

**Programme: BA**

**Subject: English**

**Paper Code: END 108**

**Paper Title: World Literatures**

**Unit: Poetry**

**Module Name: The Mystic Drum by Gabriel Okara**

**Module No: 12**

**Name of the Presenter: Ms. Priscilla David**

## **NOTES:**

Gabriel Okara, the Nigerian poet and novelist, has infused his poetry with images of his Nigerian delta birthplace and his writing welds the concept of his native language Ijaw with the English vocabulary. “The Mystic Drum” is an African poem both in content and form. Being an African, Okara goes back to his roots in history, religion and culture and folklore. Through its image and symbol, rhythm and tone, the poem expresses the subtle nuances of an African experience. In a way this poem justifies the modernist dictum, ‘A poem should not mean, but be’. In African folklore, the beating of drums has ritualistic and therefore mystical significance. The beating of the drum unites the mind and heart of the drum beater with the outer world of nature. But the idea of cosmic unity in the poem does not last long. There is an end to this beating of the drum. The poem’s thematic emphasis is not upon how man and nature became one when the mystic drum beats within him; but it’s about the brevity of this experience. The return to the reality makes the poet sing: ‘never to beat so loud any more’.

Here there is the dialectic between tradition and influences. There is no overt references to the neo-colonialism or cultural imperialism, and unlike Ngugi, Okara does not relate the problem of culture to the economic sphere.

When we are talking about The Mystic Drum so it is essentially to tell that it is a love poem:

***“This was a lady I loved. And she coyly was not responding directly, but I adored her. Her demeanor seemed to mask her true feelings; at a distance, she seemed adoring, however, on coming closer, she was, after all, not what she seemed.”***

This lady may stand as an emblem that represents the lure of Western life; how it seemed appealing at first but later came across as distasteful to the poet.

The drum in African poetry generally stands for the spiritual pulse of traditional African life. The poet asserts that first, as the drum beat inside him, fishes danced in the rivers and men and women danced on the land to the rhythm of the drum. But standing behind the tree, there stood an outsider who smiled with an air of indifference at the richness of their culture. However, the drum still continued to beat rippling the air with quickened tempo compelling the dead to dance and sing with their shadows. The ancestral glory overpowers other considerations. So powerful is the mystic drum, that it brings back even the dead alive. The rhythm of the drum is the aching for an ideal Nigerian State of harmony.

The outsider still continued to smile at the culture from the distance. The outsider stands for Western Imperialism that has looked down upon anything Eastern, non-Western, alien and therefore, ‘incomprehensible for their own good’ as ‘The Other’. The African culture is so much in tune with nature that the mystic drum invokes the sun, the moon, the river gods and the trees began to dance.

The gap finally gets bridged between humanity and nature, the animal world and human world, the hydrosphere and lithosphere that fishes turned men, and men became fishes. But later as the mystic drum stopped beating, men became men, and fishes became fishes. Life now became dry, logical and mechanical thanks to Western Scientific Imperialism and everything found its place. Leaves started sprouting on the woman; she started to flourish on the land. Gradually her roots struck the ground. Spreading a kind of parched rationalism, smoke issued from her lips and her lips parted in smile. The term ‘smoke’ is also suggestive of the pollution caused by industrialization, and also the clouding of morals.. Ultimately, the speaker was left in ‘belching darkness’, completely cut off from the heart of his culture, and he packed off the mystic drum not to beat loudly anymore. The ‘belching darkness’ alludes to the futility and hollowness of the imposed existence.

The outsider, at first, only has an objective role standing behind a tree. Eventually, she intrudes and tries to weave their spiritual life. The ‘leaves around her waist’ are very much suggestive of Eve who adorned the same after losing her innocence. Leaves stop growing on the trees but only sprout on her head signifying ‘deforestation.’ The refrain reminds us again and again, that this Eve turns out to be the eve of Nigerian damnation.

**Critical Analysis of Gabriel Okara's poems**

**<http://bharatbhammar051314.blogspot.com/2015/03/okara-poems.html>**