

## **CROSSING TROUBLED SEAS: THE METAPHOR OF FLIGHT IN CARIBBEAN LITERATURE.**

Mots-clés: slavery, obeah, memory, exotification, fragmentation, transgression, Middle-Passage narratives

After crossing the Middle Passage, the enslaved African was dropped on American shores. A naked, reluctant “migrant” he was nevertheless haunted with memories of his lost homeland. These memories were a way of resisting and surviving the trauma. Some of the memories were re-enacted through *obeah*. The term obeah is « a set or system of secret beliefs in the use of supernatural forces to attain or defend against evil ends; it is African in origin and varies greatly in kind, requirements and practice.”<sup>1</sup>The survival of obeah during the slave period and its continued existence as a force among the black Diaspora are as unexpected as they are paradoxical. Rejected by the middle-class as being primitivism, the reality of this force has surfaced in literature through, for instance references to “magic”, superstitions.

It is the purpose of this paper to attempt an analysis of the attitudes displayed by some Caribbean authors toward these beliefs and particularly the myth of Flying Africans commonly called *soucouyans*. The novels referred to are Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*, Simone Schwarz-Bart’s *Between two Worlds* and *The Bridge of Beyond*, Earl Lovelace’s *Salt*.

For a long time magical-religious practices and certain cults of some Black communities in the West-Indies were regarded as Black superstitions or remnants of African fetishism. The European literature referring to West Indian populations always described superstitious Black people.

During the second half of the 17th century letters written by the clergy from the West Indies noted the presence of sorcerers. Thus Père Labat in his famous *Nouveau Voyage aux Isles d’Amérique* (1722) noted that almost all the African slaves were sorcerers and mastered the use of poison.

To this simplistic representation were added visions produced by some 18th century authors as Moreau de Saint Méry, Girod –Chantrans for example.

In the 20th century these stereotypes were widely spread, thanks to a book written by W.B. Seabrook, *The Magical Island* (1929). In this work the author described the different stages of an initiation voodoo ritual by stressing on the gestures and the human cries mingled with those of sacrificed animals. We may also quote Lafcadio Hearn’s *Two years in the French West Indies* (1890). The authors of these travellers’ reports never forgot to depict “quimboiseurs”, “séanciers”,

“magnétiseurs” “dormeuses”<sup>2</sup> etc...Since they were writing about the West Indies they thought that they had to allude to this type of characters.

In *The Beacon*, the Trinidadian monthly magazine created in 1931, two short stories *Booze and the Goberdaw* (1929) by Ralph De Boissière and *Black Mother* (1931) by Ernest Carr bear witness to the interest of writers in this particular field.

Once the Caribbean authors discovered this hetero-image construed by western authors, they tried to modify or contradict this vision. In Haiti, for instance, the indigenist movement along with Price Mars tried to praise all the features of the African heritage: dances, languages, music and particularly the voodoo cult in *Ainsi parla L'oncle* (1928). The Negritude movement prolonged the Haitian indigenism in voicing the Negro identity and dignity rejecting the simplistic imagology contained in the travellers' reports. Irony, derision, humor were used as means to fight the disparaged vision of self. The binary categories of civilized and primitive haunted the representation of the Americas by not only European writers but the very inhabitants of these lands.

Hence the writers, who wanted to introduce “authentic” elements as folk traditions and religious beliefs, opened the door to a kind of “exoticism” since they presented as strange -therefore alien, what was endogenous. A few examples:

*The Jumbie Bird* (1974) Ismith Khan  
*The Obeah Man* (1964) Ismith Khan  
*Those who eat the Cascadura* (1957) Samuel Selvon  
*Banana Bottom* (1933) Claude McKay  
*Season of Adventure* (1966) George Lamming  
*My Bone and My Flute* (1955) Edgar Mittelhozer  
*Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) Jean Rhys

In those works either a character was endowed with magical powers (Christophine in *Wide Sargasso Sea*) or a whole passage devoted to some magical practices (“the ceremony of the souls” in *Season of Adventure*) In doing so they acknowledged the debt that any Caribbean writer had to the oral tradition, but never felt a sense of responsibility toward this heritage that had to endure through their writing.

### **The myth of Flying Africans**

Toni Morrison's fiction, particularly *Song of Solomon* (1977), claims and is rooted in Black expressive cultures which include traditions of myths and oral history. The vital themes and governing structural patterns of Morrison's or Schwarz-Bart's novels are modeled on African

narrative modes which Morrison calls “the oral origins” (mythology, folktales). As an example of an oral origin model, Morrison discusses her use of the myth of Flying Africans in an interview with Leclair: “The flying African myth in *Song of Solomon* ... If it means Icarus to some readers. Fine. My meaning is specific: it is about Black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life: flying was one of our gifts” (Leclair, 1993)

Morrison’s argument refocuses my reading of *Song of Solomon* but also redirects my approach toward Caribbean literature as a whole: how can one explore this myth? As a way of reshaping the slave’s fragmented body through memories? As transgression, resistance or healing?

Let us consider the original myth as reported in *The Book of Negro Folklore*, a ground breaking book of Black folktales collected in the 1950’s by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps. Told to the authors by a Gullah man living in the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia, the story was said to be of Angolan origin. The folktale reads:

Once all Africans could fly like birds; but owing to their many transgressions their wings were taken away. There remained, here and there, in the Sea Islands and out-of-the way places in the low country, some who had been overlooked, and had retained the power of flight, though they looked like other men.

Speaking of flight is referring to the passage of the African myth to the Americas. A process through which the African became a Caribbean or an American while keeping the essence of his heritage and renewing it. We can even use the word “adjustment” since in re-enacting the ancestral myths Schwarz-Bart and Lovelace endow them with a new function, giving them a new meaning different from the older one. Myths are not simple tales, because before being transcribed or written, they were part of oral civilization - words, gestures- thus making a link between the sacred and the “historicized” These myths are told, handled, distorted by the community in order to serve it when needed.

### **Flight as Memory: Remembering / Dismembering**

Speaking of the experience of the New World, these writers’ intention is to re-create myths, to restructure a past for their community. Myths and past are imbued with empathy, with the emphasis on the fortifying elements of their people’s humanity. As Christol aptly points it:

“Such echoes of the cultures and rituals from Africa point to the attempt to tame the “strangeness”, the deregulation of the universe, thus incurring a subtle interplay between continuities and discontinuities, ruptures and fusions, the ontological objective being the restoration of order preceded by its disruption.” (Christol, 1999, 169)

In Schwarz-Bart's *Between two Worlds* and *The Bridge of Beyond* and Lovelace's *Salt* the writers recreate the collective memory which was never recorded in history books, but was transmitted from generation to generation as part of a collective lore, a "conscious". This reclamation of the Ancestor represents not only an aesthetic act but an act of historical recovery. These Middle Passage narratives restate the tragic crossing of the Atlantic from Africa to the Americas... ..

Earth, Water and Air are the three elements of flight: to soar from the ground (America), to be carried by the wind and to cross the waters (the Atlantic) repeating the exact reverse route of the Middle Passage. Flight is the metaphor for a floating bridge ferrying the spirits of the ancestors across the Atlantic. Surprisingly enough, the combination of Schwarz-Bart's two novels is also the metaphor of flight: The Bridge between two worlds. In the novel *The Bridge of Beyond* Télumée must cross the bridge over into Man Cia's world, since Queen Without a Name considers this a crucial rite of passage for the little girl. Those who had kept the gift of flight, those who remember, must transgress their suffering bodies and through the process of metamorphosis dismember their bodies. During slavery (or enslavement, to quote Earl Lovelace) the slave's body belonged to the master who used it as a tool, an object. But he did not own the slave's soul. To be free is to have power over one's own body to be able to manipulate it, to transform it and create new flesh and bones. In Creole "chapé kow-ou" literally means "to flee with your body and to save it". In English flight (to flee) and flight (to fly) are homonyms. In the present study they seem to proceed from the same pattern: resistance and memory. The *soucouyan* which is defined as "a legendary evil, wrinkled old woman who hides by day, but by night sheds her skin she carefully hides in a jar, then becomes a ball of fire roving in the air should be considered, in a de-centering approach as a flying maroon who changes his body into that of a bird. The one who flies has chosen freedom instead of amnesia. To fly is to remember.

### **The reverse journey**

In *The Bridge of Beyond* Man Cia is introduced and described this way:

I was also very interested when the men started to talk about the spirits, spells  
a man who'd been seen the week before running about like a dog and old Man Cia,  
who flew about every night over the hills and valleys and cabins of Fond Zombi, her  
ordinary human form insufficient for her.

(p.48)

Flying is one of her multiple gifts. For she has certain capabilities in the use of herbs for healing body and soul. Ma Chess in Kincaid's *Annie John* has also the gift of flight even though it is not explicitly mentioned: she arrives and leaves on days when the steamer is not due. She is

obviously a kind of *soucouyan*. The resemblance between these two figures is close. They are meant by both authors to be perceived as a repository of all that is spiritual and harmonious. Schwarz –Bart and Kincaid differ from the exotic point of view in so far as they show that the possession of this belief leads to a transcendence of mental, spiritual and physical bondage. Both Man Cia and Ma Chess are profoundly free.

The introduction of Fond Zombi in *Between two Worlds* echoes the sorrow of one of the characters of *Salt*:

And it supports all kinds of strange creatures, men and beasts, devils, zombies and the rest, all seeking something which has not come yet but which they dimly hope for without knowing its shape or name. (*Between Two Worlds 2*)

He had no idea of the loss he had lost. He had to try to put aside the depth of this loss he had lost and find a way in his mind to claim this new world home.

(*Salt 173*)

The sense of spiritual loss is recurrent. Flight is thus the way to fill the loss. Ti Jean brings back the sun to Fond Zombi at the end of his initiation quest. In *Salt* the one who has the gift of flight is an old man who “put two corn cobs under his armpits and flew away to Africa, taking with him the mysteries of levitation and flight.” (*Salt 3*)

In *The Bridge of Beyond* and *Annie John* the *soucouyan* is an old woman. The reader makes acquaintance with a three obeah-women figure: Queen Without a Name / Man Cia / Télumée on the one hand, Ma Chess / Annie’s mother / Annie, on the other hand. Some endowed with more or less spiritual powers. What is interesting to underline is the fact that the bond (the bridge) between the three women is one that transcends death. Each individual strength compensates for each other’s loss. The three are making a circle in which time is mastered. In *Salt* and *Between two Worlds* the *soucouyan* is a young boy and an old man. The reader follows the route of the gift as far as men are concerned: the first man (Ti Jean) embodies the future (his gift was revealed to him by Eusèbe, the Ancestor), the second (Jojo’s grandfather) epitomizes achievement. Both images, the spiritual circular bridge drawn by the women and the linear one by the men, tell of the unruptured bond of life and death.

But Ti Jean L’horizon is not the only *soucouyan* character in *Between two Worlds*. The novel abounds with people such as Man Justina:

Ma Justina was not a real witch but a sort of reserivist, one of those people weary of human form who sign a contract with a devil so as to be able to change themselves at night into a donkey or a crab or a bird as the fancy takes them. One fine day she was found drowned in her own

blood on the way into the village. Returning from a nocturnal flight, she had been surprised by the first rays of dawn and immediately fattened on the ground, struck down by the holiness of the light. As she lay in the middle of the road her bird's body slowly resumed its human form: hands sprouted at the tips of her wings and long dazzling white tresses mingled with the lustreless feathers of the head of an owl. (*Between* 19)

In *Salt* Mother Ethel the Shango priest woman speaks with Ogun the god of fire, Yemanja the goddess of water.

These references help to establish the authors' treatment of obeah as an integral part of the lives of the ex-slaves in their community. They infuse their work with belief in obeah as a norm. These works are statements on the survival of the legacy and on the legacy of survival, on the power of memory - collective memories kept alive through folk traditions. Ti Jean, Man Cia, Ma Chess, Jojo's grandfather, Mother Ethel are wise people who can interpret the spiritual world to their community. Through their characters, the authors valorize a cosmology and an epistemology that were disparaged and erased by the colonial era. These *soucouyans* have the capacity to reach unseen sources of meaning and to translate unreadable signs into more familiar and meaningful language for their community. Thanks to their understanding, the community can read and understand the daily life as a coherent and stable narrative.

## Salt

The only way to stop the process of metamorphosis is to sprinkle salt on their skin which they generally hang in a secret place. Then on return from their nocturnal flight they can't put on their human skin because it burns the flesh. According to *Le Dictionnaire des Symboles* "salt is fire freed from the waters". It is both the biblical "salt of the earth" with purifying virtues: "Ye are the salt of the earth" (Matt.5. 13), the symbol of spiritual food through baptism (the salt of wisdom) and also the symbol of sterility and bitterness. The salted waters of the ocean are ones of bitterness. In French the word "amertume" contains the word "mer". Those who fly have crossed the troubled seas of bitterness...

During the colonial period, salt was an important element for the survival of the inhabitants of the plantation house. The slaves were fed with salted beef, salt fish etc...

But they had eaten salt and made themselves too heavy to fly

(*Salt* 3)

Salt. Too much salt. Too much salt meat.

(*Salt* 213)

The masters had used salt as a silent weapon to erase, to mask the gift of flight. The writers, the new sorcerers are the ones who have stolen the salt from the white masters to give their

characters the power of flight. They unveiled the mask. They are the new diviners who apply the myth as paradigm for the diagnosis and solutions of the community's problems. The *soucouyans* reconceived the sorcerer or witch as figures of healing and resistance. They are the ones capable of returning to Africa, to make the reverse journey under the waters and through the air mastering the sacred and old language of the homeland. They are also the embodiment of syncretism for they are bridges upon the salted seas. Those who can fly know the (secret) Word. These writers having recourse to myth want to transform the void of historical rupture and fragmentation into an open-ended vision of possibility.

To rehabilitate the image of the *soucouyan* is to destroy, to dismantle the "master's house" via the medium of language, to challenge western codes. Flight is a fit metaphor for the secret and hazardous act of writing, an act of faith and communion. The writers tell us that the community must complete an odyssey of discovery and realize this absolute paradox: that one must be rooted in order to fly.

*"Once all Africans could fly like birds".*

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## END NOTES

1 R., Allsopp (ed), *Dictionary of Caribbean Usage*, OUP, 1996, p.412

2 various French terms in reference to obeahmen or women

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