



‘Questioning the Established Truths of the World’ in Marlon James’s novel *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*

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Abstract— *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is a beautiful fantasy novel that explores African mythology like never before. Away from the Caucasian fairy tale characters and mythology, the novel had set the bar high for all of the writer Marlon James's future endeavours and all of the other fantasy writers who are yet to breathe life into the literary world. Fantasy, as a genre, has been high on demand since the end of the 20th century, and the novel utilises every literary element to drive the reader through a rollercoaster ride while engaged in the reading process. Marlon James has high expectations from his readers worldwide, which he truly met in his first book of the ‘Dark Start Trilogy’. In the research paper, the researcher analyses the theme of truth present in the story and the history behind the conception of the novel. The paper analyses the deep emotions associated with truth as a theme and sheds light on the ways truth manifests itself in various forms in the story. There are times when the theme of truth was not directly apparent, but when analysed from a psychological and spiritual view point, the lines give away their participation in building up the theme of truth very clearly. Such is the discussion style of the paper, which will unravel various aspects of the truth inside the novel.

Keywords— *Black Leopard, Red Wolf, African Mythology, Fantasy Novel, Caucasian fairy tale, Truth, Manifestation, Emotions spiritual, psychological.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Marlon James had promised the world that after releasing his first book, "A Brief History of Seven Killings," he would bring a novel that would be the "African Game of Thrones," full of mystery, magic, and thrills. The novel *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is set in a fantasy world based on African mythology. The story is about the wars between the kingdoms, namely the South and the North. A North Kingdom Prince tries to kill his sister's son, who is the legal heir to the throne. Meanwhile, the boy escapes from the kingdom, his mother hires Tracker, the narrator of the novel, and the plot revolves around him.

He has particularly chosen the African mythology and culture in the novel to get rid of the "white" washing of the fantasy universe and literature. (Janse) "White" here

refers to the skin color, the cultural and mythological intertwining, and the impact of the Caucasian population on the world. He believes that the world is not well versed enough with the local mythologies and is not playing with the mythology described by the ‘White’ population. James also believes it to be the result of centuries of colonisation and slavery. It is true in the case of the black population, since they were subjected to years of subconscious programming through slavery. In one of his interviews, the writer admits that, in

“I could have easily written a European fantasy

novel in black verse, but I didn't

(Swarup).

Marlon James himself has to take a detour as a Jamaican in order to find his existential reality as he

admits that he has to decolonize his imagination of the Western mythology. He says,

"It took me a while to realize that every time

I spoke, I sounded like someone's butler"
(Swarup).

In one of his lectures, Marlon James says that,

"One hundred pages describing a village?

Hell yeah. [...] A big appendix on magic techniques?

Of course I'm gonna do it.

Two hundred pages on a mysterious dwarf race that lives underground? [...] yes." (Swarup).

The novel is the first part of Marlon James' planned "Dark Star Trilogy" and he says that the other two novels retell the stories from the point of view of other characters. The story is narrated from the point of view of Tracker, who is responsible for finding the missing boy.

There are multiple themes that are apparent in the novel, like truth, ambition, politics, duty, honor, and Machiavellianism, etc. All of these are spread out remarkably throughout the novel and give substance and framework to the story. (Monk) Out of these themes, the research paper deals with the theme of "truth".

The narrator begins the novel with a striking and contradictive line,

"The child is dead. There is nothing left to know" (pg.2, James)

The line itself is the door to the deluge of mystery that follows ahead in the 600-page novel. The theme, "truth", beautifully seeps in its presence in the lines by making it obvious that whatever might ensue, the truth has already been told. The way the narrator adds depth to the theme is interesting in itself. He assures and reminds the readers that the novel is a game of truth and lies. The Tracker further adds,

"Truth eats lies just as the crocodile eats the moon,

and yet my witness is the same today as it will be tomorrow."

(pg. 2, James)

Tracker feels that if he tells the death of the child to the queen of the South, she will definitely kill him. So he hides the truth in the shadow of lie by creating interest as well as little confusion in the mind of the reader.

Robertson opines in his article that "It holds a dual mysticism where the reader is, on one hand, freed of any other apprehension of the storyline's direction whereas on the other hand, it delivers a grip to the story where the reader is intrigued and entangled in the story despite of having known the plausible ending of the story." (Robertson)

It is fair enough to claim that the opening line itself has the readers from the start, and portrays the theme of "truth" clearly. Moving ahead, the theme emerges in its more raw form and becomes more apparent in other parts of the novel. Not only the truth, but even the secrets hidden in truths play an important role in contributing towards this theme. The fantasy model used in the novel is swathed by the hidden truths that exist around its characters where all the characters are seen hiding something crucial either about their identity, or their story. Patrick mentions that "The storyteller, Tracker, is himself surrounded by mysterious secrets and he himself grows in the story through the constant process of questioning the established truths of the world". (Patri) Tracker makes curious remarks in the beginning which add up towards building his secret identity.

"I am just a man who some have called a wolf.

The child is dead. I know the old woman brings

you different news.."(pg.2, James)

The words uttered by the Tracker add into the snowball effect of building up the mysticism of secrets. The secrets remain served in a platter, out in the open in the plain sight, and yet remain undiscovered, which further adds to the girth of the story. Later, as the characters unfold themselves, the secrets are also disclosed for the sake of building up of the story and merged with the theme of truth.

"I will give you a story.

It begins with a Leopard.

And a witch." (pg.2, James)

To get the attention of the readers Tracker tries to narrate his own imaginary world revealing the truth regarding the survival of the missing boy. Robertson says, "Eerily enough, the narrator embroils each and every truth in the serum of secrets to be tasted slowly and gradually, the kind of taste that lingers on and makes one crave for more- hence serving the purpose of his fantasy novel." (Robertson)

The narrator lies to create contrast in the story while building up on the theme of the truth. He mentions it in the beginning of the novel saying that,

“Not everything the eye sees
should be spoken by the mouth.” (pg.2,
James)

Thus, while it may appear to be a component of truth, it actually contributes to the flood of falsehoods, because the only option to prevent the truth from being spoken is to tell a lie. This is apparent in the novel when the same story of the boy's disappearance moves around of the fantasy universe in different forms through characters. As they circulated and re-circulated within the storyline, even their acceptance and rejection also changes within different characters. Leopard at one point, depicted as a character that “feed[s] on [Bunshi's] story like someone starving, or like someone glutting” (pg. 167, James). Sukhdev comments, “The story was retold in a manner in which he needed to listen to. It was a lie, yet it was the truth portrayed in a positive light”. (Sandhu)

Tracker says in the beginning,

“My mouth might say too much before they club it shut”
(pg. 3, James)

It indicates a Pandora box of truth, although fatal truths, which might be lying dormant in the story. As Janse describes about the Tracker, “He was initially hired to locate the whereabouts of the missing boy, or return with evidence of his death, since he had the ability to identify smells from the other world”. (Janse) But later, year after year, he was shown to be trapped, trapped in the prison itself. He faces many obstacles in his way and all this led him to seek greater truth in life. He concludes that,

“The child is dead, and so is everyone.” (pg. 3, James)

It is a breaking point where Tracker could not keep peace with the truths being revealed and did not seem to be at peace with how everyone is not a murderer, yet their actions lead to murder something inside of the people they deal with. Such is the truth of the world he was roaming in. In the process of facing so many glitches and undergoing oppression, he constantly ponders upon the meaning behind all of them and tries to point out the reason as to why all of this is happening. When he meets with the crone at the river bank, he remarks,

“Life is love and I have no love left.
Love has drained itself from me,
and run to a river like this one.” (pg. 8,
James)

He feels that the path he has put unto might have been wrong in the first place and that was the reason why

he is facing so many obstacles. Patri opines that, “Every time he stopped to seek truth, he received greater reflection of what his purpose and what life's purpose might be.”(Patri)

In the pursuit of truth, the Tracker is involved in a manner that often puts him up as an existential struggler. Although he grows more resolute with every hurdle he crosses, he is often seen lost for purpose and is shown finding meaning in the justification and truth of the problem itself. The tracker himself says,

“Sometimes the only way forward is
through.

So I walked through. I was not afraid”,
(pg. 9, James)

Finally he understands the purpose of life and accepts to reveal the truth about the boy, which adds weight to the theme of truth. The purpose of life and its acceptance is beautifully depicted in the following lines,

“I told myself ... Here is truth:

At this point I would have told anyone.

Truth is truth, and I do not own it.

It should make no difference to me who
hears it,

since him hearing the truth does not
change it” (pg. 331, James).

II. CONCLUSION

Thus, the research paper observes the theme of 'Truth' manifested itself in the novel and discussed the presence of other main themes in the story. The storey behind the novel's inception is also zoomed into, and shows how significant the novel is in terms of highlighting African myths and traditions. Finally, the theme of "truth" is intertwined with many other emotions such as seeking, lying, secrets, and mystery.

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