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A Postcolonial Feminist Approach to Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women*

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Abstract

Postcolonial feminism, also known as Third World Feminism, is a form of feminism which is concerned with the representation of women in the countries that were once under the colonial rule of Britain. Postcolonial feminists study the way colonialism conditioned the lives of the third world women who experience the 'double colonization' in terms of both race and gender. *The Book of Night Women* (2009) is a novel by a Jamaican novelist Marlon James. The novel, a slave narrative, also represents the condition of black women under slavery and their struggle to resist the colonial oppression in terms of race, gender, sexuality, etc. James here very realistically depicts the relationship between the slaves and slave owners, and colonized and colonizers. The black women in the novel also witness the double colonization. Therefore, the paper attempts to explore the ways black women are being oppressed in the system of colonization which blends all types of oppressions such as race, gender, sexuality, class, etc to control and dominate them. The focus shall be also to explore their resistance against slavery and patriarchy.

Keywords- *Postcolonial, Feminism, Black Women, Double Colonization, Race, Gender*

Introduction

The Book of Night Women (2009) by an emerging novelist in the Caribbean literature Marlon James, is a historical novel in which James revisits the slavery in the late eighteenth century Jamaican history. The novel portrays the life of black people (slaves) in the plantation system and the relationship between the slaves and the masters. More particularly, it depicts the life of black women slaves who fall victims of the colonial oppression from their very birth to the last breath of their life. It tells the story of their struggle and resistance against the oppression—racial and gender, throughout their lives. Lilith, the female (slave) protagonist of

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the novel, is born as a slave and witnesses the constant sexual and physical abuse at the hands of white overseers. In order to escape the sexual and physical violation by their masters, Lilith and other black women collectively protest and rebel against the dominated system.

The novel very realistically depicts the relation between the slaves and slave owners. The novel is full with the incidents which show the colonial oppression experienced by the night women in terms of race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. The protagonist of the novel, Lilith, and other black women, experience rape, sexual and physical abuse, whippings, etc. at the hands of whites throughout the novel. These slave women are considered as a thing of commodity, an item to be owned, controlled and sexually violated by the colonizers. Treating the women as a thing of sexual pleasure is the most concrete type of colonial oppression experienced by the black women in the novel.

The novel clearly describes the sexual and physical abuse experienced by Lilith which leads to her rebellion. Lilith is forced to endure the worst kind of sexual and physical violation. For instance, she is made to bathe her master. Once she is forced to stimulate her master's phallus with her hand upon which she expresses her resentment and she kills her master in her defense.

Lilith experiences sexual violation which clearly displays how sexuality influenced the female slave experience. At fifteen, when a Johnny-jumper tries to rape Lilith, she succeeds in killing him with his own cutlass. Homer, impressed by her will to resist male domination, recruits her into the group of 'night women' plotting against the white masters. Homer brings her into the main house after disposing of the murder with the help of two other women:

She drive the carryall carriage that come to take the body. Homer walk over to the Johnny-jumper. Then she looks at the girl. The women, except Circe, wrap the body in black cloth. Homer shove the boy head in a sack. They put the body in the back of the carriage and the short women ride off. (*The Book of Night Women* 17)

Lilith, the female protagonist of the novel, faces continually sexual violation and becomes the object of sexual gratification for the white masters for one reason or the other. Sexual violation has become a kind of punishment she experiences very often at the hands of males whenever she commits a crime. This is evident in the event when Lilith mistakenly spills hot soup on one of the guests at a ball hosted by her master, Humphrey, she is raped by a group of overseers in retaliation as a punishment.

Lilith also experiences physical torture at the hands of Johnny-jumpers, flogging her twice a week after Isobel retaliates against Lilith for sexually attempting her master, Humphrey. Among other people on the plantation she comes to be known as "the woman with the quilt on her back." (*The Book of Night Women* 167). Eventually, Lilith gets rid of these physical tortures with the help of Jack Wilkins, the original overseer of Montpelier plantation, who intervenes on her behalf. Sexual violence and abuse make her so strong in her

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will to resist male domination that she doesn't feel angry or anxious when she is sexually abused or mocked.

The novel explicitly details the sexual and physical abuse of Dulcimina who in spite of performing her duties experiences the physical and sexual violation. Her sexual and physical abuse is described in a lucid manner. She gives birth to twins, as she tells Lilith, fathered by her master. Then they have been snatched away from her and sold, thus depriving her of motherhood as well. Dulcimina becomes the victim of brutal floggings which eventually lead her to death. Once she is beaten 166 times by the mistress because she forgets to put the goats in the pen and they eat all the flowers of the mistress. She dies soon after and Lilith is forced to perform also the labors of Dulcimena after her death, "As soon as Dulcey dead, all her duty fall on Lilith" (*The Book of Night Women* 200).

Marlon James also reflects the gender-based oppression against women (universal kind of oppression experienced by women) which is also focused by the mainstream/western feminism. The women in the novel face gender oppression in their own community. The maroons, independent communities of escaped slaves outside the plantation, for their self interest return the runaway slaves to the plantation, and prove themselves more harsh and oppressive towards the black women. For instance, when the maroons find Benjy and Homer, they retain Benjy but reject Homer saying that she is of no use to them sexually. Before taking her back to the plantation, the maroons torture her physically many times that her child dies in her womb:

–That mean that they grab we and kick we like we is nigger. Benjy tell them that me in the family way and them don't business. White man can make you feel plenty bad, but me never dream that nigger could make nigger feel worse. Call me lanky titty donkey. Say that the massa might not even want me back. One of them lift up me frock and shove him hand in me pussy to see if me tight enough to keep. Sum' bitches. Goddamn sum' bitches. Me was right. Them was looking for strapping nigger so they keep Benjy, but they drag me back for they two pounds. And not before they beat me first. Beat me so much that see me own pickney give up first and fall out of me womb. A girl. You understand what me telling you, chile? (*The Book of Night Women* 215-16)

This reflects how the life of slave women is affected and the way slave women face the sexual violence at the hands of their own community. The maroons having masculine concept of freedom shatters the black slave's hope and concept of freedom as they pose a great threat to their freedom from the plantation life. They make them feel like the niggers don't deserve freedom. As Homer speaks out her mind and remarks about the maroons while beating and flogging her ruthlessly and sending back to the plantation:

Is not even losing the pickney that kill me. Is losing myself. Them Maroons make me feel like no nigger deserve freedom. No nigger must be man or

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woman. They think they free but they base and wicked and fucking goat so long they don't even know woman. Me did think a woman not a woman unless she be free and they take that from me. Take 'way me womanness. Is better they did rape me than send me back. Benjy, that same Benjy who tell me that me birthmark is like island and me skin is sea. That same sum' bitch don't even say nothing and couldn't even look. Me even feel sorry for him, for what nigger love be compare to free? (*The Book of Night Women* 216)

This is quite obvious that niggers don't feel safe at the hands of the maroons, the people of their own race, more particularly nigger women who face physical assault and sexual exploitation.

The novel very clearly gives the detail of racial oppression and discrimination towards black people by white masters. The whites consider themselves powerful and superior to the blacks and they treat them not as humans but merely as a thing, a commodity or an object which is to be inherited, bought and sold. The black women in particular often witness the racial oppression in the form of rape and sexual abuse by the whites. They have become a sexual commodity, a thing that satisfies the sexual desire of their masters and something that is supposed to be available for their masters whenever they feel need of them to satisfy their sexual hunger. Commenting upon the colonial control over the women by treating them sexual commodity, Smith writes:

By rape and sexual abuse, colonial powers can assert their power in a simultaneously literal and figurative manner. We own you, says the ideology, and that your body is a sexual commodity is evidence of this condition. Not only are the colonized sexually humiliated and controlled, but they are further reduced to animals, their very humanity displaced. This, of course, is absolutely critical to maintain the illusion of the benevolence of colonial power—for once the oppressed are recognized as fully human, the pretense is unsupportable.

The novel exposes the negative effect of this ideological discourse of womanhood on black women who were implicitly constructed in opposition to this ideal of white femininity with the result that the institutions of marriage, motherhood and the family, that were highly prized in white genteel society were devalued in the life of the slave woman. (Barron 186).

These women were considered as sexual toys and were sexually violated and raped by the whites but were not allowed to marry. Even the children, who were born out of rape, were snatched away from these women, thus depriving them of the institutions of family and motherhood. Therefore, these women experienced the double colonization on the basis of gender (both at the hands of whites as well as in their own community, maroons) and race. In the novel, when the maroons bring Homer back to the plantation, she is whipped repeatedly

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as a punishment and then raped by six men. Out of this sexual violation and rape, she bears two children who are sold in their infancy and die afterwards very soon. Therefore, the slave women whom the whites use for sexual pleasure and their own profit only, are not given their rights to marriage and family. As Smith puts it:

One of the glaring ironies, or hypocrisies, of colonialism is that it condemns the colonized for the very things it forces them to do. It condemns the enslaved woman for being sexually promiscuous, yet at the same time coerces or forces her to have as many children as possible—for the profit of slave owners (capitalism!)

While the novel shows the oppressions of black women, it also depicts their resistance and rebellion against the slavery where they become victims of both gender and racial oppression. Lilith, Homer and other black women go against the slavery and the male domination after having experienced too many sexual and physical violations on the plantation. The 'Night Women', a group of six black women (half-sisters), is formed on each plantation in order to show the female resistance not only to slavery but also to the male domination. Because the black women experience the oppression not only in terms of race but also in terms of gender both at the hands of whites and in their own race (Maroonage). Thus, these women don't involve men in their campaign. They can't trust men anymore out of their experiences of sexual and physical violations. Homer overreacts when she knows that women are compelled to include men also in their plans at another place and says, "we can't abide manfolk... you can't trust a man" (*The Book of Night Women* 166). It is out of her personal experience of sexual and physical violation that Homer plans to rebel against the plantation system. She tries to escape the plantation but is caught in the hands of the maroons. She is returned to the plantation not before she is raped by a group of men and flogs her which results in her miscarriage. She rebels to revenge against the deaths of her children who are sold during their infancy and against her sexual violations. It is Homer who recruits Lilith in their campaign after witnessing her will and power to resist the male domination when Lilith succeeds in killing a Johnny jumper who tries to rape her. Again, when Lilith refuses to touch her master's private part with her hands he tries to strike her. But in retaliation, Lilith drowns him. Later, she pushes his mistress over the second floor and sets fire to the house in which two children of the couple and two other slaves are killed. This illustrates that Lilith's rebellion is the outcome of her continuous sexual exploitation. However, in the end of the novel, both oppressors and oppressed, colonizer and colonized meet the tragic ends. In a fit of vengeance, whites and blacks, masters and slaves both are destroyed and both fall victims of colonial relations.

Conclusion

Marlon James offers an authentic account of the colonial relationship between the slaves and their masters, between the blacks and the whites, the colonizers and the colonized

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in the late 18th century Jamaica. The novel reflects how the black people in general, and black women in particular, experience the harsh kind of oppression in the plantation system. While the black men witness racial difference only, the black women experience the double colonization in terms of both race and gender at the hands of whites. These black women witness gender discrimination even in their own race at the hands of maroons. They fall victims of sexual and physical abuse in their own community for their personal interest. They are treated just like animals who are supposed to work in the fields only, having nothing to do with their rights. The novel very clearly portrays the impact of colonialism, (which interlocks all the oppressions in terms of race, gender, class, sexuality, etc.) upon the lives of black women, thus making them more and more suppressed, oppressed and colonized.

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