spell on somebody, were given a bath made from various herbs and bushes accompanied by chants and incantations. They might also be given with some mysterious medicines to be injected or rubbed on skin. The Obeah men might ask the clients to bring strands of hair or clothes of the individuals on whom the Obeah was to be set. The Obeah men might also give some mystifying powders and liquids to be sprinkled on the way of the enemy. The Obeah spell set on somebody could be removed and reversed with the help of another stronger Obeah-man.

The Africans strongly believed that the Obeah practitioners were endowed with extraordinary powers to cure all diseases and ailments, bring back dead men alive, protect them from the consequences of crimes, and induce harm to anyone they wished. Though Obeah was practiced by African slaves for personal benefits, mostly for evil purposes, it also played a significant role in providing immense source of strength and clandestine resistance to the black society. Significantly, in Caribbean region, Obeah-Women were believed to be more powerful than Obeah-Men. Historical records prove that hundreds of deaths of both blacks and whites during the days of slavery were attributed to poisons devised by Obeah-men. Obeah practitioners were considered to be dangerous and mysterious by both black and white. Apart from this, the British also strongly believed that the Obeah practitioners played a central role in the conception and execution of the slave rebellions. As the white rulers feared the consequences of the Obeah spells and the role of Obeah-men in slave revolts, the practice of Obeah was outlawed and made illegal in Jamaica in 1760.

The importance of Obeah lies in the fact that it not only signifies the retention of traditional cultural identity of a socially and culturally oppressed group but as a form of rebellion and threat to the white supremacy. Its impact on literature is also highly noticeable as the entire world got to know about this indigenous cultural practice and its threatening features which shook the basement of colonial powers. To be precise, Obeah is not only an indigenous cultural marker of Caribbean society but also a symbol of revolt against the colonial supremacy and over bearing oppression of the black cultural identity in Jamaica.

-----

#### REFERENCES:

1. Gregg, Veronica Marie. Jean Rhys's Historical imagination. University of North Carolina Press, 1995.
2. Long, Edward, History of Jamaica (London: 1774), Vol. II.
3. Williams, Joseph J., Voodoo and Obeahs: Phases of West India Witchcraft. (New York: Dial Press, 1932).
4. Jamaica Traditions Obeah in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Web. 01/03/2019 < <https://www.real-jamaica-vacations.com/jamaican-traditions-obeah.html> >