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SUBTLE RESISTANCE AGAINST SLAVERY IN MARLON JAMES'S THE BOOK OF NIGHT WOMEN

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Abstract

*Slavery and oppression of the Blacks have always been the themes in the works of many Black writers. Most works show how these Blacks were mistreated and how they succumbed to the horror of slavery without much resistance. However, Marlon James, a writer who hails from Kingston, Jamaica often depicts the Black characters as people who actually resisted the oppression during the period of slavery. This paper will discuss how the Black characters resisted the system of slavery in a subtle manner based Marlon James's novel, *The Book of Night Women* (2009). The resistance that will be discussed here are the subtle resistance by the characters in the novel, against the colonizer's harsh and inhuman abuses. The Black slaves showed subtle resistance by bridging the trust, resisting reproduction and committing infanticide, practicing black magic and resisting the master's culture by preserving the remnants of their culture and tradition. Instead of accepting their unfortunate fate, this group of oppressed people actually showed their resistance through these measures.*

Key words: *subtle resistance, slavery, oppression, black magic, infanticide, obeah.*

Introduction

Christopher Columbus is believed to be the first European to have landed in Jamaica in 1494, during his second voyage to the Americas. After his arrival, the history of the Caribbean took a dramatic turn. The European colonizers competed with each other to establish their colonies on these islands which they labeled as the New World. Sugar was first introduced by the Dutch in the British West Indies from Brazil in the mid 1700. The sugar industry needed labourers and the British started bringing in thousands of enslaved Africans into Jamaica. Then, from the 17th century until the 19th century, twelve million Africans were brought to the New World against their will to perform back-breaking labor under terrible conditions. The barbarous "triangle trade" began shortly after Europeans began exploring the west coast of Africa. Ships leaving Europe first stopped in Africa where they traded weapons, ammunition, metal, liquor, and cloth for captives taken in wars or raids. The ships then traveled to the Americas, where slaves were exchanged for sugar, rum, salt, and other island products. The ships completed the triangle loaded with products popular with the European people, and were ready to begin their journey again (Richardson, 1968: 21). Jamaica was under the Spanish rule until the British invaded it in 1655. Slavery of the Blacks in Jamaica was initiated by the Spanish after the native Taino people who were enslaved then were wiped off due to European diseases, over work and massacre. *The Book of Night*

Women (2009) is Marlon James's second novel. Marlon James is well known for his distinct style of writing where he resists portraying his protagonist character as the role model. He also uses Black English as a mode of narration to make the novel more realistic to the readers. James was born in Kingston, Jamaica. He is the winner of Man Booker Prize 2015 for his third novel, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014). He is the second Caribbean winner for that prize after V.S. Naipaul.

The Book of Night Women is set in a sugar cane plantation called Montpelier estate. The main character of this novel is Liliith, a Mulatto girl with green eyes who was born out of wedlock, after her mother (Demeter) was raped by the white overseer, Jack Wilkins because her brother tried to run away. Then, he beheaded Demeter's brother. Demeter dies giving birth to Liliith and she is put under the care of Circe, a field hand. Later, Liliith learns that Circe was not her real mother. When she was fifteen, Johnny Jumpers (field hands) tried to rape her and she kills one of them. Later, she is taken in as a house slave by Homer, a Black woman who heads the house slaves in the estate home. Later, Liliith is introduced to five other mulatto women (Iphigenia, Gorgon, Pallas, Hippolyta and Callisto) who were also fathered by Wilkins and all of them possess the same green eyes. Homer heads these women and together they plot to defeat the oppressive and abusive white colonizer, which eventually led to a slave revolt in Montpelier estate. However, without much cooperation from

the male Black slaves, the revolt failed and most of the slaves were killed. This paper will discuss on the subtle resistance put up by the slaves in order to show their disagreement on the system of slavery. The slaves on the Montpelier estate are ruled with terror. After the frequent slave uprisings and revolts on the island, the colonizers started to exercise unrestrained power over their slaves. They were treated very barbarically like burnt alive, amputating the foot of the runaway slaves, brutal whippings for the simplest mistakes and women were exploited sexually. Since the slaves were always exposed to the reign of terror, they can only express their resistance in subtle ways. Though towards the end of the novel, James pictures a big revolt in Montpelier but the slaves failed when they were overpowered by the colonizers. Contrary to this, the slaves who resisted subtly were successful most of the time.

Subtle Resistance against Slavery in *The Book of Night Women*

Having been uprooted involuntarily and brutally from their established cultural settings and plunged to an alien environment, the Blacks find no justification in submitting themselves to the new setting. Harping remorseful and vindictive feelings towards the whites, they live with a subtle protest towards everything that is linked to their former masters (Mani 2011:161). Their indignation is displayed in a silent protest toward the establishment and the institution of the Whites. The subtle resistance helped the slaves to revenge their owners and vent out their anger. This method was a easy way to get their revenge without being caught by their Masters. The first form of subtle resistance is by bridging the trust. The female slaves who worked in the house are the most trusted by their masters. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator states that Mrs. Wilson, the Lady of the house as being insane. Homer, the head cook in the plantation house, uses the trust that the Mistress had on her to take revenge. She took advantage of her position as the Head Cook to poison Mrs. Wilson. Gradually, Mrs. Wilson became mad. This was Homer's way of revenging for what she did to her two children. Homer's children were sold away to another plantation by Mrs. Wilson.

"[t]hat sweet and dandy. Me been friggin' up the mistress mind with me tea for years now. She soon mad as raas and this one think this tea goin'

cool her nerves but it goin' do more than that"(James, 2009:217).

Most of the Black women were well versed in the use of herbs and plants for medicinal uses and often misused them to take revenge on the white folks. In this way, no one could detect any foul play and they got their revenge. Besides that, Homer who wanted to seek revenge towards Mrs. Wilson, contaminated the food that she served her. Mrs. Wilson instigated her husband to whip Homer and brand her back with iron. These slave women's resistance is clear in the conversation between Lilitth and Homer.

"[this kinda ways, Lilitth say and hike up her skirt. She crouch good over the pot but high up that she don't burn herself and piss. Homer spit into it. Sometimes, when the recipe call for molasses, me slip some dog shit in it too, Lilitth say. Cow shit! Cow shit for me, Homer say". (James, 2009:217)

In any plantation, the Black women are used as the vessel for reproduction. They are often raped by their owners or impregnated by Black men whose role is as a mere stud. They were expected to multiply and make their owners richer. James shows how these women eat herbs to avoid the unwanted pregnancy. After Lilitth is raped by many men as a punishment for spilling the soup, Homer asks her to eat some herbs to avoid being pregnant.

"Lilitth eat one slice and go to spit. She put back the rest. -Listen to me. Plenty man rape you tonight. One of them seed must did get in you. So you goin' eat the green pawpaw until up in that womb clean out, you hear me? Don't have no dutty stinking white pickney. Lilitth eat the rest". (James, 2009:159)

This is to avoid giving birth to Mulatto children. This act on the other hand works as an agenda to resist the colonizer's dream of multiplying the slaves at no cost. Many Black women resist this attempt of their Masters by committing infanticide too. This action of resistance is also highlighted by James in this novel. "They can imitate us, but above that they are still beast that'd even kill their own. I had a kitchen slave who killed her own twins, several months ago (James, 2009:202). According to Barbara Bush in her article titled "Hard Labor: Women, Childbirth, and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies", resistance to slavery was a significant part of the lives of female slaves and it took many forms, ranging from outright revolt to more

subtle and less aggressive behaviour (Bush 1996:193-217). She further reiterates in her book, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (1990) that in many Caribbean plantations, many Europeans declared women slaves to be more troublesome than men and they often proved difficult and awkward to manage for the colonialists (Bush, 1990: 53-56).

The Blacks also practice black magic and other African ancestral beliefs as a subtle form of resistance. James highlights how these practices are used to frighten people. By practicing them, the Blacks are able to retain their culture though distorted without conforming to the Master's culture. Both the Blacks and whites fear when the word *Obeah* is mentioned. Lawrence Levine in his book titled, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* states the following about the practices of the Black slaves:

There were things white folks did not know and because of this their power, great as it was, was limited. ...there were things they did not know, forces they could not control, areas in which slaves could act with more knowledge and authority than their masters, ways in which the powers of the whites could be muted if not thwarted entirely. (Levine, 2007: 73)

In *The Book of Night Women*, *obeah* is widely used by the Black slaves. *Obeah* in the form of *Sasabonsam* is sent by Circe to Liliith. Here, James reveals the following to the readers:

Sasabonsam come straight from the Africa, not in the chains but by free will, and make him home wherever there be most misery. Sasabonsam live in the cotton tree and give any man him time if have a guinea... a shuman at your bed mean somebody setting evil on you, mayhaps death. Sasabonsam be the wickedest Obeah, worse than poison. Only one thing can fight it and nothing that the white man brew. (James, 2009: 48-49)

The Blacks in the Caribbean, especially Jamaica were able to retain their culture by instilling a subtle fear among the white people though they were enslaved. *Obeah* is believed to be deadly where Homer relates to Liliith how a Black woman bled to death where "her entire lifeblood bleed out of her pussyhole, arsehole, earhole and nosehole" (James 2009:51). She was sought after not only by the Blacks for remedy but even the Whites. Homer who

possesses all this knowledge in *Obeah*, managed to retain the African culture, and at the same time resist the Master's culture by instilling subtle fear in the White society as well as the Black.

Conclusion

Instead of accepting their unfortunate fate, this group of oppressed people decided to show their disagreement by resisting subtly. Since open confrontation and resistance will land them in corporal punishment, these people resort to a subtle resistance. Though there was no escape from the horrible fate that was cast upon them, these slaves found small success in resisting their fate subtly.

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