

Religion and Rebellion in Marlon James' 'John Crow's Devil'

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John Crow's Devil is a religious fiction. "one of my characters is both a church sister and an obeah woman, because she really doesn't see the difference" (Annie Paul 2006), James says of Lucinda, exemplifying his interest in the way religion may morph into mysticism when rational thought is absent. Since the 18th century, when Edward Long first highlighted the Obeah man's (religious leader's) role in the 1760 Tacky Rebellion (Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gerbert 31), religious tensions have been a source of strife in Jamaica. Both Bedwardism (a Caribbean hybrid religion that mixes Christian and African traditions) and Obeah (a spirit religion with African roots) are described in this article, along with other important theological and political backdrops for the characters in *John Crow's Devil*.

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Religion has an effect on the subject's social and psychological lives and is often used as a means of physical control. This sense of religious identity in Jamaica is not singular but rather plural, with Obeah serving as the "low" alternative to Christianity. One side represents Christian monotheism, exclusive, guarded by a jealous God who opposes the worship of the golden calf and other idols, as explained by former Jamaican prime minister Edward Seaga (1969), who is interested in regional religious anthropology. On the other hand, African Polytheism is all-inclusive and can include the Christian Trinity, Angels and Saints, Prophets and Apostles, but it also incorporates spirits, such as those of the Ancestral dead and the demonic host. (4)

One manifestation of this diversity is the rise of Bedwardism. Bedwardism, which emerged in the early twentieth century as a continuation of the Baptist Afro-Christian Great Revival (Seaga 4), dominated Jamaican religion for about three decades (A. Bakan 95). Alexander Bedward's speech emphasized the political nature of the movement despite its religious veneer:

"Brethren! If you don't stand up and defeat the white man, you'll be in a position of hell. "Now is the time!" (Bakan 1995).

Bedward's hubris led him to assume he was the second coming of Christ. He was accused of inciting a riot after calling for the destruction of "the white wall" (Bakan 96; Nathaniel Samuel Murrell 285). The lines between faith, crime, and insanity were blurred when Bedward was sent to Kingston Asylum. When Apostle York claims to be the Messiah of Gibbeah, he meets the same fate:

"You see God? An imaginary deity. Some sort of tier. In other words, a method. I used the same method and eventually reached Godhood" (JCD 199).

Like the chorus of Gibbeah's villagers who recognize that "Christianity is not no play-play religion" (JCD 87), Bedward's followers were drawn to his message of redemption (Bakan 95). Because it provided "mystical solutions [...] as a means of dealing with material problems," it was popular among black Jamaicans from the working class (Bakan 96). The illiteracy of the Gibbeah peasants reflects their social status; for instance, they think Mammon is a fish (because they confuse it with the rhyming term salmon) (JCD 110).

Although *John Crow's Devil* is set roughly thirty years after Bedwardism's peak, its themes of connections between the black working class, politics, and religion continue far beyond Bedward's death. The real-life civil rights leader Marcus Garvey (from whom the fictional Aloysius Garvey takes his

name) mobilized the African diaspora with religious rhetoric. Prayer gatherings were a regular element of his Universal Negro Improvement Agency, earning him the nickname "Black Moses" from his devotees. However, he was another false messiah like Bedward, whose "fall [...] came as quickly as the rise" (Adam Ewing 17) due to accusations of fraud.

The leaders of Jamaica's working class continue to appeal to religious sentiments in their speeches. At a time when many would-be political leaders proclaimed themselves to be Jamaica's savior—the late 1950s—James's novel's setting provides the ideal social context for a self-proclaimed Messiah, like Apostle York, to appear and lead marginalized minorities like Lucinda, who lives "outside the Gibbeah plan [...] but still within the boundary of the river" (JCD 125).

There are many striking parallels between fictional pasts and the present. With phrases like "Jesus died for us," the Jamaican working class continues to deify politicians and crime lords equally. (Harrison 14)

We will die for Dudus. The threat arises from the potential for patriarchal heteronormative control of the body when the line between politics and religion becomes blurred. Political leaders in the modern Caribbean use religious sexual discourse to divert attention away from more pressing issues, such as poverty and corruption. (Rosamond S. King 8).

She quotes Jacqui Alexander as saying,

Women's sexual agency and erotic autonomy have always been troublesome for the state. They threaten the myth that the nuclear heterosexual family is the bedrock of society, which is a central tenet of the dominant ideology (King, 9).

Because "the individual's desire is seen as threatening — or supporting — the coherence and strength of Caribbean society," (King 19) it is necessary to exert control over individuals who pose a danger to the established social and political order.

Apostle York administers the punishment for sexual sin in Gibbeah. For their adultery, Clarence and Mrs. Johnson are publicly flogged. The New Revised Standard Version of Exodus 20:1-17 states explicitly:

"You shall not commit adultery" and "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife." The villagers have a sense of mercy, despite the severity of the sin they have committed; "but then the Apostle remind [them] concerning Bible chapter Mark where the devils beseech the Son of God, and if the Son of God did heed to all this begging, plenty people would be in hell right now. The ones "who go back on their word" (JCD 105).

The Apostle's physical decline, moral decay, and homosexuality are all overshadowed by this sham trial.

"Gibbeah would rather have my lies than your truth," he says to the Rum Preacher. What gives, Bligh, that they readily follow me? So rapidly, without a doubt? I offer people what they need in a way that God can't (JCD 199, 200).

The Apostle's early trauma warps his understanding of Faith:

God is real, Jehovah is a fantasy. The concept of Jehovah was created to provide an explanation for evil deeds. [...] The act of sucking my fictional uncle's cock serves no purpose, teaches me nothing, and does no good. Only his cock and I are left. (JCD 200-201)

York's syphilis-infected mind constructs a new religion by splitting God and Jehovah, and uses it to get revenge on the people that ignored his misery. James uses this example to highlight the dangers of allowing religious authority over one's physical being to go unchecked.

Lucinda is an independent and confident sexual being. For her, being subject to religious authority over her body was a thrilling sensation of transgression and sexuality.

If ten lashes didn't work, then twenty would. She increased her lashout. She would be made whole again by her scars. Lucinda jammed a sponge down her throat and doused her back in iodine so her cuts could scream. God was not happy, but he eventually would be. She was confident in her selfless act of sacrifice. Lucinda was supposed to be Christ's bride, but she lost her ring finger in a tangle of pubic hair. That dang Apostle did it. Together, the red tip of his circumcision and his daring red textbooks make quite the statement. (JCD 112)

Lucinda takes control of her own physical abuse in this scenario. James makes an analogy between masturbation and self-flagellation. As a result, religion's legitimacy is called into question. As if that weren't enough, the mystical tomes in the Apostle's holy library share a color with the tip of his penis, further emphasizing the fact that the ring finger, which should symbolize Lucinda's rank within the Church, is instead utilized for an autoerotic purpose. According to Stallybrass and White (16), satire would be meaningless without its serious complement. Therefore, the blatant heresy of the scene serves to emphasize its hideous mockery. Since Lucinda does not meet the religious requirements of being a wife or mother, her sexuality does not appease the sex expectations of her community. Her autonomous seduction of Mr. Greenfield and sexual attack on the unconscious Apostle York stands out as transgressions in the midst of a spiritually strict society, but her sexual autonomy and promiscuity stand out even more.

In the Caribbean, women who choose to be single or sexually autonomous are "defined as lasciviously deviant — 'good women' were constructed as sexual for procreative purposes and as sexual servants to men" (King 126). Similarly, "female sexual containment through compulsory heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood" (King 126) is a central tenet of local nationalism, which also places a heavy emphasis on women's sexuality. Lucinda contradicts this notion; she is a "outgrowing all limits, obscenely decentred and off-balance" (Stallybrass and White 9) "mobile and hybrid creature." Therefore, she should be penalized for defying simplistic social and political classifications.

Because of her numerous misdeeds, Lucinda's mother "had beaten her in two before she was thirteen," as the proverb goes. "Day Lucinda and Night Lucinda," she dubbed the two halves. Eventually, the lady unravelled, and Lucinda had to decide whether to divide in half to appease her mother or risk being flogged. (JCD 57).

Lucinda is able to handle her environment and acquire influence by splitting herself into two distinct personas:

"Day Lucinda," who emerges when her mother is in a religious mood and talks about Sunday school and the friends she never had. For mingling with the shadows, there was Night Lucinda. [...] Lucinda was able to carry both of her identities into adulthood and use them to her advantage. (JCD 57-8)

Day Lucinda, with her "white gloves and skirts below the knee," "stiff lips," and "Bible verse," and Night Lucinda, with her "goat blood on black skin," and "an orgy of one with a green banana as her incubus," emphasize the magical realist idea that this spiritual division is also corporeal (JCD 58).

Day and Night Lucinda represent Lucinda's efforts to undermine her abuser and re-establish herself, with Obeah serving as the vehicle for this subversion. Because of its association with crime and revolt, Obeah is still prohibited in Jamaica. According to Diana Paton, the Undesirable Publications Act of 1940 was revised in 1972, but books about Obeah remained on bookstore shelves.

[...] the illegality of Obeah continued to accomplish considerable work even at the height of cultural nationalism represented by his [Michael Manley's] regime. It distinguished between celebratory folklore and the disapproved remnants of the past (852-3).

Simply put, Obeah aids the Jamaican government in enforcing the line between the high and low. The primary goal of the law prohibiting Obeah in the eighteenth century was to "monitor space and people in order to be able to track and thus prevent insurrectionary activity" (Paton 71).

In Obeah magic, what happens in one place is reflected in another (Olmos & Paravisini-Gerbert, pp. 13–14). Stallybrass and White (1986) argue that "the human body, psychic forms, geographical space, and the social formation" are all interconnected through a "complex cultural process" (2). For Obeah, "like produces like and an effect resembles its cause" (Olmos & Paravisini-Gerbert, 13–14). The night "welcomed Lucinda back" after Mr. Greenfield chooses Mary over her, the loser. She burned the skins of lizards, the bones of cats, and the paw of a dog that her mother had preserved in vinegar. Stillbirths, distrust, and jealousy "killed" Mary and John Greenfield's marriage long before John's death (JCD 130). The coincidence of these two occurrences strengthens the argument that Lucinda poisons the Greenfields' marriage. She performs a form of imitative magic involving the use of fetid, unclean animal bodies to render Mary infertile.

Since "God created humankind in his image" (Genesis 1:27), Christians respect personal cleanliness. As a result, most of what Christians teach has to do with having children and staying clean. Lucinda's daytime position within this belief system is at odds with her night-time character, which manifests itself through magic and the seduction of Mr. Greenfield. Similar to Christian beliefs, Obeah doctrines frequently refer to the physical self.

When Lucinda's mother drank a potion, "as the vapor vanished, so did she" (JCD 127), she became invisible. "as she released her buttocks to his coarse hand," Lucinda says of her sex with Mr. Greenfield, "a feeling came over her that in the past had only come from spirits" (JCD 130). Sexual desire and religious observance are intrinsically linked. According to Stallybrass and White (1986), "the intensifying grid of the body effects events occurring on different levels and sectors of social and psychic reality" (26). Lucinda experiences a bodily high from the momentary reversal of social rank signalled by the successful seduction.

Nanny, "the most celebrated woman from the era of slavery in Jamaica," (Jenny Sharpe xvi) symbolizes the relationship between the buttocks and Obeah spirituality and the spirit of revolt. The historical Nanny, the powerful female leader of the Maroons, is said to have used her bottom to deflect the bullets of British soldiers, according to Carolyn Cooper (1993 p. 11). Cooper argues that this "vulgar" image of the bottom as a site of anti-colonialist resistance is most dramatically realized in the assertion that Nanny used her bottom to deflect the bullets of British soldiers in Jamaican folklore. Bottom so represents the lowly 'others' revolt against the imperial master in Jamaica.

Like Lucinda, Nanny was an Obeah lady and a commander of the Maroon insurgents and a national heroine of Jamaica. Legends about her miraculous bottom and her capacity to defeat British soldiers in "Nanny's pot," a confluence of two rivers that, through the power of oral tradition, has become her boiling cauldron, have contributed to her religious mystique and hence to her notoriety (Sharpe 16). Nanny, although being a woman, assumed a position of leadership in her neighbourhood. According to Honor Ford Smith, submitting women was never a part of the Afro-Caribbean culture. As Christian missionaries "insisted that drums and dancing were to be outlawed, that an end to "concubinage" and that virginity and marriage be enforced" (Sharpe 13), "the image of woman as warrior/priestess as epitomized by Nanny was converted to the domesticated Nanny." As a result, the physical autonomy of AfroCaribbean women was diminished as a result of Obeah's conversion to Christianity.

This is hardly the only way in which the spread of evangelical Christianity in the Caribbean posed a threat to black autonomy. The name Obeah eventually came to signify laggardliness. To be accepted into their new churches, believers "had to formally renounce their old ways" (Olmos and Parsvisini Gerbert 31). Lucinda's embarrassment after Apostle York learns of her Obeah views is understandable in light of this. She is "convicted and blessed in one fell swoop" as he asks, "Don't those knees ache from kneeling, waiting on God?" and "Didn't He see you mixing tea till He came?" (JCD 22). As Stallybrass and White put it, "a political imperative to reject and eliminate the debasing 'low' [conflicts]

powerfully and unpredictably with this desire for the Other" (4-5), which is why people feel "repugnance and fascination" at the same time when they encounter the "Other."

As a result, Christians and Obeah followers experience changes to their physical, social, and mental environments. In *John Crow's Devil*, the figure of Lucinda plays out this transgressive conflict between extremes of lofty Christianity and low Obeah through her separation into Day Lucinda, a Church sister, and Night Lucinda, an Obeah woman. As a poor black woman living on the fringes of society, Lucinda's body and the agency inherent in her sexual independence represent the importance of both religions in her life. Marlon James's incorporation of Christian and Afro-Caribbean symbolism into his novel thus reflects the creolization found in Jamaican religious practice.

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