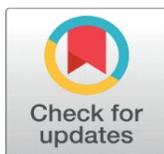


RACE, CONJURE AND THE AMERICAN SOUTH IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY AMERICAN SOUTH: A STUDY OF SELECT STORIES FROM CHARLES W CHESNUTT'S THE CONJURE WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

Charles Chesnutt's short-story collection *The Conjure Woman* looks back at America's plantation South during the antebellum days, through stories narrated by African American ex-slave Julius. Help from a conjure women is sought by the white masters for protecting their property and by the slaves for salvaging basic humanity. However, the present owner of the plantation believes Julius' stories to be purpose-driven and irrational.

This paper attempts to demonstrate how conjure becomes a weapon with subversive potential in saving the lives of African Americans during and after slavery. Another crucial endeavour of this paper will be to delineate between the African American and the white American, based on their respective attitudes towards nature, borne out during the act of telling of these stories.

Keywords: Conjure, Subversion, Ecological Concerns, Utilitarian Philosophy

BRIEF AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858-1932) was an American author, lawyer and social-cum-political activist. Both his parents were free persons of colour. Chesnutt was 7/8th white European and could easily have passed off as "white", but refrained from doing so. Most of his childhood was spent in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Besides studying, he started teaching at a very young age. But in 1883, he left for New York to pursue a career in writing. His short fiction was published in several magazines in the 1880s and 1890s. *The Conjure Woman* (1899)-a collection of seven short stories was Chesnutt's first published book. Through the short stories in this collection, Chesnutt explores race and labour relations in the postbellum South, steering away from the fond nostalgia towards the antebellum world of plantation South, expressed in the stories of Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page.

Chesnutt published another collection of short stories titled *The Wife of His Youth and Other Short Stories of the Colour Line* (1899). His book titled *Frederick Douglass* (1899) records the biography of the famous abolitionist. He has also written several novels such as *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), etc. He spent the last two decades of his life as a practicing lawyer.

PUBLICATION HISTORY AND GENERAL INFORMATION

Several of the seven short stories published in the collection had been published earlier in magazines. For instance, the title story 'The Conjure Woman' had been published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1887, 'Po' Sandy' had appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1888, etc. All the stories employ the same narrator-the old ex slave Julius, who tells his stories featuring antebellum plantation life populated by Black American slaves and white masters, to new master and mistress of the plantation-John and Annie. Voodoo, (or 'goopher' as Julius calls) plays a key role, being practised by free black practitioner Aunt Peggy. John and Annie are wonderstruck by the quaint descriptions of antebellum life, but John suspects Julius to be a trickster who is assuring himself of several things in the guise of telling his tales to gullible northerners.

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF SELECT SHORT STORIES IN *THE CONJURE WOMAN* **THE GOOPHER'D GRAPEVINE: A SHORT SUMMARY**

Julius McAdoo, an African American, has continued to live on the plantation in Patesville that the narrator, John, contemplates to buy. As John and his wife Annie visit the plantation one day, they come across Julius. Julius, aware that John is the northern gentleman who is about to buy this rundown plantation, tries to dissuade him from the deal. He narrates a tale from the antebellum days when Mr Dugal McAdoo, the then master, noticed that the grapes in his plantation were stealthily consumed by the slaves. To instil fear among the slaves he employed Aunt Peggy, the local conjure woman to curse the vineyard so that anyone who would steal or consume the grapes, would die soon. Since they were believers in the potential of conjure, all the slaves stopped stealing from the grapevines immediately. However, a short while later, a new slave Henry was bought by the master and made to work on this plantation. Oblivious of the spell cast by Aunt Peggy on the plantation, one night he ate the grapes to his fill. But upon knowing about the curse, he began panicking and fearing for his life. The other slaves took him to the conjure woman, where he pleaded Aunt Peggy to help him. Realising that his mistake was an innocent one, Aunt Peggy using her conjure ordained that his health would parallel that of the grapes every year; he would age rapidly when the time came for the vines to wither and die, but his youth and vigour would be restored from spring onwards. Dugal McAdoo took the opportunity to sell Henry every summer at a high price, extolling his strength and capability, only to buy him back in autumn or winter for a meagre price on account of his age and weakened physique. Dugal McAdoo kept earning a double profit; firstly from the grapevines whose fecundity had been ensured by Aunt Peggy's act of goopher, as well as from the slave Henry, whose waxing and waning health was bound interminably with those goophered grapevines. This purple patch continued for a significant duration, until the master was gulled by a Yankee who claimed to have a chemical formula that would enhance the profitability from the grapes even further. The plan was a hoax and both the vines and the slave withered to death. Then came the Civil War in which the owner of the plantation, Dugal McAdoo perished. His surviving family left the vineyard abandoned. McAdoo warns the couple against purchasing the property due to it still being cursed, but the narrator buys the vineyard regardless. He employs Julius McAdoo in the capacity of coachman.

Analysis of 'The Goopher'd Grapevine': *The Conjure Woman* abounds in images of slaves being converted into aspects of nature. 'The Goophered Grapevine' tells of a field hand whose physical condition parallels the growth and withering cycle of the grape vines amidst which he lives. In the story "Po' Sandy," Tenie uses conjure to convert her husband Sandy to a pine tree, so that he may escape his master's plan of lending him to a different plantation owner. However, every night Tenie briefly conjures him back to human form, before transforming to the pine tree by morning. But soon after the pine is axed to provide lumber-simultaneously symbolizing absolute control over the slave's body as well as the land and everything growing on it. In another story titled 'The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt' Dan, a slave is transformed into a grey wolf. He is shown as inhabiting and later, and later haunting a particularly dense and uninhabited section of the forest. The conflation of the bodies of slaves with the land or different aspects of it assumes the status of a trope in Chesnutt's collection of short stories.

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* Toni Morrison states that "whiteness" in American literature is in binary opposition to "a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence" (5). In Chesnutt's short stories, this essentially white American identity is constructed as binary opposition to firstly the "Africanist presence" but secondly to the wilderness of the land. The tree-an organic aspect of the land, as well as the slave's body- are under the proprietorship of the owner. This dual sense of ownership empowers the white man by instilling in him a sense of autonomy. In fact, his subjective self finds expression in opposition to and by dint of dominion over both slaves and

nature; he considers both as his rightfully owned property, which he can exploit to his advantage. In fact, his cotton and tobacco plantations are facilitated by exploiting the land and the labour of the slaves. John and the likes of him have merely stepped in the shoes of the slave-owning plantation masters of the antebellum years. Through the voice of Julius, Chesnutt hints that unlike these ex-slaves who have a truly symbiotic relationship with the land built on the fundamental motto of coexistence, the whites merely consider the land as a pool from which profit awaits extraction.

But in Julius' tales of antebellum life narrated, John discerns only nostalgia. He misses Julius' suggestion of an alternative to the dominant culture of proprietorship over people and nature. Toni Morrison explains that "... in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free, but also...the projection of the not-me". Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* is a prime example of how slaves and the environment together constitute the other, the "not-me", in contradistinction to which white American identity constituted itself. Chesnutt exposes claims of white supremacy, and nullifies the arguments in favour of plantation-era nostalgia, calling into question its untenability at both the social and the ecological levels. The voice of Julius, advocating conservation of landscape and racial diversity emerges as more sensible.

This conflict between opposite attitudes towards nature emerges at the outset in the first story titled 'The Goopher'd Grapevine'. John, a businessman from the north claims that he has recently shifted to North Carolina, upon the suggestion of his family doctor, to counteract the adverse effect of harsh northern winters on Annie's health. But financial considerations have played an important role in his decision. The prospect of the "business of grape-culture"(2) in postbellum North Carolina with its supply of "cheap labour" has spurred John's decision to relocate to North Carolina. Consequently, much of the following discussion revolves around commerce, as shown by the predominance of phrases such as "the business" of grape culture, "the turpentine business", "the town's "commercial emporium", "its "business activity", etc (2-4). They sufficiently reveal the dominant trend of John's character, which in the words of Lorne Fienberg amounts to "economic absolutism" (Fienberg 168). In the final few decades of the nineteenth century, plantation owners and industrialists in the rapidly industrialized South, profited from the thriving convict-lease system (Cobb 68-69) and rampant utilisation of the vast natural resources of the South, which fuelled the growth of its burgeoning industries (Cowardrey 103).

Whereas John identifies himself as one who knows how to utilise human (African American ex slaves) resources and untapped natural resources (the rundown plantations), Julius the ex-slave identifies himself as someone who is organically rooted in his surroundings. The difference between them is palpable to John, but he does not identify the cause of this difference properly. According to John, Julius with his "thorough knowledge of the neighbourhood...the roads...the watercourses, the various soils...their produce" (64) appears "primitive" and "predial rather than proprietary". The "peculiar personal attitude", inexplicable to John, signifies his sense of kinship with the land and its native culture, deriving from the animist spirituality of their African ancestors. Will Coleman in his book *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of Telling the Story* points out the fluid "line of demarcation between animate and inanimate, human and non-human, spirit and human" (25) in African animist traditions. The world of Julius and the ex-slaves, according to Eric J. Sundquist, presents "a psycho-spatial representation of a separate cultural world of blackness" but one that is "horizontally coexistent with the crushing world of antebellum slavery" and by implication with its "African past" (360). This world with its connections and belief-systems is alien to John. His mental framework has taught him to value nature and natural resources only if they are systematised- cultivated lands, organised farming, constructed roads and all other markers of development. Therefore, Julius' outlook appears inexplicably "predial" to him. John thinks that Julius with his antebellum past rooted in slavery has learnt to think of himself as "an appurtenance" (65) to the land. But as unfolding incidents in the book clearly demonstrate, it is the white northerner who considers Julius as "an appurtenance". After buying the land, John hires Julius to be his coachman, which formally changes Julius's relationship to the land, as he now becomes a cog in the wheel of cash economy under the ultimate supervision of John. John reasons to himself that he has roughly matched the amount Julius was earning from selling the scuppernongs growing in "wild luxuriance" with the salary that he is offering Julius for the job of coachman. From a strictly financial standpoint, John is perhaps right. But the change in the status of African American Julius with regard to the land signals, in microcosmic form, the largescale shifts that were happening across the South post-Reformation, breaking the promises that Reconstruction was expected to usher in.

John on his arrival at the prospective plantation, comments on the "wild and unpruned luxuriance" of the grapevines and expresses his intention of "improving" them, in order to benefit from them financially (6). But this "wild and unpruned luxuriance" of the landscape and in the culture is what Julius is striving to preserve. In the post-Reformation socio-economic milieu Julius is fighting a losing battle because all over the South, white northerners were buying land, acquiring natural resources and ushering in a new phase marked by environmental exploitation in the South, with the

employment of African American labour. Rather than becoming the proprietors of land, African Americans were supposed to remain content with the transformation in status from slave to labourer.

At the end of the 'Goopher'd Grapevine' we find John congratulating himself, narrating how the "local press" hails the success of his plantation as "a striking illustration of the opportunities open to Northern capital in the development of Southern industries" (34). Julius on the other hand had been an advocate of "wild and unpruned luxuriance"- land and human culture coexisting in an ecologically sustainable way. Understanding the risk of slipping back into the clutches of a system as degrading as the plantation economy, Julius tries to stall John's plans but John buys the vineyard anyway, Thereafter Julius turns to the theme of fusion of slaves and landscape in the next story titled 'Po Sandy'.

PO' SANDY: A SHORT SUMMARY

Once again Julius tries to dissuade John-this time from demolishing a schoolhouse and replacing it with a new kitchen. He is reminded of an ex-slave Sandy who was often sent by master Marrabo McSwayne to the plantations of his friends and families on one errand or the other. During one instance, master McSwayne sells Sandy's wife, in her place buying another female slave Tenie. Overcoming his initial shock and grief, Sandy and Tenie grow fond of each other. Master McSwayne's habit of sending Sandy off on errands becomes unbearable to the new couple. Tenie then confides to Sandy of being a conjure woman and offers to help. After considering several options, they come to the decision that Tenie will transform Sandy to a tree. This way, Sandy would not have to stay apart from Tenie, as she would convert him back to human form every night and back to tree next morning. The plan works perfectly for some time, before master McSwayne decides to build floorboards in his kitchen utilising lumber from this particular tree. Tenie had been sent elsewhere on some errand. On her return she found the lumberjacks struggling to cut the tree down. Eventually, they were successful. However, sawing it proved to be even more tedious. The remaining slaves expressed their surprise on hearing the tree groaning and moaning as it was being sawn. Tenie loses her sanity as a result of this shock and perishes. However, the kitchen which was constructed using the wood from this tree could not be used for long either, because the squeaking sounds emanating from the floor resembled the sounds of a person groaning in pain. People on the plantation began believing that the building was haunted and avoided it. The situation went so out of control that it had to be demolished. Later, a schoolhouse was built in its place. But since the war even the schoolhouse has remained abandoned. Upon listening to Julius' account Annie discourages John from replacing the schoolhouse with a kitchen.

Analysis of 'Po' Sandy': Julius is reminded of Sandy, Tenie and the entire sequence of events upon listening to the squeaking noise of a huge pine log being sawn. Julius' tale elicits a sad remark from Annie, as she shudders at the thought of "a system where such things were possible". Julius is successful in evoking empathy in the mind of at least one member of the class constituting his present masters. But John is highly cynical about the fantastic nature of the tale. At the beginning of his narration John had vividly described how the abandoned school-house has been assimilated into the wilderness of the rundown plantation- "Wild grasses and weeds grow up all around it, animals take shelter there, and vines cover the chimney".

'Po' Sandy' begins with a reflection on man's intimate relationship with nature and a thorough awareness of man's organic situatedness in the web of ecological relations. This becomes evident as Sandy and Tenie debate which natural element Sandy should be transformed into; turning Sandy into a rabbit would not be a safe option because in that case "de dogs mought git atter" him; the possibility of transformation into a wolf is also rejected by Sandy because he "'doan want nobody ter be skeered "; becoming a mockingbird is rejected too, because "a hawk mought ketch". Ideally, Sandy would "wanter be turnt inter sump'n w'at'll stay in one place " (46). Sandy's preference sufficiently reflects his awareness of ecological interrelationships and his wish to stay within its confines without disturbing others and inviting undue attention. His desire to be rooted in one place finds literal fulfilment when he is transformed into a pine tree. However, nature is not immune to the attacks and encroachments of the white masters and both Sandy and Tenie fail to take this factor into consideration. Initially Tenie tries to ward off several challenges using elements of nature derived from the forest itself. To drive away the wood-pecker that pecks a hole in the pine tree, Tenie sends a sparrow hawk; to scare away master Marrabo's field hands who have come to collect turpentine from the tree, Tenie sets a hornet's nest. All of this is made possible by Tenie's knowledge of conjure-that has its roots in West African practices and faith in the animist traditions that have been replanted in American soil.

Tenie reveals to Sandy that it has been fifteen years since she "got religion" (45)-i.e., Christianity and suggests that she hasn't taken recourse to conjure in the meantime. Conjure emerges as a subversive tool in the hands of African American ex-slave women who face othering at several levels. In this story, Tenie's use of conjure after a fifteen-year hiatus is necessitated by the basic human need of staying close to her partner. Significantly, Sandy is safe as the tree only as long

as Tenie is around; as soon as she is sent out of the plantation on some errand the pine tree into which Sandy was converted gets cut down. Vandana Shiva comments:

The reductionist mind superimposes the roles and forms of power of Western male-oriented concepts on women, all non-Western peoples, and even on nature, rendering all three 'deficient,' and in need of 'development' (Shiva 5).

The rootedness of African-American culture in the midst of nature is borne out by the fact that the field hands instantly recognise the strange, sudden appearance of the pine tree. Among the multitude of trees in the forest they can identify the sudden presence of a tree they haven't seen before:

"Dey seed a tree w'at dey didn' 'member er habbin' seed befo'; it wuz monst'us quare, en dey wuz bleedst ter 'low dat dey hadn' 'membered right, er e'se one er der saplin's had be'n growin' monst'us fas'" (47).

In another story titled "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt" a slave conceals his "life charm" under a particular live-oak tree, thinking it would be a safe place. More than the artificial world of human beings, the African American mind trusts nature. Such an attitude is in clear contrast to the utilitarian mindset of white American masters such as master Marrabo and John, both of whom consider the forest as a bank of natural resources which may be pooled at will.

In continuation of the present discussion, one must pay attention to the association of untamed landscape with the hope of liberation. Melvin Dixon states that in the antebellum South "blacks depicted wilderness as a place of refuge beyond the restricted world of the plantation" (Dixon 3). The statement applies perfectly to the story 'Po' Sandy' where Tenie transforms Sandy into a tree, inside the forest, right at the "aidge er de swamp" (47), which resonates across the body of Chesnutt's fiction as a subversive locus that disrupts the racial hierarchy. When master Marrabo discovers that Sandy is missing, he orders the dogs to be brought, in order that they may sniff out Sandy's whereabouts:

But de las' place dey could track Sandy ter wuz de foot er dat pine tree. En dere de dogs stood en barked, en bayed, en pawed at de tree, en tried to climb up on it; en w'en dey wuz tuk roun' thoo de swamp ter look fer de scent, dey broke loose en made fer dat tree ag'in. It wuz de beat-enis' thing de w'ite folks eber hearn of (48)

It becomes clear that the swamp assumes great significance in Sandy's disappearance and at several levels becomes synonymous with emancipation for the African American slaves in antebellum America. Julius has thorough knowledge about not only the plantation but the forests and the swamps. He sets store by them, because they offered him a hope of liberation in the days of slavery. Besides, their unpruned luxuriance offers him different ways to earn money, as we see in "The Goopher'd Grapevine" and in "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt". John or the white Americans do not care for the untamed wilderness until they offer a prospect of handsome financial returns.

Even after the enormous pine tree is felled with lots of difficulty, it seems to resist being hauled and then sawed. Through this episode Chesnutt poignantly represents the African American spirit of fighting for survival, from the clutches of dehumanization as well as the extermination of nature. The tree's "sweekin', en moanin', and groanin'" sounds represent its outrage at the unjust suffering of slaves as well as nature at the hands of Euro-American civilisation.

THE GRAY WOLF'S HA'NT: A SHORT SUMMARY

At the beginning of this story, we find Julius narrating John a tale through which he tries to discourage John from clearing up a forested tract of land for cultivation. On this occasion he narrates the story of Uncle Jube, a conjure man who was intent on avenging a slave called Dan, for having apparently murdered Jube's son, who had for tried to steal Dan's wife. On learning Jube's motive, Dan seeks protection from the conjure woman Aunt Peggy. However, the wily Uncle Jube deludes Dan, pretending that he is oblivious of Dan's role in the murder of his son and offers Dan to help him in finding the witch responsible for this misfortune. Dan is unaware that Uncle Jube has already kidnapped his wife and transformed her to a black cat. Later he turns the gullible Dan into a grey wolf. Purposefully, he tells Dan (now a wolf) that the black cat is indeed the witch. The wolf hunts and kills the black cat, only to realise too late that it was his wife. Jube's plan is evident to him now. He finds Jube, attacks and fatally wounds him. With his dying breath Jube gives him a potion, stating that drinking it would turn him back into human form. Actually, the sly Jube had given him the potion that would keep him wolf forever. In this way Jube can take his ultimate revenge on Dan, who remains a wolf that haunts the grave of his deceased human wife, for the rest of his days. With this story, Julius McAdoo advises John that the aforementioned piece of land is cursed and should better be left to itself. Later on, John finds out that Julius had been harnessing the bees at this location as a side-business for himself.

Analysis of "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt": Julius' plea to John who is intent on clearing and developing a certain tract of the forest, is the cry of the conservationist. From a historical standpoint, this was the period when huge tracts of forest land in the South were cleared by timber companies and speculators for meagre sums of money. The Reformation had given freedmen the hope that these lands would be theirs someday (Cowdrey 111-12). When John asks for Julius' opinion on "the cost to have that neck of woods down by the swamp cleared up" (165), his statement becomes an example of situation irony. John would calculate the value of land on the basis of its size and the natural resources available, whereas Julius would measure its value in very different terms. Therefore he tells John that from a strictly monetary consideration, clearing the said piece of land would not cost much, but it was not advisable to do it. Displaying his "peculiar personal attitude" towards the natural resources that come under John's proprietorship,

"Julius attempts to preserve an entire ecosystem, one that has provided material and spiritual sustenance for him and his community throughout their history. It is a plea for the conservation of forest and wildlife staked out in terms similar to an indigenous people's right to their ancestral land in the face of exploitation by the rampant industrial capitalism." (Myers 16)

John is oblivious and sceptical of Julius' motives and comes to believe that Julius was protecting his "monopoly" over the honey tree that lay within that specific part of the forest. The most environmentally far-reaching of the tales, then, "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt" tells the story of the slave Dan, who had hidden his "life charm" under a live-oak tree in the forest (174). But uncle Jube tricks him into assuming the form of a gray wolf and finally taking the life of his beloved wife Mahaly. When he understands that he has been tricked, he kills Jube, but his revenge remains partial and not complete because even with his dying breath the scheming Jube tricks Dan to consume the potion that would keep him as a grey wolf forever. It may be noted that in American folklore, the grey wolf is perhaps the single most despised animal, which also made it the most hunted animal in the second half of the nineteenth century, leading to its virtual extinction. Thus, conjure which was seen as a practice with subversive potential in the service of African American liberation in the days of antebellum slavery, could also be utilised to jeopardise the already vulnerable position of the slaves. Nature which can provide a refuge (as in the form of a pine tree in 'Po' Sandy') can also lead to deadly consequences (as in the form of the dreaded grey wolf in 'The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt').

CONCLUSION

From the strictly utilitarian viewpoint, the post-Reformation South with its plentiful supply of cheap labour force consisting of freed slaves and cheap, natural resource-laden lands presented a golden opportunity to northern investors like John who pounced on it, without realising that they were basically doing the same thing that plantation owners had done in the antebellum days, with the nominal replacement of slaves with labourers. As slaves, Julius and his compatriots were exploited by the plantation owners. Now, John and similar others would place them under virtually the same scenario.

Conjure was associated with subversion and the hope of liberation. Slaves depended on the power of conjure to salvage what they could for themselves, from the oppression unleashed by the masters. The practice of conjure embodied the spirituality associated with nature, harnessing the sacred and the liberatory aspects associated with nature. In this collection of short stories, Chesnutt poses an indirect challenge to the white masters who upheld the 'plantation tradition' in American literature. Julius' tales depicting the power of conjure are utilised to try and protect nature and natural resources, thus ensuring harmony in nature and human society.

Civil rights associations and environmental activists in recent years have worked on the recurring theme of environmental justice, underlining the pivotal role that socio-economic factors play in environmental degradation and social inequity. Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* illustrates how white hegemony and ecological plunder in the post-Reformation South deny the marginalised a sustainable future by depriving them of their identity and plundering nature for their short-lived benefits. The stories of Julius poignantly show that the way forward requires thorough understanding, empathy and the spirit of co-existence. Though written in the late 19th century, these stories echo issues that are current even in the 21st century.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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