



## READING DANTICAT'S *BREATH, EYES, MEMORY* AS A RELIGIOUS NOVEL

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### Abstract

The narrativization of oppression in Edwidge Danticat's literary world, here, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), has sought to envision religion not only as a tool for conversation between God and man but also as an instrument in the fight against both stronger external and internal forces. Sophie Caco's closeness to the Holy Virgin through her daily rosary prayers is one side of the Haitian people's search for God's protection. As obeah practices were part of their cultural heritage, the defeated could not but resort to them for faster survival. Not to get dehumanised or killed, witches discreetly committed to defeating the evil domineering instinct of the Duvalier regime. In the history of the Caribbean archipelagos, such a mysterious resistance was widespread in folks' daily lives. Even equipped with the overt Christian religion, the West Indians brought along hidden mysterious practices. As a result, they could thwart adversity from both Christianity and Obeah. The latter ended up in syncretism as hostility

permeated the island. Female characters and their stories in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* exist, and these women are naturally related to the supernatural world. A close reading of these religious

moments helps understand to what extent a syncretic religious tradition provides hope, comfort, and release for Danticat's female characters.

## Keywords

Oppression - Religion – Christian – Obeah – syncretism – Resistance

## 1- Introduction

This article is an opportunity to make the argument that religion, alongside other forms of resistance, has played an important role in the battle against oppression in Haiti<sup>1</sup> and the Caribbean archipelagos. The Spanish colonization of Haïti affected every aspect of the slave's life, including the organisation of its religious institutions. This article on Danticat refers to religious practices in some characters' daily lives. How could it be otherwise if they were the prey to countless oppressive and dehumanizing factors? The problem of the dehumanization of the Caribbean mirrors the question of how the oppressed overcame their ordeals from a religious perspective. These victimized people went to their new land from Africa and Asia carrying their beliefs and mystical practices. The Haitian plantation system, ecologically different from the West African milieu, brought about the emergence of various forms of syncretic Vodou cult. An overview of the historical arrival of the Western religion is fundamental. This article will first look at Christianity, and then analyze obeah before digging into the syncretic practices that aboriginal people used for solace against adversity.

## 2- Christianity

The Christian religion in the Caribbean archipelago was an imported faith that Europeans imposed on the slaves in 1492. The Spanish brought along Roman Catholic Christianity, and later on, the Church of England arrived in 1620. Faith was expanded years later with the evangelicals<sup>2</sup> and non-conformist Christians<sup>3</sup> from the mid-eighteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup> *Breath, Eyes, Memory* has its space settings in Haiti and America. The independence of Saint-Domingue was proclaimed under the native name 'Haïti' by Jean-Jacques Dessalines on 1 January 1804.

<sup>2</sup> Of or belonging to a Christian group that emphasizes the authority of the Bible and the importance of people being saved through faith.

<sup>3</sup> (In England and Wales) a member of a Protestant Church that does not follow the beliefs and practices of the Church of England.

The post-emancipation era of 1833 coincided with the emergence of black Christian groups and African religions. This is the reason why anthropologists talk about “*religion on the move*”.

Religion features high in *Breath, Eyes, and Memory* (1994) as religious faith alludes to a revealed religion such as Christianity. The Christian religion is known as being capable of providing some form of succour. Lots of stories were told of faith and encouragement gained with recourse to this religion. The catholic tilegliz<sup>4</sup> movements set up solidarity groups that shared the same convictions based on the same creed to face adversity in times of struggle. This tilegliz was also a structured organization that could mobilize the masses for protest or social upheaval. Such an attitude of contentment is another way of survival as elucidated in Beverly Bell’s book, *Walking on Fire* (2001). Religion as a weapon against oppression features high:

Yolande Mevs<sup>5</sup> exhales loudly and picks the edges of her wide polyester skirt off the ant-ridden ground. She states “*The Eternal has shown me how to resist. God gives me strength and courage.*” *Often despite tremendous misery, the Haitian women here have managed to sustain themselves through spiritual faith. The relationship between religion and resistance is integral to these istwa and to Haitian history and culture*” (Bell 2001: 30). Religion provides oppressed people with grace as Roselie Jean-Juste also in Beverly Bell’s *Walking on Fire* (2001) testifies. She more often than not pins her faith on God as she is victimized by her husband. She religiously testifies “*I like to go to church and he never could stop me even though that always bothered him. Prayer has helped me. Sometimes I run into a priest or a nun who talks to me and encourages me. I have a lot of courage that I get from God. That's God's grace. Alone I couldn't go on*” (Bell 2001: 53).

As acknowledged by Christians, God is a shelter against oppression, and such has been recognized by Roselie. Jean Claude Duvalier’s aggravation of poverty fostered civil turmoil and belief in Christianity as a means of resistance “the tilegliz, the liberation theology-inspired “little church” or church of the poor. The mobilization of Christians who believed that justice is God's will galvanized the population into action. Among the clergy and laity, women were more central and vociferous than ever before” (Bell 2001: 11). As a matter of fact, the Christian God has always been a shield for mankind as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, especially *King James Version of the Holy Bible* (2011). In Genesis, it is said: “*And the Lord God planted a garden eastern in Eden and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground*

<sup>4</sup>Literally, the little church; liberation theology-based church of the poor or Christian base community

<sup>5</sup> A Haitian woman who testifies about her own ordeals and resistance strategy for survival

made the Lord God to grow every tree, (...). The tree of life also amid the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2: 8-9).<sup>75</sup>

Oppression causes Caribbean believers to long for the Edenic garden where everything was bestowed to Adam and Eve. For example, trees and every pleasant food were free and no torture existed. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie’s testing by her mother, Martine, induces her to pray “the words of the Virgin Mother’s Prayer: Hail Mary...so full of grace. The Lord is with you (...) you are blessed among women... Holy Mary Mother of God Pray for us poor sinners” (Danticat 1994: 84). Christianity is protection in times of ordeal; so, Sophie<sup>6</sup> recites the prayer to the Holy Virgin, mother of Jesus as suggested by the missionaries who educated and christened Caribbean folks. She seeks refuge in the hands of the Holy Virgin as was recommended by Lord Jesus who asked his followers to pray in order not to succumb to temptation. Martine’s daughter can cry out “Hear o Lord when I cry with my voice: have mercy also upon me, and answer me. When thou saidst, seek my face; my heart unto thee, thy face, Lord, will I seek. Hide not thy face far from me; put not thy servant away in anger: (....) neither forsake me, o God of my salvation” (Psalm 27: 7-9).

Faithfulness to Godly matters provides solace to Sophie who stands as a metaphor for the many oppressed folks under the Duvalier regime and beyond. Yet, the West Indians cannot help blending faiths against God’s warning as revealed in the book of the Israelis’ Exodus “Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exodus 20: 1-5). Sophie Caco could have voiced like the psalmist this Christian prayer “save me, o God, by thy name, and judge me by thy strength. Hear my prayer, o God; give ear to the words of my mouth. For strangers are risen against me and oppressors seek after my soul: they have not set God before them. Selah. Behold God is my helper” (Psalm 54: 1-7). As a Christian character of Danticat, she is oppressed by the European colonial powers who were supposed to come second.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the latter come first and are rather served than serving, making the Caribbean bear the brunt of their cohabitation in the archipelago. She occupies a bottom ranking so far that strangers seek to appropriate their body and soul through hard treatment. This above prayer can protect the subaltern from the invader stranger embodied by the Western invaders.

<sup>6</sup> The main female protagonist Edwidge Danticat’s novel BREATH, EYES, MEMORY

<sup>7</sup>As second class citizens and in terms of economic position in the Caribbean archipelagos.

Kept in bondage, the West Indians as God believers can entreat “*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage*” (Galatians 5: 1). Bondage has long bogged the Caribbean in ghastly ordeals which

can be eliminated with faithful prayers to God and Jesus as aforementioned. Saint Paul’s letter to the Galatians is an encouragement for people to seek refuge in prayers in times of adversity and tribulation. In the book of Genesis, it is said that “*the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul*” (Genesis 2:7). Without God’s gift of his breath, man would not have come to life. So, man’s life, including that of women owes its foundation to God. How can human beings, therefore, do without God? The Holy Rosary of the Holy Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus strengthens the believer who spins his faith in her strong intercession. Whenever she asks her only son to do miracles, the latter immediately or belatedly acts to the prayer’s satisfaction.

People from Guinea<sup>8</sup>, a West African country are alluded to in Danticat’s 1994’s novel. These people have been chosen to carry the sky on their heads because they are strong, tall, and mighty people. Sophie must have originated from Guinea through her ancestry and as such, she has to regard herself as someone who will face trouble. Tante Atie testifies for the female protagonist, Sophie, to keep memory “*She told me about a group of people in Guinea who carry the sky on heads. They are the people of creation. They are the strong, tall, and mighty people who can bear anything*” (Danticat 1994: 25). Yet God’s benevolence does not prevent them from seeking further protection from Obeah or Vodou mysterious practices.

### 3- Obeah

It corresponds to various Caribbean supernatural practices such as “*Obeye*” in Africa, “*Shango*” in Trinidad, “*Santeria*” in Cuba, “*Vodun or Vodoo*” in Haiti, “*Ju-Ju*” in the Bahamas, and “*Obeah*” in Jamaica. It stands to reason that Caribbean slaves and their descendants resorted to these practices for good or evil. For example, they would use them as cures as well as poison. The latter use was destined to slave masters, their enemies, and even, colonial powers as a means of resistance. Gaspar characterizes the graveyard as a site of resistance in the West Indies. According to Sense, obeah dirt taken from the graves of the other deceased slaves was used in the ritual concoctions. In addition, many induction ceremonies took place at cemeteries and were a way for the rebels to have assistance and gain approval

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<sup>8</sup>Here Guinea may mean the West African country or the afterlife.

from the ancestral spirits. In the course of Antigua's 1736 rebellion, the slaves gathered in the graveyard to take their oath of war. The Caribbean slave garden was a resistance sign in that slaves could grow any poisonous plant they wanted as a form of resistance.

In *Caribbean Discourse* (1989), the Martinican novelist and philosopher Edouard Glissant explains that given the “*loss of collective memory*” and “*the careful erasing of the past*” aftermaths of Caribbean history “*without witnesses*” of slavery, it is important that members of ex-slave societies should resort to “*opacity*” and to “*a resistance to scrutiny.*” He further describes how this Caribbean inclination for obscurity can only be understood in terms of the Western tradition of transparency and facticity. The discrepancy between the Western literary canons of modernism and the third-world post-modernist writing commands the urgency for the African Caribbean and the third world's literary significance. Carine M. Mardorossian's article “*Opacity as Obeah in Jean Rhys's Work*” precautiously resorts to Jameson's essay “*Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.*” Frederic Jameson denounces literary criticism's tendency to judge non-Western cultures by European aesthetic and moral standards. He argues that while these criteria are claimed to be “*universal,*” they fail to do justice to the alterity of non-Western<sup>9</sup>. Literary universalism may mislead critics. So, the reversal is valid as well.

Matthew Gregory Lewis testifies that there are countless qualities in the Negro character, their default relates to Obeah and their propensity to poison to the right hand and the left. One of the deadliest potions used by Negroes is prepared with the root of cassava. Its juice is fermented; a small worm comes out of that. Finally, a substance is drawn from that worm to poison the stomach in a most pernicious way. The thumbnails are used to hide small portions of that worm; then, the Obeah practitioner contrived to persuade his intended victim to eat or drink with him. And then, he takes an opportunity, while handing him a dish or a cup, to let the worm fall, which never fails to destroy the person who swallows it. Another means of destruction is found in almost every Negro garden across the island. The cultivation of the arsenic bean, neither useful for food nor ornamental in its appearance serves for the destruction of the white slave owner or the foe. Is Obeah, not a resistance practice?

It is very clear after reading Gregory's testimony that secrets of how to thwart adversity by killing the slave masters or any other participants in the slave economy were no mystery. Gardening was essential for obeah practices because, in the name of ecological passion, slaves could decide to cause death as a means of resistance in Antigua and all over the Caribbean

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<sup>9</sup>Jameson opposes Western Literary canon to Non-Western literary techniques. Danticat and Kincaid posit themselves in the Third World canon that of postmodernism.

archipelagoes including Haiti as a means of reprisal. Obeah, therefore, is multifaceted, because it can not only protect its user as a miraculous remedy but also vanquish adversity. Religion is a source of resistance, and Haitians and the African Caribbean at large have used it in times of despair. The Christian religion and the traditional ones were adopted by newly colonized nations. And yet, traditional beliefs were persistent, and in Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), Sophie states that "as a child, the mother I imagined for myself was like Erzulie, the lavish Virgin Mother" (Danticat 1994: 59).

While Sophie has her mother to hold on to, in Brooklyn, America, she prefers Erzulie she dreamt of as a mother in her early childhood. This godliness served the defeated tremendously, even though they kept invoking their traditional gods and goddesses. For example, Vodou practices were very common with Caribbean people. What about Erzulie, their god? Misery did not prevent Haitian people from straightening up their heads in defiance of the enemy or circumstances. The horrific (hi)stories that happened in Haiti could not destroy the victims as they would have, had religion not taken root in people's hearts. Beverly Bell in her book, *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance*, clarifies: "The relationship between religion and resistance is integral to this istwa and Haitian history and culture. As for Vodou, Haitian's predominant religion that it still exists is in itself an act of rebellion" (Bell 2001:30). This is a stark testimony to the seminal place religion occupied and has occupied so far in the struggles of Haitians.

The practitioners of the superstitious African religion were either punished or killed. All the same, the obscurantist practice survived as a way to thwart oppression. Indeed, Vodou has become a widespread practice that is understood to be a form of protest and rebellion not only against the white man's imperialistic invasion but also against the dictatorial authorities:

For instance, the story of the slave revolution began with a ceremony in the dark woods at Bois Caiman. In another example, the istwa Erzulie Danthor has been invoked by Vodouizan throughout Haiti's history to rid the country of abusive leaders. After the 1991 coup, for instance, pictures of Erzulie appeared on battered wooden doorways throughout the country to hasten the downfall of the regime (Bell 2001: 30).

Subtle resistance has not always been overt in all-out war. So the colonial powers and before them, the slave masters were very uncomfortable with these forms of worship and belief. As aforementioned, they more often than not especially French slave masters resorted to murder to silence the Vodou practitioners. Obeah was used both, to vanquish the Western invaders and poison, internal enemies. The Obeah man or woman was feared by both: the natives and the conquerors as he or she was capable of good and evil. Public opinion believed them to be able

to resuscitate the dead. Although African slaves usually resorted to obeah for “evil” or rather self-interested, instrumental purposes, this belief helped them as a source of strength and clandestine resistance. That practice is the belief that certain spirits or supernatural agents can be used advantageously to harm the living or to protect them against evil. Regardless of its use, for “evil” or “good”, the Obeah men were treated with the highest respect and were likewise, feared by community members and colonial powers. The Obeah men and women played a key role in the Caribbean slave societies right at the beginning of the slave trade.

They were regarded as community leaders and teachers of the African folk’s cultural heritage. The obeah man was generally believed to hold within his mystical miracles the ability to render a person invincible, resuscitate the dead, cure any disease, protect a man from the aftermath of his crimes, and cause great harm to anyone he wanted. Yet the Obeah man’s most powerful gift, as aforementioned, was not only his ability to steal people’s shadows but also his intricate knowledge of herbs and poisons. The term obeah also suggested the word “poison” in the Caribbean understanding, this being the favourite and most effective tool that this practitioner of “magic” had at his disposal. Through herbal mixtures and recipes, the latter was able to mysteriously save lives or cause death. This brought about harsh competition between Whiteman’s medicine and the Obeah practitioner. The latter, all things considered, got the upper hand as obeah was stronger than modern medical practices from Europe.

Obeah was not only used as a power provider through its association with the supernatural but also with political power as well, specifically slave rebellions and the other forms of resistance in the Caribbean. It was the obeah practitioner’s duty to be an inspirational leader who could bewitch his people. For Instance, his countless followers or thousands could partake in resistance and rebellions. Because of their inclination to inflict misfortune, obeah practitioners were blamed for every mishap that befell a plantation or individual. So, how did they manage to convince thousands of followers? History has it that so many fighters or obedient followers were lured into believing that any membership to an obeah man’s army would grant them invincibility to mankind. Adhesion to an obeah practitioner’s resistance group was a guarantee against the white man’s weapon. They were also lured into membership as they believed firmly that any vanquished or killed resistant could be resuscitated at the Obeah man’s miraculous will. It was obeah men’s responsibility to see to the conception and enactment of any serious attempt at rebellion. The obeah man, through ideological discourse, could successfully start an overt rebellion. Under the disguise of religious affairs gatherings, the Obeah leaders and their followers could plan their revolts.

This enabled him to perpetuate the traditional African culture which resisted colonial rule and the Creole (Caribbean-born) slaves. Remarkably, the most paramount resistance effort



the Obeah man brought to the resistance of the slave system was his concrete participation in the enactment of the insurrectionists for rebellion. African rebels were made to take an oath of faithfulness to the combatants and the secrecy of the tactics and fighting principles. Any betrayal could cause the traitor a slow and bestial death. A white Jamaican planter, Edward Long reckons that the oaths were very demanding. Obeah practitioners are their chief oracles in all serious affairs, whether of peace, war or the pursuit of revenge. When gathering for conspiracy, the priest, after various mysterious ceremonies, picks up a little blood from every member present; this is mixed in a vessel with gunpowder and grave dirt; the fetish or oath follows its protocol.

Such sacrificial rituals do not exist in Christianity because Christ has made the holiest blood sacrifice for the liberation of mankind. This liberation is both from Satan and eternal death. On the other hand, Jesus suggests a life of love and brotherhood as Caribbean folks would have yearned for. In *“Hebrew”* it is said prayingly *“let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain the strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them, and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body”* (Hebrew 13: 1-3). Strangers’ presence in the Caribbean archipelago poses the problematic issue of the oppressed advisable attitude. Dialectically<sup>10</sup>, the concept is complex because strangers can be white men; on the other side, the term can designate any human subaltern.

So, they solemnly pledge themselves to inviolable secrecy, fidelity to their chiefs, and to wage unceasing war against their enemies. As proof of their sincerity, each combatant takes a cup of the mixture, and this rite ends thus. Hardly anyone has been known to have flouted this oath or to have abandoned his engagement halfway in the process of execution of reprisal. Protection against the white man’s dangerous weapons could also be shared among the followers by the obeah specialist through a miraculous powder the latter had invented. Long describes the arrest of an Obeah priest who was suspected of having practised the Obeah protection rituals to many followers. A white Jamaican planter testifies that in St. Mary’s parish, a random control was conducted at one estate, and a much respected religious man among his countrymen was captured. He was an old Koromantin, who specializes in using a miraculous powder as a bulletproof against the white man’s weapons. In addition, he granted his herd that such bullets could be captured to be launched back at their foes for an irresistible decimation. This so-called mysterious powdery power owned by any slave made lots of plantation owners

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<sup>10</sup>The doubled edged knife dimension of the concept of stranger brinks on the qualities of an angel and the defects of a devil.

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fearful. No wonder therefore if the West Indian folks resort to syncretic invocations to vanquish their foes.

#### 4- Syncretism

Because of the traumatic displacement caused by the forced shipment across the Atlantic Ocean in tightly packed cargo, the victims needed to reignite Obeah. In *The Anti-Slavery Examiner: Emancipation in the West Indies* Jas A. Thome and J. Horace Kimball reveal that in Antigua slaves had houses in which they planted and grew obeah plants and poisonous traps. They also testify that these vanquished sang “Alleluia!” they clapped their hands, leapt up, fell, clasped each other in their free arms, cried, laughed, and went to and fro, (.....) it was the utterings, in broken Negro dialect, of gratitude to God. After this (....) the religious exercises were resumed, and the remainder of the night was occupied in singing (Kimball et al 1837:145).” As a syncretic transcultural religion, obeah consists of sorcery and magic.

In some situations, it used some Christian characteristics. According to West Indian proprietor Matthew Gregory Lewis,<sup>11</sup> a generalized practice was the cultivation of poisonous seeds to kill the white masters. Obeah used special herbs, objects, and concoctions made of gallbladders and livers. Colonial Vodou syncretism was the outcome of the magical and religious acculturation of the slaves, for instance, the process of incorporating certain items, material elements, and theological ideas borrowed from Catholicism and Indian religions into the Vodou practices. Some of these elements were used as parallel magical elements to strengthen the magical and religious power inherent in Vodou. Vodouism relates here to a generic term, encompassing all the Creolised slave cults of French colonial Haiti. It is used in the same manner as is the case with the word ‘Christianity’ to refer to the religion of the congregations of any Christian belief. All sects within the Christian religion have faith in Christ, likewise, different cults of Vodouism believe in Gran-Met (the Supreme Being).

Faced with harsh treatment ever since Anacaona<sup>12</sup> was defeated, West Indians adopted religious syncretism as a shield against the exterior and interior dehumanizer. Disrespect of God’s Holy Scriptures precepts materializes through the making of obeah deities as narrativized in Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994). Religion seeks to foil the pitfalls of oppression that

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<sup>11</sup> JOURNAL OF A WEST INDIA PROPRIETOR, Kept During a Residence in The Island of Jamaica. By Matthew Gregory Lewis Author of “The Monk,” “The Castle Spectre,” “Tales of Wonder,” &c.

<sup>12</sup> The Tainos were an Arawak people, who were the indigenous people of the Caribbean. The Tainos were my people. My name is Anacaona from the Taino language, Anacaona meaning ‘Golden Flower’. Ana meaning flower and Caona meaning golden. I am one of the first woman to lead my tribe. I am a Cacica (chief). We are a gentle culture, happy, friendly, peaceful...

ruthlessly crushes the subaltern<sup>13</sup>. Such disbelief overshadows some West Indians' faith; for example, there seems to be a sort of syncretism in Sophie's religiousness. The reason is that obeah is regarded as a terrible practice with immediate results in some instances.

This religious strangeness is illustrated in chapter sixteen where Sophie depicts her grandmother's room thus *"Her room was crowded with old baskets, dusty crates, and rusting steel drums. On an old dresser was a statue of Erzulie, our goddess of love who doubled for us as the Virgin Mother"* (Danticat 1994: 113). Why the devil do the Caribbean as epitomized by Sophie, blur the authenticity of their faith? Religious syncretism while it enriches the Caribbean cultural heritage may be interpreted as problematic.<sup>14</sup> Can resistance be steely if the faith people build their foundation on is shaky? It is factual that Sophie's grandmother cannot part with her religious ways. The female narrator insists *"My grandmother's face was powdered with ashes as she left the house. Walking past me, she tapped my knee with the tip of her cane. She lowered a black veil over her face as she twirled a rosary between her fingers"* (Danticat 1994: 144).

This testimonial of Sophie is enough to understand that Caribbean people as former slaves have been indoctrinated by the Western slave masters. As a result, Grandmè Ife's religious attitude poses the relationship ship between the blurred identities of the Caribbean folks. Obeah could have been an alternative to Christianity to some extent. Yet, the locals' abdication of their authenticity after the Europeans' invasion made them resort to syncretism. Sophie's struggle to vanquish her sexual trauma made her set up as she says *"My Sexual Phobia Group."* *Breath, Eyes, Memory's* protagonist, Sophie teams up with *"Buki, an Ethiopian college student, who had her clitoris cut and her labia sewn up when she was a girl. Davina, a middle-aged Chicana, had been raped by her grandfather for ten years"* (Danticat 1994: 201). Rena, their therapist labeled the new association a sexual phobia group and aimed at curing the three of them. Resistance to sexual torture and excision is based on Obeah *"Davina had a whole room in her house set aside for our meetings. When we came in, we changed into long white dresses that Buki had sewn for us. (...). As we changed in the front room I showed them the statue of Erzulie that my grandmother had given me"* (Danticat 1994: 201-2).

As appears in this narration, obeah is a means of resistance against patriarchy-generated problems. Erzulie has been brought by Sophie; the three girls have worn white dresses and white headscarves as a symbol of innocence and purity. Oddly enough this therapist group uses esoteric and cabbalistic signs that are too mysterious to understand. The name *"god"* is ambiguously invoked in so far as vodou practices are often mixed with real religious references.

<sup>13</sup>In post-colonial studies this term refers to the invisible colonized folks who are oppressed and exploited

<sup>14</sup> Evangelicals and the Roman Catholic Church have settled in the West Indies, but obeah is very conspicuous.

So, the ultimate goal of the Davina-Buki-Sophie therapy or phobia group is to face psychic<sup>83</sup> torments caused by the sexual torture and excision adults made them suffer from. In this worship, they turn to opaque deities offering them items from African-Caribbean libation to soothe their traumas.

Vodou's Oppressive yoke of bondage started in the Caribbean with their enslavement; then, continued through colonialism and political dictatorship. This may have been due to syncretic faith as God reproached Aaron<sup>15</sup> after the Israelis had him make up a golden calf to worship. Evidence is Sophie's treatment of her therapist who had a room decorated with a "collection of Brazilian paintings and ceremonial African masks on her walls" (Danticat 1994: 206). Cabbalistic ornaments are hung here and there in the therapist's room. Thus, it stands to reason that Sophie is an obeah adept, referring to "my Santeria priestess" in her quest for resistance. All the same, Danticat through the female narrator, Sophie, and her mother, Martine, allude to the mother of Jesus. Martine's fear of having Marc's baby induces her to end her phone conversation with her daughter in these words "Pray to the Virgin Mother for me" (Danticat 1994: 217). Martine is so lost that she is in dire need of intense prayers. Prayers are important for Martine who had been raped so much so that she has a phobia of any maternal affairs.

The process of syncretism has brought a variety of Christian-based indigenous Caribbean religions, the most significant of which is Rastafarianism. In his documented book, *The Role of Religion in Caribbean History*, Patrick Hylton<sup>16</sup> traces the dynamic interplay of these practices as they occurred in the plantations of the Americas. So, oppression ideologies characterized the dominant economic sector, and logically, the resistance of those whose subjugation was indispensable to the ongoing economy. Whatever acts of sorcery and evil practices on the part of the slaves and later on, colonized folks were attributed to obeah by the British. That obscure practice must have originated from the Gold Coast and may have entered the Caribbean archipelagos as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The reason may stem from "the opacity" of obeah which makes Carine M. Mardorossian entitled her study "Opacity as Obeah in Jean Rhys" Work.<sup>17</sup> As such, she does not seem to suggest this Haitian vodou practice to possess miracles that can religiously vanquish the white man. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* zombies are, as the myth goes, deadened bodies that succumbed to Obeah magic. The latter should not just be historicized or narrativized; it had better serve as a revealer of another facet of resistance.

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<sup>15</sup>Biblical figure known as a prophet and brother of God's Prophet Moses.

<sup>17</sup> See this article in Journal of Caribbean retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40986150> 27th May 2019 at 10H 00 a.m.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) by Danticat, religious language pervades the social conditions respectively, of the Haitians. Resistance is necessary through different strategies; so this article intends to attract attention to the healing aspect of some religious practices. Syncretic though religion is in the Caribbean, it takes on healing virtues against the consequences of oppression. A case in point is the psychic affections that befall most of the Haitians and Caribbean folks at large. Female characters like Sophie resort to Christian and Obeah religions for peace of mind. On the other hand, Sophie Caco and her parents seek protection in syncretic religions. In a world where people seem to feel the presence of their dead ancestors, it is no wonder that religion is an instrument that counterbalances suffering through anxiety, trauma, alienation, madness, and, any other psychological problem. In this described context, Divine assistance is welcome to soothe people's hauntedness by not only the ancestors' spirits but also by those of the lost family members. Imported from Africa, the Obeah religious tradition is practised by priests who are known for miraculous powers. Christianity is very recurrently alluded to as the slave master's ship. Women are principally the marginalized people who need religious rescue; even though they seem to be invisible.

As a result, these female victims have recourse to supernatural interconnections for any vital relief. A thorough look at *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) shows how Danticat delineates characters' religious resistance in hard times. For instance, the Caco family invokes God and Obeah in various circumstances. This syncretic recourse provides the Haitians with hope, comfort and peace of mind. Storytelling through sacred oral, poetic language and folk songs has helped the Haitian American author demonstrate the interwoven intricacies between, especially women and the supernatural cosmos. This article seeks to make the argument that *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and other Caribbean works show religiousness in many instances. This fact is due to the omnipresence of spirits that communicate with living people. These spiritual foundations take root in syncretic spirituality. A case in point is the association of the book of Genesis from the Bible's Old Testament and the city of man's origin in the Yoruba myth, Ife. Guinea is also the place where all Sophie's people are supposed to see one another as with the Israelis' Promised Land. Crimson clothes on the corpse of Martine are a sort of celebration of life. A black colour garment could have epitomized death, but a crimson red dress is a hymn to life.

As was said above, Martine's death is far from being actual death; definitely, she will become dust. Yet, her soul has soared up to heaven to taste God's everlasting felicity. Syncretism induces Sophie to compare her dead mother's red clothes to "*Jezebel, hot-blooded Erzulie*" (Danticat 1994:227). It seems clear that Haitian traditional beliefs somehow interact with modern religion. Otherness makes Tante Atie volunteer to bear the brunt when it comes to

carrying the sky as a descendant from Guinea. The surrogate mother would rather her niece,<sup>85</sup> Sophie, would not be on the bad side of the labour division. She exclaims “*As long as you do not have to work in the fields, it does not matter that I will never learn to read that ragged old Bible under my pillow*” (Danticat 1994: 4).

This ragged Bible has not only lasted in The Caco family but also has been leafed through many times over for words of comfort and hope. Illiteracy prevents Tante Atie from quenching her thirst for words that can keep her breath flowing, words of God that restore the oppressed peace of mind. In the Bible, precisely in Psalm 121, the psalmist says “*I will lift my eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help*” (Psalms 121:1). Obviously, there is a sort of expectation that nourishes Martine and Sophie’s lives. For solace, this bleeding woman pins her faith on Erzulie<sup>18</sup>; the reason is all the other obeah concoctions yielded no results. By contrast, the twelve-year-old woman who was described as suffering from bleeding in the bible got saved by touching Jesus Christ’s garment. At the very moment of that miserable woman’s action, the blood stopped gushing out. Jesus felt that some force had left him and he asked the crowd who touched him. The apostles answered him ‘*You see that people are numerous and you ask who touched me?*’ At the very moment, the woman declared that it was her who had touched him. Jesus then told her to go in peace; that her faith had saved her.

In Luke, Jesus confirmed to the lucky woman that your “*faith hath made thee whole*” (Luke 48: 43). The parallel shows that Erzulie turns the suffering woman into a butterfly, liberating her from the heaviness of her dismal body. This disembodying technique used by Erzulie contrasts with the real recovery that saved the woman from the mockery of her fellow human beings and restored her dignity among other women. She would no longer be chased away as she had regained normality and desirability. Cleanliness could not be reached by Erzulie who resorted to a radical transformation of the twelve-year-bleeding woman. By contrast, the Biblical verses give accounts of Jesus’s powerful miracle, through the woman’s touching of his clothes. The underlying factor of the latter’s recovery is the unflinching faith that she will get back to normality, just touching the Lord’s garment. Comparatively, syncretic practices show that Erzulie as a deity denatures the identity or selfness of the miserable woman. Meanwhile, Jesus as testified by Luke bestows cleanliness, and purity and safeguards the identity of the woman. The latter is better off as she passes from sinfulness to flawlessness. Martine enters the American church as if to melt in the syncretic pot.

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<sup>18</sup> The goddess of love in Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, memory*, *Erzulie* is considered as the most powerful and arbitrary of Gods in Vodou.

## 5- Conclusion

To recap, Christianity and obeah, while they exclude each other, constitute the two sides of the same coin. As parallel modes of religious resistance for survival, they can help replenish the void that demoralizes Haitians and Caribbean folks. As melt forms of religious practices, that as syncretism, both Christianity and Obeah bear the sour seeds of their success or failure. Is God not clear enough when he recommended that the Israelis not sacrifice to idols at all? In so far as obeah involves some obscurantist compromise with the devil, Sophie's family's Catholicism may not be fruitful. The reason lies in their worship of Erzulie, a goddess who cannot alleviate suffering as efficiently as Jesus demonstrates.<sup>19</sup> Beverly Bell's *Walking on Fire* (2001) narrated Haitian people's Christian virtues such as faith, hope and charity. The fight to vanquish internal and external adversity being an endless one, Danticat decided to speak out and write people's stories as a witness and actor.

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<sup>19</sup> The 12-year bleeding woman was healed by Jesus, just touching his garment; Erzulie, by contrast, transforms the sufferer into a butterfly.

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