



SUPER-NATURAL

Sneha Solanki

TITUBA, a construct of synthetic biology and a woman from our historical past, necromatically raised from the dead to inhabit a new body in the 21st century, a *sui generis*.

In our time, Tituba was created in a laboratory from genetic ATCG data, enzymes, proteins and chemical reactions. Coded into closed circular structural systems of modification and immunity.

She became a host of e-coli and then in her final transformation to b.subtilis 168. She was heat-shocked from -80°C to 42°C, centrifuged at 180 rpm, streaked across agar plates, incubated for hours at 37°C, scraped from a plate, inoculated with antibiotics, fed with a nutritious broth, grown and cloned, again for hours at 37°C. She followed protocols and procedures. Her optical density was measured and her DNA was laid bare to run electrified across a gel. She was amplified, digested, ligated and transformed. Finally, suspended in -80°C deep freeze, she awaits further transformations.

In 1692 her ordeal was a little different. She was a slave of Reverend Samuel Parrish in Salem, Massachusetts. Her origin and identity oscillates between a speculative historical analysis- was she a voodoo sorceress of African descent, a fetish worshipping Arawak Indian from the Caribbean or a 'native Indian' coersed by bestial spirits from the netherworld?⁽¹⁾

To the puritan immigrants she was the 'other' and a confidante of the devil. Consequently she became the first to be accused of practising witchcraft during the infamous Salem witchcraft trials.

Omnipotent in culture, the witch is often described as a mystery, as a myth, a fictional character, a form of fantasy and predominantly gendered as female. Historian Dianne Purkiss proclaims the witch is a fantasy figure created by women as a blank canvas on which to "express their fears and desires as women"⁽²⁾. A point explicitly performed as a reclamation in 1969 by 'W.I.T.C.H.', 'Womens International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell'⁽³⁾, a radical feminist group



from New York, and in recent years by Romanian witches planning to hex their president, Traian Basescu using poisonous plants, cat excrement and chants for implementing a tax on mystics, healers, witches and astrologers⁽⁴⁾. Malcolm Gaskill, an expert in witchcraft and reader in early modern history, describes witches as “ambiguous symbols and conduits of encoded meanings”⁽⁵⁾. Some argue, even in the present day that the witch possesses an extending 'evil' from an intangible place with the sole purpose to cause maleficium⁽⁶⁾. In some parts of the world being labeled a witch can have extremely serious and detrimental consequences, initially epitomised on a large and socio-politically networked scale by the European and 'New World' witchcraft trials between the 14th and 17th Century. The visible effects of these trials, noted by Gaskill, characterise witchcraft as a “divided self, caught between the old world and new”⁽⁷⁾ at the beginning of modernity, imperialism and capitalism.

Judgments and perceptions of witchcraft swing between the extremities of fantasy and realism, further polarised by contrasting interpretations and inconceivable far-fetched descriptions. Abetted by its' intangible abstruse nature, witchcraft defies any fixed rendition. Historical observations however do reveal that witchcraft is a global concept rooted in religion, politics, science, history and culture. An immaterial manifestation materialising from socio-political effects, and transformed into a biopolitical vector. Super-natural draws from this historical resonance, aligning the materiality of Synthetic Biology⁽⁸⁾ with the immaterial culture of witchcraft.

Tituba's surface into the present, into a new form and a new transmutative space of the emergent life sciences predicts once again a peak in society, a revolutionary change, a paradigm shift⁽⁹⁾. An entity computationally engineered, chemically animated, biologically nurtured and inoculated with occult reasoning, Tituba becomes a body on which to construct a narrative of uncertainty and transition at the edge of a *radical technological shift*.



REFERENCES

1. Tituba was a 17th-century slave belonging to Reverend Samuel Parris of Salem, Massachusetts. Tituba was also the first to be accused of practicing witchcraft during the Salem witch trials which took place in 1692. Arthur Millar also fictionalised Tituba in '*The Crucible*', 1952, a play dramatising the trials of Salem.
2. Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History. Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*. Routledge, London and New York. 1996, pp. 2.
3. W.I.T.C.H., a feminist group (1969-1970) from New York, USA confronted institutional conditioning citing hexes (spells) as performance and guerrilla actions.
4. Matthew Weaver. *Romanian witches to cast anti-government spell*. The Guardian, Friday 7 January 2011, pp. 23.
5. Malcolm Gaskill. *Witchcraft, A very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, Oxford. 2010, pp. 8.
6. Maleficium, a latin term describing 'wrong doing', usually in context to malevolent sorcery or any other magical act intended to cause harm.
7. Malcolm Gaskill. *Witchcraft, A very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, Oxford. 2010, pp. 90.
8. Synthetic Biology is an emerging area in genetic and molecular sciences which integrates engineering principles with biology, computer sciences and chemistry to create 'synthetic' life that can behave naturally as in nature or to act un-naturally.
It can currently be defined by the creation of life by-
 - a) modifying existing molecules, the 'top down' method.
 - b) or creating non-existing molecules (protocells), 'the bottom-up' method.
9. A 'paradigm shift' was one of the key features of the enlightenment in Europe and North America. Thomas Kuhn later describes the Paradigm Shift as “a revolution, a transformation, a sort of metamorphosis. It just does not happen, but rather it is driven by agents of change”. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2nd edition. 1970, pp. 10.