Dis-eases of Dis-location: Gender and Race in *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*

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In an interview with Ann Scarboro, Maryse Condé remarks that *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* is basically a book about life in America. Although the story is set in the 1692 witch trials in Salem Village, Massachusetts, for Conde, the unequal life situation people faced then have persisted even today. Tituba, a female slave sold to serve her masters in seventeenth century colonial America, is just one among a group of stigmatized people who are forced to live in a highly undesirable social and cultural environment. Although the events of the novel evolve around the birth and personal experience of the titular heroine Tituba, through her personal involvement in the events and her miraculous transcendental identity, Tituba's telling of the story becomes one which reaches not just "the other side of the sea", but like a song, escapes the normal boundaries of knowledge and reveals the life of the untouchables and the unrecorded. As she remarks in the epilogue of the novel, her life after death is the best because it defies normal constraints imposed by the patriarchal, sexist, classist, and xenophobic society.

Indeed, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* is a personal statement made by a voice from beyond, in duality. Among the voluminous official records of the Salem witch trials, possibly the only words concerning Tituba the black female slave would be "a slave originating from the West Indies and probably practicing 'hoodoo'" (110). In the midst of the researches about what really happened during those years, amidst the various hypotheses about the actual cause of the events, and the numerous attempts to understand the cultural meaning of the mass hysteria, the story of this confessed "witch" who survives the trials has not induced enough interest for an in-depth study of her life. Maryse Conde, a contemporary female Caribbean writer writing in French, seeks Tituba the outcast beyond the official invisibility, and "lived for a year on the closest of terms" (as stated before the Forward) with Tituba, sharing her story and her life. The voice from beyond is not just Tituba's life in the form of a "song" sung by the masses, but also a voice behind the official records of the witch trials, speaking of the sickness of disorientation which has embraced a highly repressed society then and even now.

Similar to other European communities recorded to have been in the grip of demonic possessions, Salem Village recognizes the presence of demonic powers through the sicknesses of its people. Tituba witnesses the sight of teenage girls suffering from incomprehensible seizures and fits, and making a spectacle of themselves in the most public places, wriggling and rolling on the ground making noises "not human" (71). That reminds Tituba of the killing of a pig:

> *They would slit the animal's throat at dawn, then hang it up by its feet from the branches of a calabash tree. While its blood flowed*

> *out, at first in great gushes, then slowing to a trickle, it screamed. Unbearable, jarring screams, suddenly silenced by death.* (71)

Even those who do not manifest physical symptoms of any kind cannot escape the psychological impact of this phenomenon. Deception, hypocrisy, revenge, greed, dominance, and all sorts of impermissible emotional qualities in a respectable society emerge out of this uncontrollable scene of chaos. The story of the witch trials in Salem Village through the eyes of Tituba is a story of physical and psychological diseases, flourishing in a community which is itself undergoing an identity crisis. *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* ultimately tells of a story of loss: a loss of the mother, a loss of orientation, and a loss of self which is manifested in the dis-eases of the individuals and the community as a whole.

Yet the novel is by no means a straightforward recounting of losses. The feminine voice of the narrator(s) has embraced the story of losses in a frame of liberation and discovery. Maryse Conde as the author, in a note before the beginning of the narrative, says that "[d]uring our endless conversations she told me things she had confided to nobody else". This is a moment of magical re-covery because it signifies a process of change: what was lost has been found, what was hidden and suppressed has been revealed, and what was considered to be weak has found its strength. The story of Tituba, told exclusively in the inspired voice of the author, is not just the re-appearance of the life of a black female slave, but it also symbolizes a feminine emergence from loss, a defeat of previously constraining conditions, and finally a striding towards knowledge, understanding, and value. The joint voice of the author and Tituba traces the origin of the dis-eases to the loss of the mother, and shows an affirmation of the feminine power of healing, understanding, and creativity as the ultimate qualities of emergence from these diseases of loss.

Almost all the main characters involved in the trials are suffering from a primary loss of homeland. Tituba was conceived on board of *Christ the King*, when she was making its way to Barbados, carrying not just English sailors, but slaves who are to be sold in the open market on arrival. Before seasickness is over, and homesickness begins, Tituba's mother, Abena, one of the Ashanti women to be sold for slavery, was raped by an English sailor on board. The raping of Abena is thus not just an act of sexual violence smacking of racial and gender discrimination, it is also an event of dislocation: the sailor, Abena, the conceived Tituba, and all the other passengers on board are all literally "at sea", far away from their homeland, wherever it is. The event of *Christ the King* carrying its human cargo is an event of consequence because it uproots the people from their homeland and brings them to a colony where their identity would be taken away, with no prospects of recovery. Like these other slaves, Tituba is to be born away from her ancestor's homeland, and never having a home of her own because the slaves' destiny is controlled by their white masters.

Yet even their white masters have not fared any better in terms of feeling at home. Salem Village is not a welcoming home for Samuel Parris, Tituba's new master, either. He has sought for a long time a minister's position with a community, but has not succeeded in getting a satisfactory one, partly because he wants something grand for himself and yet he has not finished all the necessary theological studies for qualification. Finally after much negotiation and bargaining about salary and provisions, he comes to Boston and settles down in Salem Village, which is just a small extension of the city Salem. The house they are allotted "stood a little askew in the middle of an immense garden completely overrun with weeds. Two black maples stood guard like candles and there was something repellent in the house's hostility" (56). Tituba notes the coldness and relates it to the previous deaths in the house, for the wives of the two previous ministers both die in the bedroom. She comments on the unsuitability of the house, and indeed the village for habitation, especially for the sickly Goodwife Elizabeth and her daughter Betsy Parris.

Mother and daughter of the Parris family are described as gentle and scared creatures who need a lot of assistance and patience to deal with. The fact of their physical and psychological sickliness placed in the historical and cultural background of the Salem witch hunt acquires additional meaning in terms of identity exploration. Their physical weakness makes the undesirable living conditions an even more threatening feature to their existence, and that in turn poses great pressure on their psychological well-being, which is already much strained by an inconsiderate and bullying patriarch in the family. Samuel Parris himself, although a tough and harsh man of religion, is not insensitive to the unfriendly atmosphere of the village when the village elders disregard his demands for firewood and other provisions. Salem Village does not encourage a sense of belonging in its inhabitants, especially those who move recently to settle down. The deprivation of a real "home" to these people is manifested in various forms of dis-eases: young Betsy's sickliness and her mother's bedridden condition are equally an illness of dislocation as Samuel Parris's ill temper and anger.

Tituba's eyewitness account of colonial America covers not just the undesirable lives of slaves who lose their independence and therefore identity in the colonial community. The dis-ease of dislocation cuts across time and space, and touches those who are not subjected by the colonial condition or the slave trade. Benjamin Cohen A'dzevedo and his family, whose ancestors originated in Portugal, live a kind of borrowed life in this foreign land of America. Their Jewishness marks them as permanent exiles, as there is no place in the world which they can claim as home. Benjamin tells the history of his ancestors:

> *In 629 the Merovingians expelled us from their kingdom in France. Pope Innocent III's Fourth Lateran Council ordered all Jews to wear a circular mark on their clothes and to cover their heads.*

> *Before leaving for the Crusades, Richard the Lion Hearted ordered a general attack against the Jews.* (127)

Symptomatically, the description of this Jewish family is also framed with images of sickness and alienation. Benjamin himself is described as "small and hunchbacked, with a complexion the color of eggplant and large, ginger-colored side-whiskers that merged into a pointed beard" (120). His nine children all "had the particularity of not speaking one word of English" (123), though perfectly healthy, are totally isolated from the local people, and form no communication with the local citizens of whatever classes.

Dislocation is a common condition shared by these characters in Salem Village during the 17th century colonial America. The slaves are uprooted from their homeland and deprived of selfhood, Jews seek only a temporary abode for their permanent homelessness, and even slave owners newly settled in this borrowed piece of land find the colony unwelcoming. The mark of homelessness, a disconnection from their mother(land), renders these people sick, because the basic nourishment of their identity, the sense of belonging, the integrity of being someone, is lost. In their new habitat, these lost people are struggling to create a new identity for themselves, some by means of dominance, some by forming a network with people in similar situation, some by isolating themselves, and some through love, with not much success. The patriarchal authority also seems to have lost its grip over the people as it cannot offer a sense of consolation and identification no matter how firmly it exercises its power. The local authority, dressed in the robes of the religious leader and other professionals, fails to provide a home for the people, because restrictions cannot replace the power of the mother.

The alienation from the mother(land) forces upon these people a life of disorientation and insecurity. Without a bond of identification with their homeland, these people in Salem Village are like transplants in new soil, being subjected to unaccustomed pressure and restrictions which are not friendly to their nature. The local administrative and religious authority plays the role of an absolute patriarch to their feminine deprivation, oppressing them through restrictions on their behavior, values, and self expression. Once again, Samuel Parris and his household can be regarded as a miniature of the culture prevailing in the colonial American village. The female members of the family are under the absolute power of the man in the house, and his decisions cover all aspects of their life, including their daily schedule, the content of their daily events, what friends they can have, what they should believe and how they should act upon their beliefs. Elizabeth, Betsy, and Abigail, although members of the family, are almost like slaves in the house, and their relationship with Samuel Parris has no element of intimacy. Elizabeth is horrified when Tituba talks about intimacy between husband and wife: "Be quiet! Be quiet! It's Satan's heritage in us" (42).

In this environment of puritan propriety, not only is sexuality a taboo, but any form of expressive behavior which calls attention to the self is also considered an outrage, especially in the female sex. Even what is considered the most natural intimacy between human beings today was forbidden its expression among the puritans. In Tituba's Salem Village, mothers' love, human curiosity, and love of pleasure never make a public appearance. Instead of subduing the natural instincts in all women, however, the oppressive atmosphere has forced them to seek alternative release of their pent-up desires. When Tituba first arrives at Salem, looking at the teenage girls, she remarks:

> *Perhaps children cannot escape the frustrations and lasciviousness of adults after all. Whatever the case, Anne and Mercy reminded me constantly of Samuel Parris's speeches on Satan's presence in all of us.* (59)

Tituba, who comes from a different background where there is no hindrance against the expression of the self and its desires, "pitied them with their waxen skin and their bodies so full of promise yet mutilated like those trees that gardeners try to dwarf" (60), sensing the possible outbreak of these repressed desires. Indeed, looking at the nature and content of the events leading to the trials in Salem Village, one can see not the fundamental confrontation between the good and the evil in a religious context, but a dramatic rebellion against the existing power structure.

The weakest people become the most powerful force in the community because they have successfully identified a weak point in the discourse of the existing authority. In its proclaimed position against evil, the puritan society has ironically given birth to a solid and vivid presence of evil power, which in turn takes up an equally important position in the consciousness of the people. Those who are oppressed by the righteous but harsh restrictions of the puritan authority cannot live up to the demands of the good find a consolation in being a victim of the bad. As they will never be able to enjoy the glory of being a saint, they can at least take pleasure in the status of being a martyr who is victimized by evil. To suffer in the hands of Christianity's approved enemy, the devil, will be a fast and sure way to fame and eventually power. The promise of such an easy way to power is not lost to young girls such as Abigail Williams, who lives as a dependent under the roof of her cousin, or Mercy Lewis, who works as a servant in the house of Anne Putnam. These girls hit the heart of the repressive religion by embracing the role of the sufferer.

And thus they put up a spectacular show of suffering in response to the iron reign of their patriarchal religion. These teenage girls, forbidden the slightest expression of sexual curiosity and pleasure, manages to escape by an appropriation of the discourse of witchery which is part and parcel of the dominant

religion. Knowing the awe and fear the church holds the devil with, these girls ride on the reputation of the devil for a taste of the forbidden pleasure. To be bewitched offers them a perfect opportunity to be the centre of attention, as others merely "formed a circle in respect and silent horror around the children, who continued to be afflicted by the most indecent convulsions" (75). Tituba witnesses the transformation this "excitement" brings to the women:

> *They had almost turned lovely in their shapeless dresses! They had become almost desirable: Mary Wolcott with her buttocks as big as a trunk, Mary Warren with her breasts like two shriveled pears, and Elizabeth Hubbard with her teeth sticking out of her mouth like millstones.* (78)

These unattractive girls practically make an exhibition of their ripening bodies, for these moments of fits and seizures provide the perfect opportunities for clothes and caps to come undone and the feminine bodies to show. And yet these moments are outside of the control of the church or the village elders because no one can be held responsible. The girls' wanton exhibition, or even the viewers' fascination, all become legitimate because these are all done in the name of the devil.

The spectacle of people throwing fits in the most public places is a symbolically significant feature in reflecting what is happening in Salem Village. While legitimate authorities such as the church and the medical profession have the final say in matters concerning the social life of the people, these institutions fail in handling the undercurrent of private emotions and desires of the population. The teenage girls see this as the opportunity to vent their hidden sexual energy and to take revenge on those who they dislike by incriminating them. The immense power of influence the victim position yields is not lost to other minorities in the region. Tituba fears for her husband because his being black may invite accusation of connection with the devil, but John Indian sees the potential of this position and embraces it rather than escapes. In *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, the drama of the fits is performed by young teenage girls of the white colonizers and John Indian, racially different but both standing in a position of the weak in relation to the patriarchal and racist legitimate authority.

In Tituba's narrative, Salem Village is a space of various dis-eases. Slaves brought to serve in this colonial land struggle to survive, new white settlers not accustomed to the harsh living conditions fall physically sick, and residents oppressed by the local authority have turned bitter and yearn to release their vengeance. Dissatisfaction with life comes from different backgrounds and converges in an outbreak which no one can escape: emotional repression, sexual repression, political repression, and even cultural repression accumulate and gather force as the talk of witchery gains heat. Legitimate authority loses control of

the situation when the underdogs of the community all resort to the built-in alternative within the masculine discourse of power. By claiming a relationship with witchery, whether in the position of a victim or a believer, the downtrodden in Salem Village successfully escape from the confines of the masculine power of the church and local authority, and let their innermost thoughts and passions run wild in the realm of the untouchable witchery. The feminine position of the victim has successfully eluded the clutches of the masculine authority.

While the masculine is desperate in trying to regain its authority over the feminine rebellion, the maternal proves the ultimate force of healing. In the midst of the physical, psychological, and political dis-eases, the mothers' presence makes a continuing lineage which runs across all these different dis-eases. Abena's beauty and racial identity may subject her to sacrifice, but she dies defending her honor and dignity, and her influence does not end with her physical death. The power of Abena lies primarily in her sexual creativity, for being a mother, she has left life behind her death, a continuation of her presence and her will. Tituba inherits from her mother physical attractiveness as well as an awareness of the power in her sexuality. Sexuality becomes for Tituba not only an act of pleasure, but also a source of energy for her to face the harshness of life, and a pool of consolation for other marginal figures in the community. Tituba's relationship with her lovers John Indian, Benjamin A'dzevedo, Iphigene, and arguably Hester, are all sexual and maternal, for her sexuality is also maternal and creative.

Motherhood, whether voluntary or involuntary, biological or spiritual, is the greatest source of power in the chaotic text of 17th century Salem Village. Mothering involves not only the act of bearing and sustaining a new life, but also nurturing the growth of needy souls and regenerate energy and spirit. Even Hester, a young white woman condemned of adultery and bearing her illegitimate child, is shown to be more concerned to "mother" others than the "shame" piled on her by the puritanical society. Her maternal tolerance and understanding makes her welcome Tituba into her cell and treat her injuries. Hester cannot believe what the others accuses Tituba of, because she is "too lovely" to have done those things. As if to prove her sincerity, Hester invites Tituba to join her in one of the most sacred rituals of a mother, to tell the child a story. She says:

> *You know, she is listening to us right now. She's just knocked on the door of my womb to get my attention. You know what she wants? She wants you to tell her a story. A story about your country. Make her happy, Tituba.* (98)

This makes a most intimate scene between the two women and the yet unborn baby girl baby. Tituba rests her head "against this soft curve of flesh" (98) and tells a story to the girl, joining Hester in the ritual of mothering. The bond between

these two outcasts of their respective societies enables them to emerge out of their physical confinement, and gain energy to accomplish what they think is right.

Hester's subsequent suicide seems to be a defeat of her motherhood, yet this is a careful decision with the knowledge of her unborn daughter. She informs Tituba: "She must simply die with me. I have already prepared her for that when we talk to each other at night" (98). Instead of a defeat, this mother has achieved perfect communication and gained understanding from the baby using her exclusive body language. Even when put in a disadvantageous position, Hester still takes charge of her own body, and makes her own decision, in defiance of the oppression facing her. Her ability to ride on top of an adverse situation can also be seen in her advice to Tituba when preparing her speech for the trial. Knowing that Tituba is supposed to give names in association to witchcraft, Hester says:

> *If some of them have wronged you in person, then take your revenge, if that's what you want. Otherwise give them an element of doubt and, believe me, they'll know how to fill in the blanks! At the right moment shout: >Oh, I can't see any more! I've gone blind!' And you'll have pulled the trick off.* (100)

Once again she shows herself a mistress in charge of herself, especially through the clever use of language. Creativity in the means of communication has a direct link with the status of motherhood, for the link between the mother and child is pre-symbolic, existing prior to the language of patriarchal society.

Other figures of motherhood also exhibit this capacity of pre-symbolic communication. Abena dies when Tituba was only seven years old, but her spirit continues to communicate with Tituba well into her adulthood, giving her strength and practical advice. Mama Yaya, Tituba's surrogate mother in many senses, "had cultivated to a fine art the ability to communicate with the invisible" (9), and teaches Tituba all about herbs:

> *Those for inducing sleep. Those for healing wounds and ulcers. Those for loosening the tongues of thieves. Those that calm epileptics and plunge them into blissful rest. Those that put words of hope on the lips of the angry, the desperate, and the suicidal.* (9)

In other words, the vegetable language of nature. The ability to heal is very much an ability to communicate, not just how to use herbs, but also what people want, and how to instill trust and understanding. Tituba heals not only the physical ailments of the people around her, but also the emotional and psychological traumas. Benjamin is sad because of the loss of his beloved wife Abigail and youngest children in an epidemic. Her compassion for him gives her the courage to

practice her art again: in the steps of her mothers, Tituba brings Abigail's spirit to Benjamin and let them talk. Tituba's maternal power to heal extends beyond boundaries of race and religion.

Although Tituba is regarded as a witch in the Salem trials, yet as Mama Yaya told her earlier, she survives the whole episode relatively unharmed. She lives to be part of a rebellion for freedom, and her story is transformed into a song whose spread is unrestricted by time and space. While her living moments are devoted to physical, emotional and spiritual healing, her life after death is even more magical because her song is sung in all moments of all kinds of people's lives. The epilogue of the novel marks the timelessness of her being, and the unending nature of her life. Even the very existence of the novel is a miraculous joint venture between Tituba the 17th century witch, black slave, and spiritual healer, and a 20th century Caribbean female writer, Conde, who is at the same time telling her own story in/with the voice of Tituba. The auto/biography of Tituba, Black Witch of Salem, has become the auto/biography of everyman, for her voice includes the smallest and weakest in every society, regardless of time and space.

Thus is the power of the story of the healer(s). The Salem Village in the 17th century is a land of dislocation and repression. The primary loss of motherland and the mother culture in the residents renders them vulnerable to all sorts of dis-eases. The desperate attempt of the local institutions to hold people by oppressive measures fails utterly and forces the primarily dis-eased people to seek refuge in further diseases. The Salem Witch Hunt, as represented in Tituba's narration, is such a frustrated attempt. In the face of these irrational attacks and hysterical destruction, only the healing power of motherhood can give a sense of orientation to these lost people.

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