

# Narrative Technique in Marlon James's Novels

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## Abstract

*Narrative Technique is a crucial tool for the novelist to write his/her literary work or work of art successfully. It is the means of producing a specific effect of a novel. Only with the employment of the right technique, the novelists would convey their ideas to the readers. It acts as the medium between life and art, which helps the novelist to interpret and transform reality. This creation involves the employment of several devices. It also makes the readers to discover and travel among other selves, other identities, and other variety of human adventures. It is the 'how' (technique) rather than the 'what' (subject) is instrumental in causing paradigm shifts, in founding literary schools, and in originating major literary trends. Hence narrative technique is not just an ornament or superimposed element upon the content to give it additional value but the intrinsic quality of the subject matter itself. Marlon James, a Jamaican novelist authored four novels *John Crow's Devil* (2005), *The Book of Night Women* (2009), *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2015), and *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019) by adopting different techniques for each novel. The aim of the research paper is to explore how Marlon James accommodates contrasting ideas and themes in his novels by employing various methods.*

**Key Words:** Narrative technique, multi-levelness, multi-genre, polyphonic, etc.

## Introduction

Marlon James writes a wide range of subjects like Jamaican history, slavery, political violence, racism, colonization, etc. He views the events in his books from various perspectives using a variety of techniques and strategies to accommodate different perspectives and ideas in his novels. He creates multi-levelness in the text.

James's novels are tributes to the shunned, deprived; those who, whether by birth or circumstance, find themselves on the "outside" of the system as a consequence, feel most acutely both the hunger for identity and the hardship in obtaining it. Marlon James's novels possess a timeless relevance in its power to expand the reader's empathy for those who suffer from the universal need to feel accepted.

*John Crow's Devil* is the first remarkable debut novel published in the year 2005. According to Bookmark review titled "In Context: Marlon James, *John Crow's Devil* has-, "Faulknerian in its layered narration ...the Apostle."<sup>1</sup>

*John Crow's Devil* has the third person point of view with diverse perspectives. Despite that, the most of the

incidents in the text surface as if the author is interpreting the details. Even with a narrator, the reader has a limited perspective and much of the information is never revealed by the narrator. For instance, Clarence a character in the story watches his back in the mirror as he undergoes what appears to be a miraculous healing. He was whipped cruelly by the Apostle York, but his back goes from bloody open slashes to heal in a matter of seconds. There are many incidents like this that the reader has to assume what happens further; the narrator never reveals any extra information about the events.

*The Book of Night Women* is the second novel by the author. It depicts the Jamaican slavery and slave's uprisings that occurred at the end of the seventeenth and in early eighteenth centuries. The protagonist is Liliith born to a White father and Black mother in the plantation. Being a mullatto, she is broken between fidelity to her half sisters (known as The Night Women) and their plan of vicious rebellion against whites. she also deceived by the Irish slave master Robert Quinn, who makes her his mistress and with whom she unwillingly falls in love.

*The Book of Night Women* appears as a multivalent novel to the reader because it blends multiple genres or different elements of different genres, thereby depicting many ideas and themes. In this regard, the reader feels the novel is a hybrid in the genre, for it is an admixture of a slave narrative and a historical fiction. The narrator is unknown still the end. Finally, the reader knows that the narrator is Lilith's daughter called Demus via her "relationship" with Robert Quinn an Overseer working in the Sugarcane plantation. The novel shares an epic narrative form in narration. The novelist beautifully applied vernacular language in much of the narration. According to The Independent Magazine review *The Book of Night Women* is,

"[An] epic narrative... violent passages".<sup>2</sup>

The use of Lilith's daughter's first-person narration, in effect, removes the reader from the inner workings of Lilith's minds.

Marlon James's third novel, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is a polyphonic novel that explores Jamaica's gang wars of the 1970s. According to Irvine Welsh review,

"A vivid plunge into a crazed, violent and...swaggering aplomb."<sup>3</sup>

The novel is narrated in third-person point of view. The plot centers on the attempted murder of "the Singer," the alter-ego of the musician Bob Marley. The novel also reveals the roles of international drug syndicates and the CIA in fueling the island's terrible gang violence. In *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, James has used the narrative technique of polyphony, there is a multitude of narrative voices reflecting different perspectives and ideas, free of the author's intervention. In this regard, the novel is a polyphonic novel representing dissimilar consciousnesses of unlike voices.

Marlon James's latest novel *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, is the first novel in a highly-anticipated trilogy written based on African myth. The narration is in first-person point of view. The narrator makes a decisive shift to the fantasy genre. He further strengthens his credentials as an artisan of multifarious forms. According to *The San Diego Union-Tribune*,

"James' new sci-fi fantasy ...a shape-shifting man-animal known as Leopard"<sup>4</sup>.

*Black Leopard Red Wolf's* utter immersion in threat is as astonishing as it is disquieting. The fantasy Africa

wonderfully illustrated by James' maps, the separation of the novel's sections, is highly rich and dizzyingly imaginative in the novel. The reader also finds a place where humans are portrayed as very last in the food chain, always at risk of being raped and consumed by lightning-vampires or ceiling demons or baby-quartering witches. The novel is also considered as inhospitable as the cell in which the reader meets Tracker – and it isn't until he stops speaking to the inquisitor and seems to be telling the story for its own sake, reliving it. Everything hurts and exhausts, even as the reader wants to know more, want to love the narrator who holds the reader constantly at arm's length.

Marlon James rejects the comfort of reworking narratives and techniques that previously earned him recognition. With each resulting novel, readers' assumptions about plot, portrayal, and story development are probably going to be perplexed. However inside the range and virtuosity of his work certain thematic concerns and narrating methods surface and these are the brand names of James' abstract oeuvre. According to Marlon James Wikipedia,

."James' work carries a unique style...rightly horrified."<sup>5</sup>

James' reliance on the spoken word also distinguishes his work in some other sense: he is masterful at writing conversation. The conversations, for the most part, are in the author's Jamaican Patois vernacular and use disconnected speech that exerts a syncopation laden with rap, pulp film, and literary influences. The conversation is fun and often very funny. It is likewise purposefully bewildering the cacophonous voices reflecting the disorder of the brutality established on the page. In spite of making discontinuous disarray, the discussions uncover the characters' mankind, engraving enthusiastic associations for the reader that are more grounded than those that emerge from enlightening portrayals alone.

Marlon James's works are challenging and lyrical, and he often uses Jamaican Patois in conversation, frequently utilizes numerous voices for various characters. His style strays from conventional and expected Caribbean writing by making wild and dangerous additional possibilities for contemplating the region's space in our contemporary reality. James' narratives explore how the inherited signifiers of sex, race, and tribe preordain identity, while at

the same time he dismantles the notion that these determiners are binary and immutable.

Marlon James adopts oral narrative traditions to reveal his plots. Characters testify about significant happenings as actors, witnesses, or receptors of stories passed down. There is grandeur to these oratories, language that resonates with the ancient timbre of biblical verse and Greek tragedy. The narration holds historical memories within which the characters attempt to find meaning for their dismal circumstances. At the same time, novels are shared again and again to sustain hatred, mythologize persons into protagonists, and nurture hope against suffering. Indeed, the intentional manipulation of others through the telling of stories is a recurring motif in James' novels, as in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, for example,

where a rumored peace between rival gangs is used to incite violence, or in *John Crow's Devil*, where accounts of the Apostle's miracles are spread to build a cult of personality around him.

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