

Superstition in Black Literature

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Abstract

Black literature emerged as distinctive genre in America where Negroes or the Blacks were regarded inferior to the Whites. This genre is a reaction to the social conditions that prevailed during the time of struggle for identity and succeeded through the works of literary interest. One such aspect that African American writers were passionate about was superstition which gave them the opportunity to showcase their ability and were not inferior to other writers and consequently enjoyed equal rights. Through Chesnutt it will be evident that how superstition was an essence for the black writers to take hold of their place in the society and in status.

Keywords: *Black literature, African American literature, Superstition, Conjure Woman, Negroes, Black Americans*

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Superstition, which is believed to be irrelevant in today's scenario, was once the core belief of people not only restricted to India but worldwide. This is reflected in literature across cultures. Literature, being the finest medium to convey the nuances of society has projected as well as recorded the traits of a society across ages. While it is known that literature captures a period it may also be agreed that a period gives rise to particular genre of literature. One such genre is African American literature also known as Black Literature which took its stand in the American setting. African American literature had its influence in the form of the social anxiety resulting out of mass exodus and has been shaped in many countries. In order to be specific it may be referred to as a body of literature that grew in the form of writings of writers of African origin residing in America.

Black literature received international acclaim as a distinctive genre in the 20th century but it had already marked its presence in the late 18th century when Phillis Wheatley dedicated her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) in order to prove that whites are not superior to negroes and that the negroes can also write good poetry, proving their capabilities as equal to white men, at least in the field of literature. Thereafter, different writers of African descent joined the literary war of words with the whites, and started

contributing literature in all forms that was later to be recognised as a distinctive genre. Among the earliest writer were Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, David, Walker, Maria M. Stewart, etc. but it was in the hands of Toni Morrison and her contemporaries that Black Literature reached its zenith.

The Black literature or the African American literature was the voice of reaction that was generated by the social conditions of that time, and since time has now changed drastically with black Americans enjoying equal rights on all fronts, the validity of this reactionary voice has become obsolete. The attention of researchers in Black literature has now shifted from its political considerations to the elements that form integral constituents of Black literature. One such element is “superstition” which is manifest in the works of Black American writers.

The objective of the study here will be focused on how the African American writers dealt with the element of superstition in the American setting and how they portray it in what we now know as Black literature. It may be noted that superstition existed or was depicted in the works of black literature in two forms, first in the belief of the characters and second in the various cult practices. The proposed research intends to explore the employment of superstition in Black Literature while simultaneously trying to study the psycho-social compulsion behind the authors in doing so.

Besides exploring the treatment of superstition in Black literature, the study also aims to throw light on the assumption that the extremities of superstition underwent a change in the transition from Africa to America. Further, the study will try to validate the literary applicability of superstition in the text where it is found. Overall there will be an effort to

establish black literature as a distinctive genre, whose one of the primary components was superstition, and negates claims of critics who are unwilling to ascribe Black literature a proper place in the world of literature.

As the paper is taken ahead it follows a descriptive methodology for its function and relies on observation as means of collecting data instead of examining records or artefacts. The observation is done with the help of textual analysis through the characters to show how the notion of superstition is established and how it all worked.

The influence of superstition in Black literature is seen through articles published in various journals dealing with Black Literature or African American Literature. But it seemed many critics are critical in approving a proper place to it in the general literature of the world. The different articles that are reviewed speaks about the basis of Black literature, its survival and its proper position. Not to restrict the research only to the idea it poses and the text it speaks of but also seen through the contemporary aspect through different perspective.

The theories that the paper holds on to is racialism and the art of conjuring which constitute the research as is done forth. Therefore, the theoretical framework not only shows the practicality but frames the paper in its own essence.

To achieve our purpose we shall choose “The Conjure Woman” written by Charles Waddell Chesnutt as the primary text for the above studies and look for the following use of superstition, characters displaying superstitious beliefs ,practices in involving superstition and tracing back textual evidence to its roots.

Charles Waddell Chesnutt, 1858 to 1932, is an Afro-American writer who was a son to free blacks and migrated from Fayetteville, North Carolina. *The Conjure Woman* by

Chesnutt is a collection of seven stories in 1899. The racial issues as faced by the Negroes or the Africans clearly states ones struggle to find place in the society specially, after the Civil War. Through *The Conjure Woman* we see how the stories narrate the superstitions and beliefs present then through the works of Chesnutt. The stories narrated by Uncle Julius who has been a victim during the Civil War clearly shows African- American folk tales and the conjuring hoodoo traditions and understanding the Southern culture where Chesnutt belongs to and the present day occurrences. *The Conjure Woman* and other short stories speak about black resistance and revenge against white culture.

Neill Matheson shows us through his work how Chesnutt himself throws some cultural light on his work of *The Conjure Woman*. “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, nor suppose that a king's touch can cure scrofula” (Matheson 1-2). Chesnutt distances himself from the African American folk culture which includes the typical language which shows us the conjuring spirit and the belief that was prevalent and ultimately a product of superstition and “mere lack of enlightenment” (Matheson 1-2). He also distances himself by claiming that “we” have abandoned absurd superstitions and identifies himself with a cosmopolitan “advanced civilization”, rather than with the “old people of the South”, who still believe that injuries or ailments are caused by “some external evil influence”. The temporality of cultural development displaces racial difference in Chesnutt's formulation: “all peoples” are subject to lingering superstitions, but the educated modern world has advanced in rejecting such beliefs (Matheson 2-4).

Thus, Neill throws light on Chesnutt's work by distancing himself from the superstitious belief.

In another short story by Chesnutt it is seen how superstition is projected. The following lines show us how a day of a week is regarded as a lucky or an unlucky one by its name and colour. "Well, suh, dis yer is a gray hoss, en dis yer is a Friday; en a gray hoss kin alluz see a ha'nt w'at walks on Friday" (Chesnutt 82).

As mentioned above that this genre evolved out of social conditions which is found where Oden cites about the African survival in her article portraying through Chesnutt's work *The Conjure Woman*. "... the better class of white man in the South, nor his knowledge of political history, but with his depiction of those kinds of nonsense which the folks downstairs believed in. In the *Goophered Grapevine*, Chesnutt was deliberately using folk material to expose the scrutiny the mundane of everyday life of the slave, the relationship of the master to the ordinary folks" (Oden 38-39).

The Conjure Woman has not been more influential than in its status as precursor to the late twentieth century. Upon closer inspection Chesnutt reveals that "could cast a literary spell of his own" (Samuel 12-13). His tales both conform to the local colour or southern regional expectations and move beyond literary conventions altogether. In the same way we find how the entire short stories by Chesnutt lead us to see how superstition played a major role in the African American write up.

Not only through Chesnutt we find the relevance of African American literature and the prevailing social conditions, there are certain other issues which can be taken into consideration.

“Even so, what made the connection more plausible than risible was that Jim Crow segregation strived to make, and in certain crucial ways succeeding in making, black intra-racial class differences in the south inoperative” and “The rise of African American literature was part of this cultural accommodation (and, yes, resistance) to the fact and implication of black southern disfranchisement” (Warren. 740-742). He makes a clear and compelling case for understanding African American literature as creative and critical work written by black Americans within and against the strictures of Jim Crow America. Here, the social aspect of the literature is seen which shows us the characters in *The Conjure Woman* when they migrate from one place to other.

As said above that the chosen work will deal with superstition element so it is seen through one of the short stories that is Po’ Sandy where “Uncle Julius says that ghosts never disturb religious worship, but that if Sandy's spirit *should* happen to stray into meetings by mistake, no doubt the preaching would do it good” (Chesnutt 63). This belief states that even if ghosts are regarded as unworthy of spiritual act, still the appearance Sandy will make a difference.

“That story does not appeal to me, Uncle Julius, and is not up to your usual mark. It is n't pathetic, it has no moral that I can discover, and I can't see why you should tell it” (Chesnutt 49). This speaks of a horse how it is purchased and was not in proper use and dies. But then it is found that Julius a character by Chesnutt is seen in a new suit of clothes soon after the purchase of the horse and John another character suspects that Julius has profited from the sale. This is how the superstition is intertwined.

Another aspect of the Negroes which is relevant in Chesnutt's work which says about the racial identity is Priscilla in her studies has taken into consideration Jeffrey Leak's logical pursuit of arguments in confronting the mythic themes like Racial Myths and Masculinity are anything but predictable or obvious. From one of the most prominent lines "How did Leak identify and challenge these myths with such unpredictable outcomes?" (Ramsey 352-354), we come to know the myths surrounding black male masculinity and sexuality. In connection to my study we see how this is relevant as superstition not only confines itself to a certain aspect but also to myths on humanitarian ground which portrays black man as incapable. Therefore, Leak pens down about it through major works by African American literary figures in the twentieth century. Though this relevance may seem to be different but this shows how racial myth is related present during that time in connection to contemporary time.

Critics may argue that Black literature is not given its proper place in the world literature as it is the outcome of the socially mushroomed conditions. If the Blacks were deprived of social status and treated as the lowest then there will be agitation for such wants.

It may be true on behalf of the critics but it this led the native African dwellers to stand on their feet and be equal in terms of experiencing rights and status like the Americans. For instance, the White writers may have produced great deal of work but the work done in reciprocation to it by the Black writers cannot go unnoticed. Though *The Conjure Woman* gives the limited space for argument as per the critics still it shows how belief is of great importance in the Chesnutt's work. The psycho-social compulsion is well portrayed on behalf of the Africans or the Negroes who strive to achieve their rights.

The research paper not only speaks about superstition as its surface meaning but also in connection to different relations as we have seen. Superstition not only in belief or faith but in relation to the distinctive notions about black man or the social condition. The way the existence of black literature questioned about its failure is unanimous. The theories and the concepts clearly show how the then settings and social conditions helped and favoured the undermining situation.

Most literature served an end and if Black Literature was produced to serve an end, then it is believed still as a literature and consequently worthy of rightful study.

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