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**Finding Your Own Magic:
How Obeah and Voodoo Provide Women Agency in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and
Tiphonie Yanique's *Land of Love and Drowning***

By Matthew Cutter¹

Abstract

One of the most important functions of Caribbean literature is to give voice to characters that would be otherwise voiceless. These characters are often slaves, women, racial minorities, and poor people; in other words, anybody who has been touched by the devastating oppression of a colonial society. The oppressed in the Caribbean have often turned to their belief in Obeah in order to assert themselves in the face of the colonizer. Obeah and magic are still ingrained in the culture of the Caribbean people because the culture of the European colonizer is still influencing society in the Caribbean.

Through this research it was discovered that both Rebekah McKenzie from *Land of Love and Drowning*, and Christophine from *Wide Sargasso Sea*, are very similar characters. They are both Obeah women who happen to be poor, single mothers, but are also feared and respected in their communities. The fear and respect are due to their practice of Obeah. Antoinette Cosway, from *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Anette and Eona Bradshaw, from *Land of Love and Drowning*, practice a more subtle form of Obeah. Obeah is a magic that liberates these women from a system of patriarchal and colonial oppression. Because they have lifted themselves, they also have the power to help other marginalized people push back against similar oppression. The use of magic to fight against oppression put in place by a colonial system is a common theme in Caribbean literature, and consequently, is important to the everyday lives of real Caribbean people.

Keywords: Obeah, Voodoo, Caribbean Literature

Magic has the power to shape minds, hearts, and nations, nobody knows better about this power than the oppressed and marginalized peoples of the Caribbean. In this region of the world, magic goes by the names of: Obeah, Voodoo, and Santeria. Santeria and Voodoo have a community of followers that practice rituals such as, offerings, sacrifices, celebrations of marriage, and communal prayer, much like more mainstream, organized religions. Obeah, on the other hand, is an individual practice. When people need to practice Obeah they are generally doing it to solve a personal problem, such as making someone love them, making someone sick, or even making someone die.

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When the Europeans first discovered the Caribbean they identified it as a land that could be exploited and built on the backs of its native people. The British, French, Dutch, Spanish, and Danish eventually started to colonize the islands and bring in stolen people from Africa to work as slaves on their plantations. Once in the Caribbean, people of diverse African cultures began to combine aspects of their tribal religions with those of their European captors. Due to this marriage of cultures, slaves could practice their beliefs openly because what was actually Voodoo, looked to the plantation masters as standard Christianity. Voodoo and Obeah eventually became tools to fight back against the oppressor. Because of Voodoo and Obeah, magic is ingrained into the culture of the Caribbean, and many oppressed peoples still use it to push back against any colonizer who is trying to marginalize them and make them give up their cultural independence. Most of the people who identify as magic are the people in these societies that have been pushed to the margins, largely women who turn to Obeah and Voodoo as a source of power and agency. In some Caribbean literature, there are characters that are perceived as weak and voiceless just as the slaves were, yet they use this magic to give themselves power, and ultimately agency.

In Jean Rhys' 1966 novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the characters Antoinette Cosway and Christophine use magic to fight back against a colonizing force. Antoinette Cosway is forced to marry an Englishman who is only in the marriage to take control of her money. Her husband, and incarnation of the colonizer, sees her as simply another Creole girl who is too culturally independent, or Creole, to be refined into a "real" English woman. This situation echoes the British colonization of the Caribbean that was purely exploitative in nature. Antoinette simply wants to retain her own identity and be loved by her husband, whereas her husband wants a woman that will conform to his standards and exist only in the way that he sees her. Antoinette eventually feels oppressed in her marriage and turns to Obeah in order to push back against her husband. Antoinette turns to her childhood nanny and mother figure in her life, Christophine, who also happens to be an Obeah woman, and asks for help to make her husband love her; "That is what I wish and that is why I came here. You can make people love or hate or... or die" (Rhys 67). Antoinette needs to make her husband love her so that she can have a sense of belonging somewhere, yet still keep her roots in Caribbean culture. Antoinette is torn between two worlds, as she has spent her entire life in the Caribbean, but comes from European ancestry. Her new husband presents Antoinette with a way to become closer to her European roots.

Antoinette finally uses Obeah against her husband but because it is not her own, he sees right through this attempt. We become aware of this through his reaction to Antoinette's use of borrowed Obeah:

She need not have done what she did to me. I will always swear that, she need not have done it. When she handed me that glass she was smiling. I remember saying in a voice that was not like my own that it was too light. I remember putting out the candles on the table near the bed and that is all I remember. All I will remember of that night. (Rhys 82)

Antoinette's husband notices the intent behind the ritual right away, her failure to conform to his whim and his ideals has only made him more hell-bent on reducing her to nothing. Just as the colonizers attempted to cause the loss of identity among the black slaves, Antoinette's husband is doing the same to her.

This failed use of Obeah is not without end though; it frightens Antoinette's husband enough to keep him on guard. Arnold Davidson further exemplifies the consequences of

Antoinette's failed Obeah in his book, *Jean Rhys*, "To have Antoinette tell how she tried to win him back with an Obeah love potion; to show how he viewed the act as an attempted poisoning... and to justify himself and his exercise in tyranny" (21). The attempted Obeah is used as an excuse to keep exercising control over Antoinette. He does not understand that Antoinette was trying to win his love and decides himself that this "crazy" Creole woman must have attempted to poison him. Antoinette's use of Obeah was misguided because instead of trying to free herself from the colonizer, she attempted to change him. Only when she uses magic for herself, will the Obeah be effective.

Eventually, Antoinette does find power within herself to fight back against the colonizer, her husband, but it takes some time. The Englishman takes her back to England and locks her up in his home, not expecting his weak and crazy Creole (someone who's ancestry is a mix between European colonizers and African slaves) wife to be any danger to him. Stanford Sternlicht frames Antoinette's final act against her colonizer as such, "Women like Antoinette remain in slavery, as chattels to their husbands, and they are more passive than the slaves were in their bondage. As ex-slaves revenge the past by burning Calibri, so Antoinette emancipates herself and takes revenge by burning Thornfield Hall" (113). Just as the slaves used magic to find it within themselves to rebel, Antoinette finally finds the courage within herself to rebel against her husband. The magic Antoinette discovers is personal and powerful because she does not need Christophine in order to wield its power. Due to the truly personal nature of this act, it is her only use of true Obeah.

Christophine, the Obeah woman, symbolizes the power of magic to defeat the will of the colonizer. As a black servant, one would assume that her social situation would cause her to be powerless in her oppression, and yet, she is one of the most powerful, independent women in the novel. Sanford Sternlicht reveals more about Christophine's power in his book, *Jean Rhys*, "So both critics you've used so far have books named *Jean Rhys*?" "She has wisdom and power. She is to be admired in that she is linked to an older and purer African past" (117). Christophine's ability to lead an independent life is connected to her roots in Africa. These African roots represent her independence from the British colonizer trying to impose their will and culture. The magic that she wields is so strong that no colonizing force can defeat it. Some may argue that her magic is not strong, given the fact that she could not help Antoinette, yet Obeah is a personal magic. She does what she can to help Antoinette, but ultimately, Antoinette must harness the power for herself.

One major colonizing force that Christophine has resisted is a husband. In a society dominated by men ruling over women, Christophine chooses to stay unmarried. She is candid when demonstrating her views on marriage, "All women, all colors, nothing but fools. Three children I have. One living in this world, each one a different father, but no husband, I thank my God. I keep my money. I don't give it to no worthless man" (Rhys 66). Christophine's resistance to marriage is in direct conflict to the will of the colonizer. The colonizer would rather see a black servant like Christophine live in subjugation so that they can continue to exploit her, yet through her belief in Obeah, she gains agency. Christophine uses her independence and free will, which arise from her practice of magic, as weapons against oppression. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, magic such as Christophine's, is used as a personal way to challenge oppression and the will of the colonizer.

Just like Christophine, Rebekah McKenzie, in Tiphany Yanique's novel, *Land of Love and Drowning*, is an Obeah woman who uses her magic to help other women in the village maintain some agency in their own lives. Rebekah practices Obeah for the public from a booth at the local market, "Rebekah loved the market. She loved the noise and the interaction. Loved the power. Loved using the power she had" (Yanique 34). Rebekah is a poor, black, single mother, so in the

eyes of the colonizing man and society, she should not have any power. Yet, at the market, Rebekah has more power than any man on the island. Rebekah's belief in her own magic not only helps the other women on the island gain agency, but also helps Rebekah live life on her terms.

The main reason Rebekah has power over many men on the island is that she can give women abortions. In a patriarchy where the man keeping the wife pregnant is valued, abortion is a powerful magic to wield. Yanique describes Rebekah's use of magic:

So Rebekah could do things. She could make the blood in your body course saltwater—burn you from the inside out. Erode your womb as if it were in a tin until the eggs inside rattled like a beggar shaking a cup... Every woman on the island knew what Rebekah McKenzie could do (34-35).

By giving women abortions, Rebekah is making sure that they have some sense of independence. Even if the colonizer, in this case their husbands, wants them to be pregnant all the time, they no longer have to worry about giving birth to a baby that they do not want. Once a woman has a child, here is more societal pressure to stay living in the subjugation of the colonizer. Not only that, but when you bring the children into the world, it is just one more thing for the man to control. Rebekah uses her Obeah to fight back against the patriarchy by making sure her fellow women have power over their own lives. Even though these women in the village are perceived as weak, Rebekah's magic helps to give them a voice.

The Obeah that Rebekah practices is a magic that has been supporting the marginalized in the Caribbean for generations. Margarite Olmos' views help put Rebekah's Obeah into context; "Obeah, thus conceived, is not a religion so much as a system of beliefs rooted in Creole notions of spirituality, which acknowledges the existence and power of the supernatural world and incorporates into its practices witchcraft, sorcery, magic, spells, and healing" (131). Rebekah incorporates spells, and other rituals into her abortions, thus rooting them into the common belief system. Rebekah uses her Obeah as a way to help heal the lives of the women on the island. This dependence on Rebekah forces the island women to respect her, even if they don't particularly like her. Even though she is considered an outcast, and everyone knows of her infidelity, she manages to keep herself on the same playing field as any man in *Land of Love and Drowning*. In a way, her magic makes her more powerful than them.

Eona Bradshaw, in *Land of Love and Drowning*, possesses a magic unique from Rebekah's. Eona is the most beautiful girl in the Virgin Islands. All of the men on the island want to sleep with her, yet only her father, Owen Bradshaw, has sex with her on a regular basis. In this instance, he is the colonizer, taking advantage of his young, naïve daughter. This beauty is not a weakness for Eona, in fact she uses it to fight back against her oppressive family situation. When her father decides he must no longer sleep with her, Eona utters these words, "I wish you would die Papa. I wish you would just die" (Yanique 58). These words cast a spell on Owen Bradshaw, which causes him to crash his ship into a reef, and drown. Eona's beauty has caused her father to be blind to anything else in his life, and if he can't have it as his own, then he would rather die than live without it. He did exactly as Eona had wished.

Eona's sister Annette Bradshaw, on the other hand, is not nearly as beautiful as her sister. The colonizers in her world are the people of her village that judge her for being promiscuous and think that she is just another "dumb black woman". Annette pushes back against this attempt to reduce her by being an astute student of history. As a narrator of *Land of Love and Drowning*, Annette tells the reader herself, "If anyone know the history is me. Nowadays people think

historians are stuffy types, but history is a kind of magic I do here” (Yanique 9). By being an historian Annette is resisting the preconceived notions of the colonizer by actually being smarter than they expect her to be. Her position as a school teacher, and her knowledge, gives her agency in her life, a way to provide for herself and her family that many people on the island did not have. Everything Annette has achieved in life stems from a strong belief in her personal magic to provide her with agency in the face of colonialism.

The Bradshaw sisters’, Eona and Anette’s, magic is not founded in Obeah or Voodoo or any other old religion with African roots. There are no ceremonies or sacrifices or spells involved in the power they wield. Their magic is simply in the way they perceive themselves. This self confidence is magical in the same way as Obeah and Voodoo, even without the spells and rituals. By the patriarchal society, they may have been perceived as “weak” and “fragile” women, yet their belief in their power helps the Bradshaw sisters to never see themselves as others see them. Eona states at a portion in her narrative, “We women must seek a life based on our abilities. The ability I have always had is that men will love me. It is the magic I have” (Yanique 88). In a world where most people are trying to impose their will on you, and will not help you unless it benefits them, Eona knows that the only thing you can do is rely on your own abilities. The Bradshaw women’s belief in themselves, is some of the strongest magic in *Land of Love and Drowning*.

Time and time again magic is used by the oppressed in order to push back against colonizing forces. Those forces may be foreign governments or nations, or even one’s own government. In some places in the Caribbean, such as Jamaica, the practice of Voodoo or Obeah is still outlawed today. Jerome Handler explains one specific law in his book, *Enacting Power: the criminalization of obeah in the Anglophone Caribbean*, “The practice of Obeah continues to be an illegal activity subject to one year in jail plus a whipping...” (85). To think that in 2014 you can still get whipped for practicing a religion your government doesn’t agree with is a thought that a lot of us probably cannot stomach. In northeast Brazil, there is a city called Salvador da Bahia. Candomblé is a popular religion there that was practiced by the slaves of the past and is very similar to Voodoo and Obeah. Why is this Candomblé still practiced in this area so long after slavery? The reason is that crushing levels of poverty in some parts of the city retains oppression. As with many oppressed people before them, the people of Salvador hold on to this religion as a tool to keep fighting for a better life. Magic helped provide them with the tools for this fight, much as it provided the women of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Land of Love and Drowning* with these same tools. Through a common belief in magic such as, Obeah or Voodoo, the people of the Caribbean can cast of the shackles of colonialism and move toward the future.

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