

Flamed And Cancelled—Salem In The 21st Century

It was a cold winter night in colonial Massachusetts. Paper hung on the walls of the houses saying, "Notice to practitioners of Witchcraft: Those who seek out communion with the devil shall be burned". In the distance, people shouted "Burn the devil!" while holding their pitchforks and torches. Two of them tied a woman to a stake and burned her. Her screams were silenced by the cheers and celebrations of the village.

This sight was not uncommon in 1692 and 1693. People were accused of worshipping Satan, kidnapping and sacrificing children, and performing witchcraft. With the onset of spring, signalling new life, 25 people faced death. This is not only one of Colonial America's most notorious cases of mass hysteria but also a lesson from history on how accusations and witch hunts can result in unnecessary destruction. Today, we know of Witch Hunts by a more unassuming term—*Cancel Culture*.

When The Devil Entered Salem

The Devil is said to have first entered Salem, a town heavily populated by the Puritan community, in the chilly winter of 1692. It knocked on Reverend Parris' door when his 9-year-old daughter and 11-year-old niece started showing 'unusual' and 'non-religious behaviour'. This included throwing fits, shuddering, shaking, and barking like dogs. When they took the girls to a physician, his diagnosis was—the girls were affected by an evil and unholy hand.



An artist's rendition of one of the girls who was regarded as a victim of witchcraft.

With the so-called disease coming to the town of Salem, people

started looking for its source. When the two girls were brought before the magistrate, they accused three women of being the root of this 'disease'. On February 29th, 1692, three women from marginalised communities—Tituba, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osborne—were accused of being Devil worshippers.

The Unfortunate Fate of Sarah Good

Sarah Good had lost her father when she was young. The law at the time prevented girls from inheriting their father's property, forcing Sarah to find refuge in charity. She married a servant named Daniel Poole, whose death left her in debt and forced her to sell a small portion of her father's land, which was the only property she owned. She later married William Good. Sarah developed a reputation for being a "*turbulent spirit, spiteful and maliciously bent*". She challenged the Puritan values, which did not sit right with the people of Salem.



Sarah Good—whose poverty resulted in her being held guilty of practising witchcraft.

When she was accused of practising witchcraft, she claimed her

innocence until the very end. Her husband told the examiners that she was "*an enemy to all good*" describing her as a "*burden to him*". He said that he hated her demeanour and that she had failed to meet his expectations of a wife. Sarah was pregnant at the time of her arrest and gave birth to a child in Ipswich, who later died.

After the trials, Sarah was given a death sentence. Even at the time of the execution, she profoundly claimed her innocence while blaming Osborne and Tituba for witchcraft.

The Tragic Life of Sarah Osborne

Sarah Osborne was the wife of a prominent man from the Putnam family, Robert Prince. The couple had two sons, after which Prince passed away. Following his death, Sarah married Alexander Osborne, an Irish immigrant. She took over the land and the property that her late husband had left for their sons, resulting in them suing their mother. When she was accused of practising witchcraft, Osborne was dealing with legal issues and had not attended church for three years which made matters worse for her. Unlike Tituba and Good, Osborne pleaded her innocence without accusing anyone else of practising witchcraft. She died in jail on May 29th, 1692.



Sarah Osborne—whose financial independence resulted in her accusation

Osborne, unlike Tituba and Good, did not belong to a

marginalised community, but she broke social norms by taking over her late husband's land and denying her sons the wealth that they inherited by law. Her economic independence made the Putnam family feel insecure, and her owning and taking over a part of their land resulted in their financial instability. Hence, it is possible that the Putnam family had a hand in her arrest.

The Black Witch of Salem

On March 1, 1692, while Good and Osborne claimed innocence, Tituba stood apart from the other two by confessing to having practised witchcraft. She also denied these accusations at first, but later confessed with persuasion, clarity, and scary specifics. Tituba's testimony is one of the longest in Salem's dark period.

She told the Court how the Devil had come to her and bid her serve him along with Good and Osborne. She had signed in the Devil's book using blood. She related detailed images of red cats, black dogs, yellow birds, and a certain black man she described vaguely, who asked her to sign in the Devil's book. She was called '*The Black Witch of Salem*'.



Tituba—whose ethnicity and social status resulted in her accusation

Today, we know very little about her apart from her being a worker and caretaker in the Parris household. Her status as a 'coloured slave' is an obstacle to knowing her story and her point of view on the accusations. Although very little is known about her later life, it is said she was jailed, and her status of 'sole witness' helped her survive the initial days of mass hysteria. During her trial, Tituba mentioned that there were nine more signatures in the Devil's book—it planted a seed of paranoia, which led to 144 more accusations in the

town.

The View of The Church

The Puritans were members of a religious movement that arose in the Church of England. Its purpose was to cleanse the church of its Roman Catholic values. They were also the people who immigrated to the US and formed the majority of Salem's population. Reports of witchcraft, which was considered evil and satanic, threatened the holy barbed wire of their religion. Hence, these cases were dealt with immediately. The magistrate did not interrogate the accuser and the accused separately, and the necessity of physical evidence was ignored. In such conditions, the accused had only two options—confess to practising witchcraft or face a death sentence.



A scene from court trials determining the fate of the woman who was accused of practising witchcraft [Image Credits: BBC]

When unexplained events began to occur, the people of Salem turned to their God for an explanation. They believed that by punishing those who performed witchcraft, they were performing

their duty towards Him. While the religion teaches peace and respect, they thought they were acting in accordance with His teachings by purging the world of Devil-worshippers—the epitome of destruction. They relied more on their instincts and faith than on physical evidence.

A Bad Case of The Ergotism

In 1976, Dr Linnda R. Caporael suggested that all the symptoms of witchcraft that were seen in the victims may have been a case of rotten bread. Ergotism is a form of food poisoning, caused in Salem in 1692 because of a rye bread that was infected by a fungus. It explained some of the symptoms experienced by victims. Other conditions like sleep paralysis accounted for the nocturnal attacks. Interestingly enough, the fungus, *Claviceps purpurea* is what modern-day LSD is derived from. There are many records that back up Caporael's theory. The year 1691 was a wet season for Salem, making the conditions perfect for fungal growth. Moreover, the minister was paid in grains, and it was the minister's daughter and niece who were the first victims of 'witchcraft'.

There are still some people out there who deny Caporael's theories because they choose to believe in flying broomsticks, grimoires, shape-shifting, and dark magic.

A Tale of Patriarchy and Discrimination

In the 17th Century, Christians believed that women were inferior, making them easy targets, and more susceptible to Satan's wiles. Perhaps the Salem Witch Trials were to serve as a reminder of the status of women in the gender hierarchy. They believed that the devil could reach and 'pollute' a women's soul more easily. The roots of this belief lie in the New Testament. Satan in the form of a serpent lured Eve and made her eat the forbidden fruit, which led to the fall of humankind. Around 70-80% of the people accused in the Trials were women, of whom, many were around the age of 40 and

above—notably, an age when a woman’s fertility starts fading away. Sarah Good began questioning the values of the Puritan Society. Osborne gained economic independence by claiming her late husband’s land. Both of their actions were considered ‘evil’.

The Salem Witch Trials were not about killing and punishing witches who went against God. It was about people trying to maintain the ill-balanced social hierarchy of the time. They felt that the hierarchy that benefited them was at risk because of Good and Osborne’s actions. They wanted to maintain the fragile status quo of male supremacy. They wanted to keep on defining a woman’s worth through her fertility. This was done best by linking folklores and myths about the Devil to women and people of colour. The Salem Witch Trials was an attempt at maintaining a position of power and privilege over those less fortunate.

The accusations soon flared out in Salem’s neighbouring towns in 1693. It did not take long before accusations were meted out indiscriminately. When the wife of Francis Dane, Governor of colonial Massachusetts, was accused of performing witchcraft, the trials were ended, sentences were retracted, the arrested were released, and compensation was given. The trials came to an end.

The Trials remain a tale of patriarchy and discrimination. It was an event that marked the beginning of the end of Puritan society. It is a tale of how people valued authority over justice and delusion over truth. It is a story that is being told to this day.

The 21st Century Witch Hunt

The hashtags keep popping up on the screen. People chant with their pitchforks and receipts “Cancel! Cancel! Cancel!”. The stake is replaced by hashtags, the pitchforks with keyboards. The internet warriors come to serve justice. Salem now is not

just a small city in Massachusetts with a small population. It is a town that exists on digital media with a population of millions. Years have passed, but time has not changed. Every generation has its own Salem.

The Salem of today is made up of social media apps. However, the beginning of the Witch Hunt in today's Salem is very different compared to the 17th Century. Cancel culture arose within black culture. It arose during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s. For black people 'Cancel Culture' was not a mere hashtag—it was about calling out those who threatened their rights and freedoms.

Cancel culture was initially supposed to represent the helplessness people felt because of unjust systems and the influences of people in power. It was a way to boycott racist businesses in the 50s. It was a way to tell people that one may not have the ability to change the inequality and the laws that support tyranny. However, one does have the power to fight, to 'cancel' out the inequality and those who promote it in society.

The Aftermath of A Hashtag

Cancel culture has taken a different turn in modern times. While appearing very different from the Salem Witch Trials, it is the same issue at its heart. In a strange turn of events, it is no longer the persecution of minorities. Now, it targets those in power who often misuse their authority.

Many celebrities like Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby were cancelled because of sexual misconduct in their workplaces and had to serve prison sentences for the same. On the other hand, when celebrities like Ellen DeGeneres and JK Rowling were cancelled, it hardly made a difference in their lives. Ellen and her show continue to maintain popularity. Even after her transphobic tweets, JK Rowling continues to profit off Harry Potter and its merchandise.

So, while Cancel Culture was successful in hunting down figures like Harvey Weinstein, many people, even after being held at the stake of cancellation, continue to maintain their status in society. Cancel culture, just like the Salem Witch Trials, is based on instinct and faith, rather than tangible evidence. It is based on mob mentality.

Instead of bringing down these authority figures, it has created fear in people's minds. Innocent individuals are burned at the stake of social humiliation. People with their keyboards hunt down others and hold them accountable for something they said or did several years ago. It is true that because of a corrupt justice system, people often resort to a hashtag to mete out punishments, but it can be harmful when the person being held accountable is innocent.

Cancel Culture frequently hides under the disguise of call-out culture and often turns into cyber-bullying. At the end of the day, such 'justice' is not worth it when it comes at the cost of mental health and the lives of the innocent.

What Lies In Store For The World?

While we continue to live and grow up in a patriarchal society where discrimination still exists, the witch hunt today is very different from what it was 330 years ago. Today, people get cancelled for supporting patriarchy and discriminating against others based on their skin.

In the 21st century, history is not recorded from the point of view of the biased majority, but in the form of digital footprints. Being able to hear opinions of both sides along with those of 'internet warriors' serving 'justice' via their keyboards instead of by the gavel does not justify the suffering innocent people had to go through. It was not warranted in 1692, it is not justified in the 21st century. With history being recorded through digital media accessible to the majority, the fate of the impetuous millions is yet to

be determined.

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