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Discovering One's Own Self: A Feminist Perspective of Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women*

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Abstract:

Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women* mainly focuses on the life of slaves who lived at the end of the eighteenth century. This novel is the story of Lilith, born into slavery on a Jamaican sugar plantation. It is all about how black women were tortured by their white masters. More than the black men, black women are violated. This study throws light on the violence that black women come across in their lifetime in their plantation as a slave, and by identifying their own self they form a group and plan to revolt against their white masters which is said from a feminist perspective.

Keywords: Violence, Black Women, Own self, Feminism.

Introduction:

Marlon James is a Jamaican writer. His major works are *John Crow's Devil* (2005), *The Book of Night Women* (2009), and *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014). He received Man Booker Prize for *A Brief History of Seven Killings* in 2015. The novel *The Book of Night Women* throws light on the black people's sufferings. Lilith is the protagonist and the story revolves around her, starting from her birth till other women plan to fight for their freedom. The author uses Jamaican dialect to bring out the real pain of the blacks. This novel gives the clear picture of the slave's life, their pain, their small happiness, their relationships and their sufferings. Blacks are isolated based on their race, colour, class and gender. They are assaulted by both means of verbal and physical. This novel deals with a variety of themes like, counter - violence, black woman's misery, oppression, and also the power of black violence.

The origin of term 'Feminism' is uncertain and debatable. The term can be traced back to 1871, when it was used as a medical term, to define symptoms of 'Feminisation' of the bodies of male patients. 'Feminism' as a term had conflicting implications in both medical and political discourse. The term is made up of two components- 'femme', 'woman' in French, and '-esme', which refers to a social movement or a political ideology. The earliest use of Feminism held negative connotations. It sought to address the inequalities that existed between men and women in a society.

Black Feminism:

Black feminism is opposed to patriarchy as well as white feminism. The black woman's oppression was the result of the double bond of being women and being black. Black legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality' in her insightful 1989 essay, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. Crenshaw argues that black women are discriminated against in ways that often do not fit neatly within the legal categories of either 'racism' or 'sexism' – but as a combination of both racism and sexism. Collins, intersectionality is “an analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation and age form mutually constructing features of social organisation which shape the black woman's experience and in turn, are shaped by black women” (299). Black feminism insists that sexism and racism are imbricated in each other.

Black feminism demands an acknowledgement of the diversity. Many black writers have recorded about black women's trouble and violence in their works during their period of time. They have also mentioned about the black women's sorrowful and painful life in their works. Black women writers have written about black feminism, writers such as Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, Bell Hooks and many others. As Barbara Omolade points out, “black feminism is sometimes referred to as womanism because both are concerned with struggles against sexism and racism by black women who are themselves part of the black community's effort to achieve equity and liberty”(10).

Patricia Hill Collins, a famous black feminist theorist has also spoken about the suffering of black women. Collins's work primarily concerns issues involving feminism and gender within the African-American community, she gained fame through her first book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. Her other works are *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology*, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. She also published *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* and *Another Kind of Public Education: Race, Schools, the Media and Democratic Possibilities*.

In the field of Feminist Criticism, Barbara Smith a critic and a feminist, in her essay *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*, says:

Feminism is the political theory that struggles to free all women: women of colour, working class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women – as well as white economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism but merely feminist self – aggrandisement. (43)

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins states that black women have experienced violence such as physical assault during slavery. Domestic abuse, incest, and sexual extortion, accompany black women's subordination in interesting oppressions . . . enslaved African women could not choose whether to work – they were beaten and often



killed if they refused . . . both the reality and the threat of violence have acted as a form of social control for African – American women.

In this novel many slaves are deflowered by the masters. One such incident occurs in the ratoon field, which is seen by Lilith:

Ratoon field be nothing but last year chopped cane that leave to grow back by it lonesome. Lilith run to the end and pull two stalk apart to see the new fields. A niggerwoman on her knees, shaking and blubbering. Her face swell and cut up and wash with so much blood that she drip red. She begging with a cry (James 62)

Lilith saw this violence and she felt distressed for that woman. All black women in the field had felt the agony at least once in their lifetime. When Lilith see that incident she feels bad for the woman even though she is not her sister: “She watch the woman turn into nigger, then animal, then dirt, then nothing, Crow food” (James 63). Women are seduced by their masters both verbally and physically. They are assaulted as they are considered to be cheap women. “The negro scream that white people don’t hear because it never stop late lunch or early afternoon tea. A negro scream be like a pig scream. A negro scream be like a dog whistle. A negro scream be like wind”. . . (James 168). Even though they scream aloud whites do not listen to them. They even make fun of black’s scream as pig scream and dog scream.

In many other novels the black women are seduced by the whites. In the same way in the novel *Color Purple* by Alice Walker protagonist Celie was also physically abused by their own father. Be it a slave or a black woman, they had undergone violence in their lives. The term binary opposition men – women, black – white, rich – poor, maser – slave relationships arrives at a point defining the status of the community. Even for the small mistake they are whipped without any mercy by the whites. “The last time anybody broke a dish was a slave girl back in 1784 and she get whip so hard she couldn’t lift butter after that” (James 137).

“James does not flinch at detailing the grotesque acts of violence that characterize life at Montpelier” (n.pag). Even learning to read is a huge crime. At one point Homer says that “as long as you can’t read this [book] white man will have all sort of power over you” (James 56). Whites think that if any black learn to read they might not work under them. By exemplifying the details of violence at Montpelier he characterises the true nature of the whites. “Writing in the spirit of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker but in a style all his own, James has conducted an experiment in how to write the unspeakable-even the unthinkable . . . (BR7).

Violence is socially constructed in a race – and gender specific manner as mentioned by Collins. Based on their colour and gender they are physically exploited. Homer, a woman who is the head of the culinary works has also undergone violence, but not physically abused by their whites. When narrating her dejected flashback to Lilith, she explodes ferociously narrating how her life was destroyed by the Maroons, who were a team that had dealings with

white men. If any black intended to escape from the Montpelier Estate he will be caught and handed over to their masters.

When Homer decided to run away from the estate with black men, carrying her own child in her belly, she is caught red-handed by the maroons and is later sent to her masters. The masters harm both her baby in the womb and her black men. The punishment which is given to her is very severe and that creates a fear in her. She keeps all her worries and sufferings inside her, as it burns like a fire inside her. "Every nigger have reason for the white man to dead" (James 329). As Homer's master kill her child and her man she decides to kill her master and waits for the perfect time. "But change can also occur in the private, personal space of an individual woman's consciousness . . . any individual black woman who is forced to remain "motionless on the outside," can develop the "inside" of a changed consciousness as a sphere of freedom"(Collins129).

As stated by Collins, the power to save the self lies within the self. Other black women may assist a black woman in this journey toward personal empowerment, but the ultimate responsibility, for self – definitions and self valuation lies within – the individual women herself. And individual women may use multiple strategies in her quest for the constructed knowledge of an independent voice. Correspondingly by the words of Collins, in this novel Homer evaluates her own self, and by evaluating, she decides to lead a nigger-free life and plans to revolt against her masters. She decides to fight back for her own self.

"The degradations of slavery and the frustrated desire for freedom" (Hannan 66) is foremost in their minds. They decide to live a free life. After facing all kinds of violence, they identify their strength and decide to revolt. She imprecates white men: "what a terrible thing 'pon this world the white man must be. What a wicked, terrible, brutal creature, nothing no wicked like he so. That is the only thing they can teach we" (James 385). The most terrible creature in the world is only the whites. In one of the articles A Revenge Tragedy of Our Times, "it is homer who introduces Lilith to the half dozen women who meet clandestinely at night. The women turn out to be Lilith's half sister-their mothers had been raped by Wilkins" (n.pag). Homer only introduced Lilith to the other five women by seeing her brave actions. After knowing the braveness of Lilith, the other women invite her to join the revolt.

The six women call themselves 'Night women' and they plan secretly at midnight. The night women are Homer, Callisto, Pallas, Hippolyta, Gorgon, Iphigenia and Lilith. The six women secretly plan for the revolt. Only at midnight the meetings take place, that too, in a place like mountain cave. For the first time when Lilith went to attend the meeting, "The womens all stand and they don't look like womens no more. Lilith back away through the cave and stumble. Then she run" (James75). She was frightened by the look of the women and ran into the big house.

When realizing her own strength Homer desires that all other women should fight for their rights as everyone has their strength in them. When Lilith is confused about this Homer says: "time to know what true and what lie, time to decide if you want to be slave or-" (James71). She adds that the time for freedom has come and that she must decide whether to



be free or to remain as a slave. Homer is the one who tried to sow the seed of freedom in every woman's mind and she says, "We goin' kill them, girl chile, every single white son of a . . . within hundred mile. We goin' kill them all" (James 281).

A violent revolt is started, to avenge the brutality that black women suffer on the plantation field. When Homer tells the plan to Lilith she says that it is not easy to get freedom from whites. "We not getting free, we taking free" Homer says (James 71). Lilith is not ready for her freedom and for the revolt. Homer conveys with a positive note that "freedom comin' whether you ready or not" (James 349). Black people want their lives to be a nigger free one. They feel that it is their own life to have their own freedom in return for the search for their own identity. "Nigger want freedom and they take it. Nigger want land and they take that it. Nigger want blood and they take that too" (James 304). Everything that the nigger wants must be taken by them. "Me say, the thing with black woman, though, is that we don't get what we want and we never get what we need, but every nigger, I mean every nigger, get what she deserve" (James 123).

When talking to Lilith, Homer says "Nigger time now. Time to make we own life" (James 347). Every black woman is ready to take up her freedom. It is only because of Homer the revolt started. "White man goin' know the meaning of frighten soon and very soon" (James 326) by Homer. She boosted every woman in the plantation field to take up their freedom. By seeing the womanness in them, every man screamed for their life. In the revolt, only black women took active participation and not the black men.

The real, hardcore, leaders, heroes, protagonist were women. The women were the ones leading the rebellion on estate, meeting at midnight, plotting, scheming, killing the slaves who would snitch and screw up the rebellion.

While the men were just bystanders who had no idea what to do with freedom had they had it. (n.pag)

The novel concludes with a note on how the night women die in the revolt while fighting for their freedom. The story is narrated to the readers by Lilith's daughter. Basically, this novel is not a historical novel but the author brings out the historical reference of the Domingue revolt of 1791 in it. They try to discover their own selves but that result in a rebellion that was not properly planned.

Conclusion:

Black women are not only humiliated by their white masters but also by their fellow black men. Lot of violence has been faced by the blacks in their lifetime. Black people in search of their identity plan to revolt against their masters for their freedom, keeping in mind about the Haitian revolution, which was the most successful slave revolt in the history.

According to Sojourner Truth, in *Ain't I a Woman* "the women must be rendered equal rights as well as for blacks" (n.pag). Black women must fight against the trauma to lead a pleasant life. One should not value women by their attire or by their physic. Women by discovering their own selves they take a step to change their fate and to live a life as free

humans. Black women have tasted a little bit of happiness amongst much violence in their lives. Blacks must not sit idle and accept the fate that lies before them. Likewise, not only black women but every woman must fight against the ordeals and must obtain freedom in a patriarchal society.

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