

Salix Alba And Its Cultural Significance

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Abstract

Salix Alba, commonly known as the Willow Tree, comprise of more than 300 species of big shrubs and deciduous trees that are particularly found in abundance in moist soils and cold temperature. Though some of them, like the dwarf willow, hardly grows beyond 7 centimeters. It is known to have many medicinal and commercial uses. *Salix Alba* has been attributed with beliefs, symbolism and folk-culture. It was used in the World War II as a strategic warfare material by the Britain. This research paper is titled “*Salix Alba* and its Cultural Significance” and it will scrutinize the social, cultural and literary significance of *Salix alba*. A branch of willow tree, for example, in Buddhism represents bodhisattva of compassion. In Christianity, its branches are used in ceremonies on Palm Sunday – the Sunday before the Easter. The paper will study a number of (literary) cultures and religions to underline the importance of *Salix alba*.

Keywords: *Salix alba*, Willow tree, Culture, religion, Asian folk tales

Introduction

Salix variety is a typically short-lived variety of plants. They can even reproduce vegetatively from broke no stumps or branches. They require warm and moist conditions for adequate growth. There exists a large number of hybrids of the *Salix* variety, like the famous ornamental weeping willow which is a hybrid of the Chinese peking willow, called *salix babylonica*, and the European white willow, called *salix alba*. The representation of the *Salix* may vary in their variety – it could be a reference to the white willow, goat willow or just willow – but the essential value of the plant is underlined. The nomenclature means little when the artistic reality is being discussed. As a result, the paper studies the importance of willow tree as a specie and not just one variety of it. White willow is the most commonly found willow, so *Salix alba* is used interchangeably for willow as a specie altogether.

It is a ubiquitous specie having a large expand, bushy and flowing branches and is very flexible and strong. Resultantly, it symbolizes adaptability and flexibility. Owing to its structure so lithe and supple, the specie happily withstands harsh winds and unfortunate weather. Humans have appreciated this trait of *Salix* and take the tree to be symbolic of human’s capability to courageously deal hardship and trying times. Similarly, *Salix* can be propagated from little cuttings and therefore it is also seen as a symbol of undying energy, recreation and rebirth. *Salix* is referred to as “weeping willow” because of its droopy structure. When it rains, water runs down the leaves before falling and it appears that the tree is crying. In some cultures, as a result, *Salix* represents mourning and sadness. Edson Luis Maistro, in his study “*Salix alba* (white willow) medicinal plant presents genotoxic effects in human cultured leukocytes” (2009), says that *Salix Alba* is used to treat multiple human disorders like acute inflammation, fever, aches and infections, one of the major reasons being the presence of acetylsalicylic acid which is a renowned anti-inflammatory. Andreea Codreanu also prove that *Salix Alba* is a common cure for people struggling with

pain in diseases like arthritis, backache, and other painful mobility issues in the study “Bioactive Phenolic Compounds From White Willow (*Salix alba*) Bark, Leaves And Branches”.

It is a culturally rich tree and its significance is found in almost every religion and every culture of the world. For example, in the Jewish festival of Sukkot, in bodhisattva attribute of Buddhism, in orthodox churches, in Chinese festivals and Taoism, in Japanese tradition, in English folklore etc. there are abundant references to the willow tree. Since *Salix* is profusely available tree, its mention is found in many cultures, tribes and religions of the world.

Like the eastern cultures, Americans have sincerely associated human life with mother nature. Willow tree is believed to be lucky and therefore people would tie willow branches to their ships, boats and even carts to protect them from any evil so that they could return home safely. The Celtic/Druid people also believed that by knocking on the bark of a willow tree, they could bring good luck in their lives. The article “Willow Tree Symbolism and Significance - Better Place Forests” also believes that the sound of the wind running through the leaves of a willow tree represents elves talking to each other.

Salix Alba has been mentioned many times in the Bible. Like the Psalm 137 says “there on the willow trees we hung up our harps”, when the Jews overwhelmingly miss their homeland (“Willow Tree...”). Willow tree signifies both, loss, hope and a feeling of homesickness. Bible makes another reference in Ezekiel 17:5 when a prophet plants a seed and sets it like a willow tree, representing regeneration, vitality and rebirth: “He took also of the seed of the land, and planted it in a fruitful soil; he placed it beside many waters; he set it as a willow tree” (“Verses about Willow”). Similarly, in Leviticus 23:40, *Salix Alba* highlights celebration when people were asked to bring “willows of the brook” as memory of the festival: You shall take on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days (“Verses about Willow”). In Isaiah 15:7 and 44:4 and Job 40:20 the willows have been shown surrounded by water and beautiful flowers: “over the brook of the willows”, “as willows by the watercourses”, “The lotuses cover him with their shade. The willows of the brook surround him” respectively (“Verses about Willow”). Though John Launer in his article believes that the willow in the Bible is not actually *Salix Alba*, but “modern commentators seem to agree that the *aravim* mentioned in the Psalm 137 are not in fact willows at all but *Populus euphratica*” (Launer).

Then, speaking of Greek mythologies, the willow branches provide protection and the willow tree, generally, is believed to symbolize power and courage. The Greek Goddess of witchcraft, Hecate, uses a wand made out of the willow tree bark. Orpheus, who is the bringer of song in Greek mythology is believed to have *Salix Alba* wood with him so that he could protect himself and the people against the evil of the underworld. *Salix Alba* is also connected to melody and music in the Greek mythology because in one of the occasions, Apollo gifted Orpheus a beautiful harp that was made out of the wood of *Salix Alba*.

In 19th century literature from Russia, V. Zhukovsky’s interpretation of Goethe’s mythological *The Alder King*, called *The Forest Tsar* in 1994 became very famous.

Dear, the Forest Tsar summoned his daughters:

I see somebody nods behind dark branches.

“Oh no, in night shade all is tranquil:

These are white willows stand aside” (qtd. in Dudareva 2)

The richness of white willow or *Salix alba* in V. Zhukovsky’s *The Forest Tsar* is associated with a female, meaning the Tsar is given a feminine touch which elaborates the two sides of every human being – the totality and it is manifested using *Salix alba* symbolism. The image of white willow also has a

metaphysical sense in Ivan Bunin's novel *The Life of Arseniev*: "Its old ruts were overgrown with grass, and old white willows still standing on the left and right along its deserted space looked lonely and sad" (qtd. in Dudareva 3).

Alisoun Gardner-Medwin, in her article "The 'Willow' Motif in Folksongs in Britain and Appalachia" (1991) believes that the symbol of willow appears as a general folklore element and "many people will know of it as: I'll hang my heart on a weeping willow tree, and may the world go well with thee" (237). But Gardner believes that William Shakespeare's *Othello* carries the most famous example of English history. The song represents the foreshadows of death and the woman lamenting the cruelty of her beloved. The evening before Desdemona death, she sings the most iconic song about her favourite willow tree:

The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree, Sing all a green willow; Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee. Sing willow, willow, willow; The fresh streams ran by her, and murmur'd her moans; Sing willow, willow, willow; Her salt tears fell from her and soft'ned the stones; Sing willow, willow, willow (qtd. in Gardner 4)

John Launer in his article "Secrets of the Willow" (2005) makes a very interesting observation as to Desdemona actually crying sitting by a sycamore tree and not a willow tree; because *Salix Alba* was an unknown specie in Europe until they were imported from Asia, (China specifically) in 1779 (Launer). The tree was actually sycamore, a tree native to central and southern Europe, or mulberry fig - *Ficus sycomorus*. Launer notes that *Ficus sycomorus* used to be a symbol of rejuvenation but it might have started suggesting infidelity by Shakespeare's time.

W. S. Gilbert uses *Salix alba* in a similar manner in *The Mikado* (Act II), when he writes "on a tree by the river a little tom-tit /Sang 'willow, titwillow, titwillow". Rizki Apriliani in her work "The Representation of Veil in the Novel Willow Trees Don't Weep Through Najwa's Perspective" breaks away from the name "weeping willows" and says that willows don't weep because they are flexible and can withstand the harshest of circumstances. Apriliani connects the too s religious compulsion of wearing a veil and shares a new perspective. Then, the significance of *Salix alba*'s image is well preserved in modern literature also. V. Dudarev's book called *White Willow* opens up using the willow's reference; "we may abandon everything, we can go crazy and go on the bottle ... But this white willow Never will catch fire!" (qtd. in Dudareva 4). Another example of modern reference to *Salix alba* is Louise McGuire's book *White Willow's Vision: The Indian Princess* written in 2012.

The symbolism of *Salix* exists today perhaps for its ability to maintain a healthy connection with our ancestors and the cultures around the world. In a world driven by sharing resources and abundant availability of everything everywhere, such symbols bind the collective unconsciousness and togetherness of humans as a specie. It may not the permanence of one *Salix* tree but its abundant availability in mother nature that matters.

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