

# Understanding caribbean history through modern caribbean literature. discussing a...

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



## **Introduction:**

Mary Conde's book 'I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem' uses the Salem Witchcraft Trials as a background for the political implications of a post-slavery scenario where the political implications are great. There are also some ironies which can be observed since the Puritans who ended up as abolitionists entertained the worst excesses as regards cleansing and purifying the nation of witches and Conde plays on that notion with subtle irony. The sense of catastrophe is also imminently felt especially in the analogous dynamics of the novel. Tituba is imbued with fantastic and wild notions of witchcraft which also impart that impending doom which almost permeates all before her. That is really the important part of the book where Caribbean catastrophe is very much present. Tituba is a classic novel which certainly creates a gender divide where the woman witch is almost imbued with a halo like countenance and is also probably a demonstration of the situation at the time. The question of colonial domination is an important one since we have the character of Tituba who is reviled and feared in equal measure by her peers with the sense of almost mythical domination that she creates.

The question of the New World is also an issue in Conde's narratives. The clash of cultures is a leitmotif which appears almost constantly in the novel and which demonstrates the crucial importance of everything that goes along with it. We are constantly confronted by what seem to be puritanical ideals as well as an urge for punishment and retribution and although this does not consistently appear in some of the characters. Conde's skilful manner of replicating historically accurate information with fictional

depictions also makes her an important beacon for the case of Tituba. The depiction of Salem as a hotbed of racialism and ignorance is also a hugely important part of the story as it makes us encounter the sheer sense of ignorance at close quarters. Tituba is no longer a woman but rather she is seen as the devil and her black skin colour continues to inflame the incredible prejudices of the people of Salem.

### **The novel's response to slavery and post-colonial domination**

Conde' delves deep into the mechanics of the slavery system in the early 18th century and how this was crucially important to the growth of the American economy in the deep South. However slavery seemed to develop from the trend of forced labour in the Caribbean colonies which had an appetite for this type of labour long before it became popular in the United States. The conditions on these vast Caribbean plantations were certainly not for the faint hearted since they were regularly abused and arbitrarily imposed on unsuspecting slaves who practically knew nothing but the lash. The psychology of lynching was also an important part of the proceedings here since the young Tituba is made to watch her mother being hanged, an incredibly brutal way of asserting authority. More so, this punishment was due to her having been raped by a white man, so the scale of psychological torture is even more rampant and terrifying.

Conde' delves deep into the heart of the matter of slavery especially in the manner with which the masters treated their slaves. Here one can compare with the ' Life of Oladiouh Equino' who was made to suffer substantially due to his diverse temperament. However the parallels with the Caribbean

catastrophe can also be gleaned since the situation

The Salem craze for the deposition of witches is also important since most of this hysteria actually continues to fascinate us. In fact historians have continued to be fascinated by these trials which have stood the test of time as being terribly effective and horrifying in both senses of the word.

It is interesting to note that this version of the Salem trials has been written by a woman who has an Afro-Caribbean background and in a sense she has been viewed as an important light and beacon for the feminist movement who have pounced on the story in several ways. First and foremost there are also a number of comparisons with the past especially with accounts of those slaves who felt without hope and who could no longer espouse human dignity. There are also parallels with the novel ' I Rigoberta Menchu' which is the story of an Indian from Guatemala who was involved in the struggle of human rights for her country.

The manner in which Tituba is put to death is also shocking and horrifying. She is burnt to death in front of her daughter who is made to watch this terrible end and this also has a parallel with lynching where the African American body was desecrated and left to rot in a most degrading manner. In a sense we are also made to observe what a lynching does to the surrounding population, it actually brutalizes them and makes them hate themselves in more ways than one.

The sense of spiritual domination is also very important in the novel which is permeated with voodoo and witch doctors. However the question of rape which comes across as a rebellion against feminist tendencies is also crucially important to the narrative. The comparatively idyllic life of Tituba as

a young woman is dashed when her mother is punished by death when she is found guilty of being raped by a white man, this is certainly a huge boost for the feminist movement who feel that their cause is most certainly at the top of the pile.

## **The Salem Trials**

The issue of catastrophe comes into play when Tituba begins exacting her revenge on those who have harmed her especially in the Endicott business. Here Tituba decided to engage herself with a white woman to act as her servant but she was humiliated and treated absolutely like dirt. Thus she began using her supernatural powers thus showing that she would not be left to endure prejudice and abuse. She uses her supernatural powers to get back at her mistress and these create a sense of hatred and oppression. However we also have the double handed effect of Tituba's powers when her mistress manages to sell her to another planter and thus her new found freedom is shattered. She also loses her husband in the process and this obviously makes her an extremely unhappy and revengeful woman. However Tituba even manages to overcome this difficulty for although her skin is black she is still respected by her new master who moves to another area to accommodate her.

The novel then picks up the Salem witch trials with all possible speed. We have very apt descriptions of the town of Salem which was permeated with hate and superstition as well as intrinsic horror at the witches and their doings. However the real strong point of the book is the encounter with Hester Prynne in prison, she who is actually a character created by Nathaniel

Hawthorne in his celebrated novel, 'A Scarlet Letter'. Prynne urges Tituba to consider being better off dead in a society which is composed of feminist utopia although this is quite far from the actual truth.

The character of Tituba is important in that she is seen as a beacon and a guiding light to those societies where slavery was prominent and was an essential fabric of society. Her conversations in prison with Prynne are also crucial and extremely important since they tackle the ideal of a feminist utopia whilst at the same time ground the brutality of slavery in all its reality.

### **Traditions and slavery**

Conde' is also astonishingly direct and factual when she attempts to recreate the testimony given by Tituba during the witch trials. The description of the catastrophe that ensues after the hysteria regarding the witches spreads through the village is also hugely powerful and incredibly effective. Whilst reading this book, one obviously cannot fail to be moved by the horrors, trials and tribulations which permeate the account as described by Conde'. However there is also a twist here since Tituba was not actually black but an Indian from the colony of New Spain so we have to encounter a little bit of historical inaccuracy here also. However there is no denying that the power of the narrative lies in the way Conde manages to extricate several historical sources and permeate them into a whole which really demonstrates her intrinsic knowledge of these trials. The romantic nature which is associated with Tituba's plight is of course very important but most important is the manner in which she conducts herself as a beacon for the feminist movement. The elements of catastrophe which ensue as the novel moves

along are also important beacons to what will come after.

Conde' speaks about the issue of slavery in the context of the Caribbean phenomenon where the slaves were constantly undermined and almost worked to death. In that sense, Tituba was crucial and important for the liberation of the female from the shackles of slavery whilst she was also an important shining light for that movement which was in favour of witchcraft due to her supernatural powers.

The traditions which were imbued in the Caribbean also feature in the book especially the question of voodoo. Tituba is an important personality since she embodies the fears and superstitions which were prevalent in New England society at the time and which were the basic tenements of civilisation in those days. Gender is also an important part of proceedings since Conde' uses Tituba as a form of female beacon which lights up society although prejudice and ignorance get her in the end. The ruse of the black woman with supernatural powers demonstrate the fear levels and high output of superstition which permeated the New England populace.

Slavery remains a topic which arouses much controversy both amongst Americans and also throughout the world when discussing the past and its effects on society in general. One has to take into account the fact that slavery remains ingrained in certain societies although the American institution also persisted for several decades after it supposedly ended through the system of sharecropping and other forms of indentured labour. Conde' also focuses on the relationship between slaves which was always fraught with danger and unhappiness with the constant threat of division and parting. Tituba's childhood and hers past was also shrouded in unhappiness

and pain.

One has to consider the fact that Conde's historical information is not always correct, the sense of mystery which she creates around her central character is definitely an important part of the narrative. We also learn the lessons of retribution and power which are accorded to Tituba in her quest for eventual happiness. The novel reads very well and is almost a tour de force with the resultant climax offering a rare insight into the psyche of the slave turned liberator.

### **Haiti as a case study – opinions by other critics**

One of the most downtrodden countries which has suffered greatly from post-colonial domination is Haiti where poverty is rampant. The immense catastrophe present in this country has to be observed at close quarters and one of the major points is the fact that slavery is still a dominant perspective in the country's social fabric. The Restavek are people who live life as little less than slaves and can be seen as relics of post-colonial domination. Slavery has remained very present in today's Haiti which is a classic case of the phenomenon of Caribbean catastrophe. Although it is a country lush with vegetation and has several natural resources, it is presently one of the poorest countries in the world and will probably remain so for many decades. Additionally the sense of voodoo and witchcraft which is present in the populace also demonstrates the ties with the past and the era of colonial domination. Having been a French colony for several hundred years, the Haitians were among the first Caribbean countries to gain independence and this also made it susceptible to certain changes. However when we compare



the tale of Tituba with the catastrophe that ensued in Haiti we cannot help feeling that the whole question of colonial dominance was crucial to its eventual failure. Other Caribbean countries also suffered to adapt from their post-colonial mentality especially Barbados and Trinidad where superstition and conservatism remain rife. In a sense, Conde is attempting to cleanse the Caribbean psyche from its intrinsic hate and superstition through the character of Tituba.

Another monograph by Ann Petry which was written in the 1960's delves deeply into the problem of Tituba and her innocence. There are also allegations that Conde' actually copied parts of Petry's writings for there are way too many similarities in the text for this to be a coincidence. The similarities include the situation where the planter Parris was married to a sickly wife before moving and the names are coincidentally similar as they are Betty and Betsey. The description of Boston as a cold and very superstitious place is also very similar and the feeling of a catastrophe is also extremely strong and quite pungent in this respect.

There are also theories that Conde' wants to revenge herself on Afro Caribbean men who are intrinsically described as self-serving cowards as well as being pretty notorious philanderers. The parallel of the rape of Tituba's mother with the rape of Africa by the British is also an intriguing comparison which occasionally escapes us. There is also the victimization of minority groups which makes the novel a calling card for those who are discriminated against.

It would also be interesting here to compare notes with other accounts of Tituba by different authors. An interesting alternative study is the one by

Elaine Breslaw which is titled; *Tituba, Reluctant Witch of Salem*' (1997), where the author attempts to explore and deconstruct practically the whole life of this perceived witch. Here, Breslaw surmises that Tituba was not even of Caribbean prominence and was actually an Indian. One can also observe the importance given to name changing by the British who actually changed the name of Tituba so as not to offend Indian religious customs. Breslaw contends that Tituba was actually an Arawak Indian and was not even a Caribbean thus ruining slightly the contention that Conde is making a pitch for the Afro-Caribbean in her novel.

### **Feminism in the novel**

However the main characteristic of this novel is the way in which feminism is portrayed. Being a victim of rape as well as slavery, Tituba is a classic example of the downtrodden woman who manages to gain her independence even through death. Then there is also the question of being framed by her master when he accuses her of witchcraft as a means of asserting authority. Thus Tituba becomes a sort of beacon for those women who are downtrodden and without much hope for their future. It can also be seen as a parallel to the breakdown of a relationship with a woman intrinsically hoping to better herself as she lies on the path to seeming self-destruction. Conde' skilfully manages to extricate her female hero from the shackles of normality and she is almost a harbinger of doom in this respect.

Power relations between the British and the American settlers are also important factors in the book. There are areas where the possibility of confrontation is there for the taking whilst there are also situations which call

for a certain amount of alacrity and tact. Conde's flowing narrative is very effective in certain points especially when he begins demonstrating the importance of retaining nationalism in situations of great delicacy. She does not really see the British as enemies but he cannot abide the fact that these have come and conquered his homeland without any resistance.

## **Conclusion**

Catastrophy certainly followed after slavery as nations struggled to come to terms with independence and freedom with political misrule and chaos often the final results. Mary Conde's book imbues the main character Tituba' with an almost prophetic sense of doom which culminates in a finale of quite epic proportions and which helps us understand the intrinsic importance of liberty which can only be gained by death on occasion.

The situation in some Caribbean countries today shows that the woman is still seen as some sort of inferior being without any hope of equality and that is something which the character of Tituba will continue to fight for. Conde's novel is certainly a powerful tour de force for the feminist movement in this respect.

## **Works Cited:**

Conde' M: I, Tituba, Black witch of Salem; Ballantine Books, 1994, Print