

# Race, Gender And Jamaica: A Critical Analysis Of The Book Of Night Women

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyze the role played by race and gender in Jamaica in Marlon James' novel, *The Book of Night Women*. Specifically, the research article argues that race and gender are underlying causes of the violence experienced by James's female character Lilith. This article reveals a startling connection between one's gender and race and the susceptibility to violence. Through the novels of Marlon James, the purpose of this paper is to provide a perspective on the world during the postcolonial era. James awakens us from our complacency and shocks us into the realisation of numerous possibilities in his novels through his deliberate exploitation of the impact of racism on the psyche of the Jamaicans. To avoid stereotyping his works, he is aware of a variety of approaches to depicting racial issues, but more significantly, he understands how race and gender issues are intertwined. Marlon James' novels reflect his desire to draw on the people, places, languages, race, slavery, cultural traditions, and politics that have shaped his own life and that of Jamaican people. In Jamaica, racial discrimination is very common and hurts very much. During the slavery era in Jamaica, white people had black people as slaves in their households. Jamaican people have to satisfy their white masters, if the white master were not satisfied, they would try to hurt the Jamaican people. This research paper entitled "Race and Jamaica: A Critical Analysis of the Book of Night Women" focus on how race played a pivotal role in Jamaica and how Jamaicans suffered for their survival in a Jamaican sugar plantation. It also reveals how Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women* illuminates Jamaican experiences during the slavery era in Jamaica from various perspectives. It also shows how Jamaican Women have been exploited in a white-dominated male chauvinistic society.

**Keywords:** Discrimination Gender, Jamaica, Race, Slavery.

## Introduction

Throughout the novel, *The Book of Night Women*, Marlon James investigates the notion of double discrimination. He points out that a woman's gender mainly contributes to her discrimination. Marlon James explores the concept of double discrimination in his novel *The Book of Night Women*. He emphasises that a woman's gender has a significant role in her discrimination. James describes the race as a similarly significant factor in discrimination and, in doing so, emphasises both gender and colour as the primary factors influencing an individual's identity. Marlon James expertly reveals how race and gender both serve as catalysts for oppression against Jamaican women through her deftly crafted female characters. The story focuses on the severe racial and gender stereotypes that Jamaican women faced as a result of colonization. Violence towards those deemed inferior is sparked by harsh categories built around differences. Jamaican women are more likely to experience violence due to their gender and race. James demonstrates how different types of physically and sexually traumatic occurrences are used to oppress and discriminate against Jamaican women based on their race and gender.

Marlon James is a Jamaican novelist and winner of the 2015 Man Booker Prize for his third novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014), making him the first Jamaican writer to bring home the U.K.'s most high artistic honour. He has become one of Jamaica's major writers in recent decades. He is establishing himself as one of the most significant and intriguing modern authors to emerge from the island state. His creations are a reflection of Jamaica's turbulent past. He writes persuasively about his home country through the eyes of an ex-pat. His writings comprise race, identity crisis, slavery, violence, gender discrimination etc. His great variety of issues draws so many readers to his writings. His novels strike readers with a balanced mixture of anger and loss.

The bulk of black people's voices has been mostly absent from the canon of popular literature for a very long time. There were gaps in the history, culture, and experiences of Black males as well as the experiences of women from all racial and ethnic groups, regardless of their socioeconomic status. In their place, a relatively limited group of wealthy, White, and male writers and teachers expressed their experiences and viewpoints as if they were universal. As a result, Rothenberg in her *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*, rightly observes that “even books about breast-feeding and childbirth were written exclusively by male ‘experts’ who defined and described a reality they had never known” (3).

### Race as a social-political construct

Race is a political and social construct that classifies the entire human race on the basis of alleged or real physical characteristics such as skin color, hair texture, eye shape or other subjectively selected attributes. There is not any scientific basis on which human beings are categorised as race but this categorization rather results from the prejudices that classifies the entire human race on the basis of their colour and other physical features. It is generally agreed among sociologists that race is socially constructed based on the social realities, norms and group experiences with in society at a particular time. The race is a broad concept. Due to how easy it draws attention, it is regarded as the most significant issue in the current day. In his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois describes it “for the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line” (2).

The race presents the toughest challenge for many people. Because of its deep-seated roots in religious, patriarchal social construction, and the exploitation of colour lines, it poses a threat to human coexistence. People and nations have paid a high price throughout history for the same issue of racial misrepresentation, according to certain arguments. The causes of racial encounters and socio-cultural unrest include the complexity of race supremacy, bias discrimination, segregation, unequal rights, hegemony, ethnic view of the "other," imperialistic domination, marginalisation, and other variables. A group of people who have comparable and distinctive physical qualities is referred to be a race in social construct theory. Before that, it was used to indicate national affinities and then to refer to speakers of a similar language. By the 17th century, the term "race" had come to mean phenotypic physical characteristics. Race, in Donald Hall's terms

“refers specifically to the ways that physiological characteristics (such as skin tone) are combined with distinctions in social history (such as region of original habitation) to distinguish and identify groups of people” (Burak 6).

The race is a sociological concept. Humans are not classified as races based on any scientific principles; rather, this categorization is the consequence of preconceptions that divide all human races based on physical characteristics including hair colour, texture, and shape. According to John McLeod's analysis, all racial distinctions are human constructs rather than biological realities. There is no set of objective standards by which people can be neatly divided into many races, each of which is essentially distinct from the others. The best way to think of racial distinctions is as political constructs that suit particular groups of people's interests. As a result, the race is increasingly being used as a lens to see society. Every society is a fusion of several religions, races, and nationalities. Some groups are politically, socially, and culturally prominent in every country. The same groups are frequently, but not always, economically dominant. Every country has some minority groups that are typically marginalised, neglected, and

socially and economically underprivileged. However, what people mean when they use the term "race" has changed over time. The idea that people think about the disparities between races is something that started with slavery. When Marlon James wrote *The Book of Night Women* in 2009, a new perspective on racial distinctions began to take root in Jamaica.

## Racism in Jamaica

Most novels about race have been about African racism like *The Heart of Darkness*, *The Things Fall Apart*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* etc but *The Book of Night Women* intervenes within this literary history by changing the setting to Jamaica, where conditions made racial discrimination radically different. In an interview, James says, he was interested in how "things could fall apart at any minute in Jamaica". Jamaica is an island country in the Caribbean region. In 1494, Christopher Columbus first sighted the Jamaican island. He considered it to be "the fairest isle that eyes have beheld", and many other explorers still deem it as one of the most beautiful islands in the Caribbean sea. But the region has a special kind of history when it comes to its historical past. Since Christopher Columbus' discovery of the Bahamas in 1492, many historians and literary figures hold the opinion that the region has no history. In *The Middle Passage*, VS Naipaul asserts that

"History is built around achievement and creation, and nothing was created in the West Indies" (20).

Jamaica's history has been poetically composed by Howard Pyle in his article *Jamaica New and Old* in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, who states:

"Jamaica, like many others of the West Indian Islands, is like a woman with a history. She has had her experiences and has lived her life rapidly. She has enjoyed a fever of prosperity founded upon those incalculable treasures poured into her lap by the old-time buccaneer pirates. She has suffered earthquake, famine, pestilence, fire and death: and she has been the home of cruel merciless slavery, hardly second to that practised by the Spaniards themselves. Other countries have taken centuries to grow from their primitive life through the flower and fruit of prosperity into the seed time of picturesque decrepitude. Jamaica has lived through it all in a few years"(1).

Spain, Portugal, Britain, Denmark, and other colonial powers have continued to control the area. The region's economic richness was taken by the European colonists, who utilised the area for trade and economic purposes. They did little to improve the area; instead, they took advantage of it economically. "The European colonizers regarded the area as one whose economic potentials were to be fully exploited, but not a place to settle in permanently" (Udofia 56). As a result, the Caribbean is now socially and economically underdeveloped. Native inhabitants of the area were wiped out and replaced by immigrants, particularly from Africa, Asia, and Europe. The vast majority of its people are of African antecedent, the scion of slaves brought by European colonists. Since people of different races brought their languages and customs with them, it is a prime illustration of unity in diversity. James claims:

"There is no common language. Its countries have inherited English, Spanish, French or Dutch, modified into Creole forms which are different within each area. Even in the postcolonial era, territories within sight of each other remain locked in separate cultural traditions. In terms of topography, language and race, few if any regions of the world are so diverse" (1-2).

On the other hand, the Caribbean countries were bound together by a shared history of slavery. The system of slavery held all the nations in the region together despite the region's extreme diversity in terms of language, religion, culture, and race. According to James, "It is an area of flux like the 'spiral chaos of the Milky Way, held within contexts of geography, and united by a common history of slavery" (2).

The plantation era and the institution of slavery are extremely important to the history of the area. People in the area experienced racial discrimination as a result of European colonisation, and this discrimination served as the foundation for classism, which was privileged in society because "white colour" was associated with the "haves" (European colonisers) and "black colour" with the "have-nots" (colonized i.e. African slaves owned by the whites). Inequality in the Caribbean country of Jamaica is substantial. The race has shaped the relationship of power, status, and identity on the island of Jamaica from its colonial era. This research analyzes racial stratification in Jamaica and nation-based identification.

“West Indian history is dominated by social and political 'White violence' and 'black resistance' and the attempts of blacks and coloured to assert themselves as individuals with dignity and pride. And creoles had to live for a long in isolation and self-exile and even after achieving political freedom. Politically, the Europeans mostly whites, not only colonized the land and people but also turned them into mere slaves and put them to indignity. 'Colour' widened the disparity in society. The 'Plantation economy' introduced by the white masters helped only the rich class. The social and economic backwardness of a majority of creoles, exploitation and chicanery, strained the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The white master became interested in his aggrandizement neglecting the progress of the islands” (James, 3).

Jamaican life and culture were dominated by the cultivation of sugar cane, coffee, and other spices, particularly sugar. In Caribbean culture, slavery and the plantation era go hand in hand. To be more specific, the growth of sugar cane drove conquerors to introduce more and more slave labourers to work the crop, which served as the fundamental reason for the institution of slavery in Caribbean civilization.

The Book of Night Women is suffused with an almost constant sense of violence due to racial discrimination. This book tells about racism in the form of slavery that happened outside the United States. In The Book of Night Women, Marlon James traces the lives of Jamaican during the period of British colonisation of Jamaica and focuses on how 'race' play a pivotal role in discrimination. The second book by James, The Book of Night Women, was a finalist for the 2010 National Book Critics Circle Award in fiction and winner of the 2010 Dayton Literary Peace Prize, The Minnesota Book Award, and the NAACP Image Award (Macalester College). This novel deals with the day-to-day life of Jamaicans and how they have been exploited in a white-dominated society in Jamaica. The Book of Night Women tells about African Slavery in Jamaica during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Marlon James presents life at Montpelier, where slaves were often treated brutally by their white overseers, who whipped, raped and murdered them. A strong theme in this book is that of race. This novel traces the life of Lilith, a mixed-race slave, on a Jamaican sugar plantation at the end of the eighteenth century. Since Lilith is bi-racial, she has trouble, simply aligning herself with one side or the other, whose life revolves around race. Numerous instances of racism in this book take the form of chattel slavery, which had a profound impact on Lilith's life by turning her into a black lady who dared to rebel and turn dark. She has black skin, but she also has a dark soul. Many other female slaves in the novel, often barely beyond childhood themselves, bore children as a result of the sexual abuses of white overseers.

"Montpelier, like other estates on the east coast, have one white man for every 33 negro, Johnny-jumpers they call them, five to ten in number and they work with whip and on some estate, knife and gun. When a field nigger not keeping up the quota of ground to plough or cane to cut they whip him in the back or punch him in the face or kick him in the balls and tell him to work harder "cause he, not no prince regent here. The Johnny-jumpers raid the slave settlement at night like they are pirates, taking the supper that just cooks, or if they hungering for a something else, grabbing the daughter or the mother even if her titty lanky and her pussy no good” (James, The Book of Night Women 4-5).

The aforementioned excerpt describes the brutality of life as a plantation slave. It is astounding how much misery slaves endure. They are required to work under the supervision of a white overseer, who is in charge of 33

slaves. When the slaves are not working hard, the overseers can use a whip and other means to punish them. The slaves endured a lot of abuse, including beatings and whipping till they were kicked up. The brutality against the slaves occurs not only when they are working at the plantation in the morning and during the day, but also at night when the overseer arrived to rob them of their dinner and rape the female slaves without taking into account their gender or age.

Marlon James writes about the psychological ramifications of slavery and race/ethnicity relations in Jamaica. In particular in his novel *The Book of Night Women* the notion of race is explored through blackness which presents to the readers that as a nation we are all implicated in the construction of blackness and present and show ways that black art can promote and transform the constructions.

“A black baby wiggling in blood on the floor with skin darker than midnight but the greenest eyes anybody did see. I going call her Lilith” (1).

The paragraph above outlines the circumstances surrounding Lilith's birth. Because the child was the result of a rape, her birth was unwelcome. And as soon as she was born, she was immediately made into a slave because of her race. Because she was born to a slave, the infant was born into slavery. The characters in the novel are facing slavery because of their race. Their race made them slaves and because of this, their generation will fall into slavery. James uses the same phrase “EVERY NEGRO WALK IN CIRCLE. TAKE THAT AND MAKE OF it what you will” multiple times in the opening of his chapters to emphasise this issue.

## Gender Discrimination

“If God wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us man. Men, doing whatever they could in this world” (Ali, *Brick Lane* 64).

The conflict between two fundamental poles that makes up society and results in the overt oppression and marginalisation of one pole — the feminine — is eloquently explained in the *Book of Night Women*. The social division brought about by the differences in anatomy resulted in a gender-based social division in actions. From an early age, this societal pressure tells a girl how to behave and what to play. The novel is fiercely disputed due to its central themes of racial discrimination, gender inequality, identity, and societal issues as well as the changing female psyche in juxtaposition with colonial society. The female character in this book serves as a clear picture of their gender roles and society. They adhere to the social norms and cultural roles that have been established for them to guide their behaviour, institutionalising their relationships and lives in the process. At the beginning of the novel narrator explains about the woman protagonist, Lilith that “A slave woman fate write before she born.” (James, *The Book of Night Women* 4)

“She swing the club, clap the ball clear’ cross the field and make one run to all four bases and beat the boys but couldn't understand when the wet nurse slap her and say that a good girl was supposed to make manchild win. Lilith cuss and ask if the man-child can't win if the girl doesn't lose and she gets another slap”(4).

Anywhere in the world, at any given time, a woman's birth brings her into an unequal environment. The horrific violence (both sexual and non-sexual) that was meted out to the Caribbean slave women by men in general and the white owners, in particular, coexisted with these injustices for them. The "night women" in James' book are the same. In the eyes of the black woman, the hierarchy among them—based on the type of work they performed—seems to vanish when they are the targets of violence. In *The Book of Night*, women are treated to brutality without mercy, starting with Homer (the head of the house slaves) and ending with the weakest of the field slaves, women without any considerations of any kind. The brutality that slave women endure at the hands of white men and slave

men is explicitly described in this book to highlight the part that sexuality plays in both the dominance of women and their resistance to servitude.

When Benjy betrays his companion Homer by refusing to defend her for the sake of his freedom, he also perpetuates the gender prejudice that black female slaves experience at the hands of the maroons. Benjy gives up his relationship and prioritises his freedom. Commenting on how Benjy's infidelity led to their relationship's eventual dissolution, Homer says: "...what nigger love be compared to free?" (The Book of Night Women 216) The way Homer is treated after leaving the plantation is another illustration of this gender inequality. Homer is severely whipped by six men, who then raped him, giving birth to two children who are sold as infants and die soon after, all on the mistress's orders. She adores and loves them even though they are illegal offspring, and she plays the mother to them. The way black female slaves are abused and exploited, as well as how their family, gender, and motherhood are shunned away from them, are reflected in these kinds of instances. When Homer learns of their murders, she starts to organise her uprising because she feels violated sexually and wants to get revenge for their deaths. To punish the female slaves for scheming against them, the slave masters use sexual torture and violence. When the slave men battle their white masters, the masters also perpetrate sexual violence against the female slaves. For instance, in punishment for her brother's rebellion, the white overseer Jack Wilkins rapes Lilith's mother.

## Conclusion

Marlon James is a writer deeply concerned with the issues of race, gender and culture. He is one of the most prominent writers of fiction in contemporary Jamaica. Although the impact of white on black communities is undeniable, James addresses the question of the position of women within black communities, and how their relationships with both men and other women shape their lives. This article traces out the problems all human face through penetrating view of unyielding, heartbreaking dilemmas which torment people of all races in *The Book of Night Women* depicts the way in which racism, classism, and other ideologies of oppression are maintained, reproduced, and transmitted in the contemporary Jamaican society. This article takes on a more comprehensive, cross-sectional analysis of her works in the lines of slavery, racism and feminism. This novel of Marlon James is concerned with the impact of racial patriarchy upon the lives of black women during specific periods in Jamaican history, such as the colonial period, or the era of slavery. This novel addresses the violent injustice committed against black identity in Jamaica.

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