

# The “True Darkness” of the Slave Woman: Portrayal of women and violence in Marlon James’ *The Book of Night Women*

Sangeeta S.

Department of English, Bharata Mata College of Commerce and Arts, Choondy, Aluva, Kerala, India  
E-mail – [sangi.ajith@gmail.com](mailto:sangi.ajith@gmail.com).

**Abstract**— Violence is one of society’s biggest, most tragic problems. However the cultural constructs, kept in place and reinforced by the patriarchal societies that we live in, refuse to associate women with violence. They are never seen capable of being the aggressors, their trauma or the complete lack of it, when they become the mute spectators of violence, is hardly ever recognised and if violence is perpetrated on them, it is normalised as being the fate of their kind. In his novel, *The Book of Night Women*, Marlon James traces out the lives of Jamaican slave women during the period of British colonisation of the island. James attempts to narrate from the perspective of women in general and slave women in particular. He does not shy away from associating women with violence. They are seen as perpetrators, spectators and victims of violence. In *The Book of Night Women*, violence is not constrained by gender. The attempt of this paper is to study the female characters of the novel in the three broad categories of perpetrators, spectators and victims of violence.

**Keywords**— Violence; women; darkness; slavery; Marlon James; Jamaica; colonisation

## I. INTRODUCTION

“A weak womb done kill one life to birth another. A black baby wiggling in blood on the floor with skin darker than midnight but the greenest eyes anybody ever done see. (James).

This is the introduction of Lilith, the main protagonist of Marlon James’ novel, *The Book of Night Women*. The novel is set in an eighteenth century Jamaican sugar plantation and traces the growth of Lilith from childhood to womanhood. She unwittingly becomes part of a sisterhood that calls itself ‘the night women’, who are plotting a slave revolt to bring an end to their life of slavery. If violence consists in the inflicting of pain and the spilling of blood, then all birth is violent and Lilith’s was even more so. This streak of violence seems to follow Lilith throughout the novel.

Violence, in *The Book of Night Women* is not limited to Lilith, but pervades the entire fabric of the narrative. James does not flinch from portraying violence in all its gory details, to the extent that these portrayals sometimes assume an almost pornographic feel to it. Researchers say that violence occurs in two different ways; “instrumental” violence and “affective” violence. Instrumental violence is used as a means to an end – for example, in a robbery to obtain cash or goods. Affective violence is an end in itself, driven by emotion – as we see in cases of aggravated assault (Salkovskis). *The Book of Night Women* encompasses both forms of violence between its pages. Violence in the novel is not limited by the boundaries of gender, race, class or nationality. It is all pervasive. The whites, blacks, masters, servants, man and women contribute to, and are affected by, the web of violence. What distinguishes James’ work is that the ferocity of violence is not in the least muted when the perpetrators or the victims of such violence happen to be women. The body is the seat of punishment for the women who indulge in violence and for those who are violent to women. Torture in its myriad forms is used by the male characters in the book and such events are made into a public spectacle. The female characters having no authority to punish could not make a public spectacle of their violence; nonetheless their brutalities were no less spectacular. Foucault, in his book *Discipline and Punish* explains the ideals that drive such punishments when he says:

The very excess of violence employed is one of the elements of its glory: the fact that the guilty man should moan and cry out under the blows is not a shameful side-effect, it is the very ceremonial of justice being expressed in all its force (pg. 34)

Although the narrative is set in a time when Jane Austen would have conceived her characters, the female characters of James’ novel do not share the qualities of the Austenian heroines. The slave women, nor their European counterparts, are strangers to violence. The

'darkness' of violence is a part of the human being and as such a part of all women. This fact is brought out in *The Book of Night Women*. Whether as victims, aggressors or mere spectators women are a part of violence that forms the background of the narrative.

## II. WOMEN PORTRAYED AS VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE

Hush now, girl chile, hush ... Don't makethem give you reason to cry more. (James, p. 159)

To be born a woman anywhere in the world, at any given point in time, is to be born into a world of inequalities. For the Caribbean slave women these inequalities co-existed with the brutal violence (both sexual and otherwise) meted out to them by men in general and the white masters in particular. The 'night women' in James' novel are no different. As far as the black woman was concerned, the hierarchy among them- based on the kind of work that they did- seem not to exist when they become subjects of violence. Right from Homer (who is the head of the house slaves) to the weakest of the field slaves, women, in *The Book of Night Women* are subjected to violence without any considerations of any kind. (James 159)

The 'night women' belonged to Montpelier Estate-a sugar plantation on the island of Jamaica-which was the site of rampant sexual violence. The white man enjoyed unbridled power on the estate and he uses this power to get sexual gratification more than anything else:

Regard this, coming to a land where a man can seduce, rape or sodomise any niggerwoman or boy or girl he wish and there be nothing that nobody goin' do, for every other white man be doing the same. (James 44)

In fact, the 'night women'-with the exception of Homer-were all conceived as a result of their mothers being raped by the white overseer, Jack Wilkins. The women thus are born out of and into a climate of violence. It is perhaps this environment of violence that invests 'the night women' with a power that James refers to as the "true darkness".

However, violence against women is not limited to the white man. Irrespective of the socio-political conditions that prevail in the world, society is basically divided into the male and the female. It is the basic power structure which is dominated by man. The black man at the plantation, while undergoing the tortures of slavery, does not let go of the opportunity to assert his domination over the women. It is through a black man that Lilith first comes to know of the fact that man primarily sees a woman as a sexual object and can and will use his superior power to subdue woman to satisfy his sexual needs. As Lilith finds out, man does not always have to

use his physical power. The societal norms that build the mental structures of a man and a woman go a long way in making man feel more powerful and a woman less so in any confrontational situation.

He was one of them man who didn't even have to beat and thump and slap, him voice was enough. ... Better to get rip to pieces by the bush dog or wild boar in the hills than feel that she walk up to a man by herself and let him ravage her. By going to him, she rapin' herself (James 16).

The white skin, that gives uncontrolled power to the men on the estate, does not give the same to women-at least not in equal measure. The white women are not immune to sexual atrocities from black men. As soon as the power equations change and the black man is not concerned with the consequences, he asserts his mastery over the white female. When the rebellion for freedom sets in on the Montpelier Estate, the black men rape Isobel (a part British and part French, female character in the novel). The racial differences take a backseat when gender power structures seek to dominate and brutalise. The novel almost underlines the fact brought out by Andrea Dorkin in her book *Intercourse*:

... intercourse distorts and ultimately destroys any potential human equality between men and women by turning women into objects and men into exploiters (Dorkin 19)

The violence that is inherent in the sexual act of intercourse is taken to brutal extremities in *The Book of Night Women*. Not only is the woman and her consent to the act treated as inconsequential but she is also expected to confront all sexual atrocities with mute submission. When Lilith murders the Johnny-jumper who tries to rape her, the other Johnny-jumpers see her as an aberration-as someone who needs to be made an example out of. The fact that she was only acting in self-preservation was all but ignored. Women are not supposed to react aggressively to men, irrespective of the violence they are subjected to. Anyone who goes against this unwritten law is faced with brutal consequences. Rape was even used as punishment for women who needed to be 'put in place'. On Montpelier estate, the slave men were tortured and whipped but the slave women were tortured whipped and raped.

When it came to whipping as punishment, the white masters did not think of women as the weaker sex. They were as brutally beaten up as their male counterparts. Slave whippings were commonplace in Jamaican sugar plantations and the slightest of offences could provoke them. The slaves far outnumbered the white masters on the plantations and a sense of insecurity among the masters led them to be almost fiendish in their

dealings with the slaves. As women did most of the house work they were sort of in the line of fire. They dealt with the master and mistress directly and were most likely to slip up and face punishment. House slaves were whipped if the tea was served at the right temperature or if they happened to break a plate. Dulcimena (a house slave on the Coulibre Estate) was hung from a tree and whipped one hundred and sixty six times, simply because goats entered the mistress' garden and ate the plants.

According to Foucault, punishment-as-spectacle, "enveloped both executioner and condemned... it often turned the legal violence of the executioner into shame." (Foucault 9). However on the Jamaican plantations the spectacle of punishment only gave more power to the executioner (in this case the white masters) and instilled a sense of horror in those condemned and those likely to be condemned (in this case the slaves on the plantation). The punishment meted out to the slaves aimed at either killing them or scaring them for life. Lilith and Homer were both whipped badly enough to develop a quilt of scars on their backs. Torture as a form of punishment must, as Foucault puts it:

...mark the victim: it is intended, either by the scar it leaves on the body, or by the spectacle that accompanies it, to brand the victim with infamy (Foucault 34).

Even when the Irish overseer Robert Quinn falls in love with Lilith, the quilt on her back is a constant reminder to Lilith that a master and slave can never be on equal terms. No matter how hard Quinn tried to bridge the gap between them, when they were in their private capacity, Lilith was painfully aware of her position of a slave, every time Quinn's hand rubbed over her bare back. The 'night women' were all scared one way or the other. Hippolyta had her throat slit when a child. She lost her ability to speak and the cut left a scar that Hippolyta hid with dresses with high neck. Iphigenia had coal burns all over her body, the scars of which were big and bumpy, making her repulsive not only to the white man but to her own people as well.

The dehumanising of the slaves helped the white masters to justify their treatment of the slaves. The black slaves were brutes who needed reformation. They were worse than beasts of burden, and were not only worked to death but also made to accept and believe in their inferiority. The scars on the slaves also lent to this dehumanising process. This is especially true of Homer's scars:

... she look like animal. Her back, arse and thigh cover in scar big like animal stripe, her titties chop up and scar up so that is only nipple left to tell you that she born to suckle (James 392).

Women on Montpelier Estate were subjected to violence on a daily basis but that is not the only way in which violence became a part of their lives. They were also at times, mute spectators of violence being perpetrated on others.

### III. WOMEN PORTRAYED AS SPECTATORS OF VIOLENCE

The patriarchal society of colonised Jamaica, was a society of binaries where man was strong, powerful and made decisions while the woman was "... feeble and passive, literally a receptacle for the desires of the male and incubator for his offspring" (King). As such they were often spectators of violence that played out in their lives. The racial difference that dominated the colony did not exclude the white women from the sphere of violence that surrounded their black counterparts.

*The Book of Night Women* depicts three distinct reactions of women as spectators of violence: one that is horrified at the spectacle unfolding in their presence, another that accepts it as inevitable and yet another that derives pleasure from the act of violence.

Horror at witnessing a violent act at Montpelier Estate is evinced, only among the uninitiated or when the act itself has no precedent in terms of its depravity. One such act was Lilith's cutting up of the Johnny -jumper who tried to rape her. Circe the woman who brought Lilith up was the first one to come upon the scene. Circe was never too fond of Lilith and hated her spiritedness. She knew that the Johnny-jumper would attack Lilith while she was out and hence she hoped to return home to find Lilith pegged down to her place by the Johnny-jumper. Instead she finds the mutilated body of the Johnny-jumper. Circe was no stranger to violence but the sheer depravity of the act committed by a fifteen-year-old girl made her run away as fast as her legs could carry her. Homer too witnesses the scene, but Homer is not horrified. She recognises in Lilith, what Marlon James terms as 'the true darkness and true womanness'. Homer starts to regard Lilith as someone who would be invaluable in the rebellion that the 'night women' are plotting and she goes out of her way to protect Lilith.

However, Lilith's 'true darkness' does not make her immune to violence. When she chances on McClusky (an overseer at the estate) sexually abusing a slave woman, whose face was "swell and cut up and wash with so much blood that she drip red", Lilith wonders at how a white man can "drink or carry on as he please." Lilith looks at the slave woman's deadbody and shudders. The rebel in Lilith does not allow her to be a mute spectator to violence for long. While she is at Coulibre estate, a young slave boy is tied naked to a tree and honey dripped all over him, all because the mistress was allergic to some

flower that he brought in. While the other slaves only gagged him so they did not have to hear him scream, Lilith washes his body and ungags him. This for the slave men is an even more horrifying sight than the torture that one of their own was undergoing. They regard Lilith with wide-eyed fear and run away.

Violence on Jamaican plantations is not restricted to racial or gender boundaries. Even religious practices become the cause of disturbing violence. Obeah, the religious practise brought in to the Jamaican islands from Africa by the slaves, was used by them to seek revenge with horrifying results. Andromeda (a house slave) has Obeah set on her and she dies as the blood in her oozes out of every orifice in her body. There is nothing that anybody can do but watch. Andromeda's daughter is so horrified at the spectacle that she screams and runs in all direction till Homer manages to catch her.

The white man is not able to make sense of Obeah and its practises. His advanced scientific knowledge is not able to explain its ways and methods. Hence he approaches it with almost as much fear as the slaves that believe in its powers. At Montpelier Estate when anybody is suspected of practicing Obeah they are dealt with severely in full public view. At times they are bound and gagged in their huts and the whole hut is set on fire. The 'night women' especially Homer also indulges in these same practices but they remain mute spectators as men and women like them burn, because they have to rise up for what they believe to be a greater cause.

On the other end of the spectrum there the white women who are painfully aware of the infidelities of their men and of the brutalities that they subject the black women to, they are destined to keep quiet and carry on as if nothing has occurred. The white woman cannot stop the white man "she can only turn her eye and sip tea" (James 45). However not all white women, cringe at the sight of violence. There are the likes of Isobel and her mother, who actively engage in violent acts when they are able to and when they are not, they derive pleasure from others engaging in it. While Jack Wilkins was whipping and murdering the slaves, "Miss Isobel watch the whole thing from the terrace even after Massa Humphrey say he had seen enough" (James 117).

Women may not always be the cause of violence but that does not mean that their lives remain untouched by it. They are often spectators to the mayhem that man creates. In James' novel however women cannot claim immunity from the mayhem around them. They are the cause, second hand perpetrators or next possible victims of violence that they witness around them.

#### IV. WOMEN PORTRAYED AS PERPETRATORS OF VIOLENCE

The courage of man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying.

-Aristotle (The Generation of Animals)

The school of thought that segregated man and woman into binary opposites, positing man as being superior and stronger than women, also suggest that women are soft and will shy away from violence. Marlon James seems to challenge that assumption in *The Book of Night Women*. The women in the novel are invested with what James refers to as 'the true darkness and true womanness' but reads more like an instinct for self-preservation in overdrive.

The white woman is seen as delicate and the society that they are brought up in tries to keep them from all things violent. Set in the eighteenth century, white men on Montpelier estate treated their ladies as men did during the Victorian period. Jane Eyre, in Charlotte Bronte's novel says that, "women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel;" (Bronte, chp.12). The white women in James' novel found that they could vent their frustrations of repressed feelings on the slaves at their command. The violence that they unleashed on the slaves was comparable to that unleashed by any man on the island. For the slaves, the Victorian 'angel in the house' was a monster in disguise.

The 'night women' are a group of rebels who are not content to conform to the roles that society has bound them with. They want to bring about a change in their circumstances and know that Aristotle's ideal of an obedient woman is not going to change their circumstances. As Maria Stewart said:

It is useless for us any longer to sit with our hands folded, reproaching the whites; for that will never elevate us,"... "Possess the spirit of independence. . . . Possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted" (Richardson 53).

Homer is the head of the house slaves and commands the respect of, not only the other slaves but also on occasion, that of her masters'. Homer gets the 'night women' together to lead the other slaves during the rebellion that she has been planning. James almost inverts the Aristotelian view of women being passive and the intellectual inferior to man. On Montpelier estate Homer is the only woman that can read and this ensures that she keenly feels the injustices around her. She does not include men in the scheme of things as she feels that they may jeopardize her plans. Ultimately it was the out of control slave men that caused the rebellion to fail miserably, which makes Callisto (one of the 'night women') exclaim, "Goddamn man! They can't do nothing right!" Homer is not impulsive and bides her time. When

the rebellion gets underway she wreaks her vengeance even though she had been whipped to within inches of her life.

Lilith's introduction to a life of a slave begins with violence. The day she was to join the field labourers, a Johnny-jumper tries to rape her. She is too terrified to be controlled by her senses and her instinct starts controlling her actions. She pours a huge pot of boiling tea on the Johnny-jumper and cuts him up with a cutlass. In her immaturity she directs her violence to anyone who antagonizes her, physically assaulting Andromeda and not being content with just that she sets Obeah on her which results in Andromeda's violent death.

As Lilith grows older, her life experiences give her enough maturity to channel her 'darkness' to right the wrongs around her. She ends up killing the master and mistress of Coulibre Estate and setting fire to the house which kills their child. Lilith is unable to come to terms with her own darkness. Although all the 'night women' were capable of violence, it was only Lilith who had murdered someone before the rebellion set in. It made her feel terrible and her act kept coming back to haunt her. She says that only God and the white people could live with the terribleness of murder. When the rebellion sets in she uses her 'darkness' to protect the only two white people who had shown her some kindness: her father, Jack Wilkins and Robert Quinn.

## V. CONCLUSION

Women have come a long way in asserting themselves and their right to be treated equally in spite of being different from the dominant sex. But each woman had to travel her own unique path. As such the black woman had her own challenges to come to terms with. Her voice was often drowned in obscurity. As Fannie Barrier Williams comments:

"The colored girl . . . is not known and hence not believed in; she belongs to a race that is best designated by the term 'problem,' and she lives beneath the shadow of that problem which envelops and obscures her" (Williams 150).

The coloured girl in Jamaica is entrenched in a deeper obscurity than her sisters elsewhere. In *The Book of Night Women* is Marlon James' attempt to bring out the Jamaican woman from obscurity. He chronicles his own rendition of the history of Jamaican women, both coloured and otherwise. Despite the considerable progress made by women, the cultural coding that signifies women with certain codes and a predetermined behavioural pattern is challenged by James. Men who went out (to hunt and later work) forgot that women who stayed back (in the cave and later homes) are endowed with the same

instincts. Their instinct to survive and hence their propensity to be violent is no less than that of men. Just because a lion is stronger than a lioness, it does not make the lioness any less of a hunter.

Society, though disturbed, is not outraged at an abusive paternal figure but an abusive maternal figure becomes beyond comprehension. The tendency to normalize male perpetrated violence and the propensity to trivialize, or to treat female perpetrated violence as an aberration, leads to compounding of the problem. Although power does play a part in the breeding of violence, it is not always a result of power structures. "Power indeed includes violence but the latter is not the whole of the former" (Fisher). Violence, in female (as in male) could be the use of power to suppress, the outburst of suppressed emotions or as in the case of 'night women', a bid to survive.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Aristotle. *Politics*. 350 B.C.E . 30 July 2017. <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.html>>.
- [2] Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. 29 April 2007. 29 July 2017. <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1260/1260-h/1260-h.htm>>.
- [3] Dorkin, Andrea. *Intercourse*. London: Hachette UK, 2008.
- [4] Fisher, Dominique D. "Review Essay: Should Feminists "Forget Foucault"?" *Studies in 20th Century Literature* (1998): 227-244.
- [5] Foucault, Michael. *DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: VINTAGE BOOKS, 1977.
- [6] James, Marlon. *The Book of Night Women*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2010.
- [7] King, Angela. "The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body." *Journal of International Women's Studies* (2004): 29-39.
- [8] Richardson, Marilyn. *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*. Trans. Marilyn Richardson. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- [9] Salkovskis, Paul. *How much do we actually know about the psychology of violence?* 13 December 2016. 27 July 2017. <<http://theconversation.com/how-much-do-we-actually-know-about-the-psychology-of-violence-51533>>.
- [10] Williams, Fannie Barrier. "The Colored Girl." *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860-1960* (1987): 150-159. Anthology.