

# Racial Discrimination and Identity Crisis in the Select Novels of Marlon James: A Postcolonial Study

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## Abstract

The present paper entitled "Racial Discrimination and Identity Crisis in the Select Novels of Marlon James: A Postcolonial Study" will explore the novels of Marlon James from the perspective of Postcolonial theory. Characters in the writer's books suffer from racism, black identity, dehumanization, discrimination, fear, violence, terror, loss of identity, suicide and death. The study shows through the novels of Marlon James how black people are marginalized, victimized, demoralized, and oppressed in society. Their individuality and freedom have been curtailed. This research work delineates how they suffer psychologically because of this dehumanization. This paper explores racism, Identity Crisis and slavery prevailing in contemporary Jamaica and the violence they encounter under white rule. His novels show that slavery, segregation, and racism have not ended in present Jamaica. Racism is apparent throughout the books in different ways and in various forms. In Marlon James's novels, characters like Hector Bligh and Lilith suffer from identity crisis and demoralization. The study aims to analyze how people have confronted barbarity and violence from white people. He argues that racial problems still exist in society. There are examples of regression instead of progression in the living conditions of Jamaicans. It will also explore the relationship between the black community and the white community.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, Identity Crisis, Marlon James, Postcolonialism, Racial Discrimination etc.

## INTRODUCTION

Marlon James was born in Kingston, Jamaica (1970). James's parents were both in Jamaican police. His mother gave him his first composition book, a collection of stories by O. Henry and his father, from whom James took adoration for Shakespeare and Coleridge. Marlon James graduated in 1991 from the University of the West Indies with a degree in language and literature. He got his master's degree in creative writing from Wilkes University in 2006. He is now living in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the U.S. and teaches literature at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. Marlon James' first novel, *John Crow's Devil* (2005), talks about the account of a biblical battle in a far off Jamaican town during the 1950s. However dismissed multiple times before being acknowledged for publication, *John Crow's Devil* proceeded to turn into a finalist for the Commonwealth Writers Prize, the

Los Angeles Times Book Prize and just a New York Times Editor's Choice. His subsequent novel, *The Book of Night Women* (2009), is about a slave women's revolt on a Jamaican plantation in the mid-nineteenth century. The novel won Minnesota Book Award, the 2010 Dayton Literary Peace Prize, and was a contender for the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2010 in fiction, just as an NAACP Image Award.

Marlon James's nonfiction and short fiction have been published in, *The Book of Men: Eighty Writers on How to Be a Man*, *Bronx Noir* and have shown up in *Granta*, *Esquire*, *Harper's*, *The Caribbean Review of Books* and different distributions. His widely read paper, "From Jamaica to Minnesota to Myself," showed up in the *New York Times Magazine*. In mid-2016, his viral video *Are you a bigot?* 'No' is anything but an adequate answer that got a massive number of hits. His top-

selling book, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019), is the first in the Dark Star Trilogy, a dream series set in African legend. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, got Fantasy and Speculative Fiction from the Los Angeles Times Book Prizes, the Ray Bradbury Prize for Science Fiction. The Locus Award (2020) for Horror was a final contender for the 2019 National Book Award in the Fiction classification and was named one of the Washington Post's Ten Best Books of 2019. The next book in the trilogy is *Moon Witch, Spider King* (Riverhead Books, February 15, 2022). Marlon James has a famous webcast about writing with Jake Morrissey called Marlon and Jake Read Dead People.

James achieved the 2015 Man Booker Prize for *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, making him the first Jamaican writer to bring home the U.K.'s most high artistic honour. James consolidates stunning narrating with splendid character and an eye for detail to produce an intense novel of great aspiration and scope. He investigates Jamaican history through the points of view of various storytellers and genres: the political thriller, the oral memoir, and the excellent whodunit stand up to the untold history of Jamaica in the 1970s, with outings to the assassination attempt on musician Bob Marley, just as the nation's stealthy fights during the cold war. James refers to impacts as different as Greek tragedy, William Faulkner, the L.A. crime author James Ellroy, Shakespeare, Batman and the X-Men. His novel, *The book A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014), won the American Book Award, the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature, the Minnesota Book Award, and was a finalist for the Award National Book Critics Circle. In 2018 Marlon James got an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature. In the Pioneers class, he was named one of Time Magazine's hundred Most Influential People of 2019. In his introductions, James tends to points identified with composing and the creative cycle, just as issues relating to the historical backdrop of the Caribbean, race and sexual orientation in the U.S. and U.K., and youth subcultures as communicated in writing and music like hip-jump and reggae.

## Identity crisis

The identity crisis and racial discrimination are society's biggest, most tragic problems. Identity is characterized as "the certainty of being who or what a man or thing is" as per oxford English definition of identity. Postcolonial theory and studies' most disputable and significant issue is identity crisis or quest for identity. Postcolonial theorists and critics have considered the issue of identity as one of the considerable impacts of colonialism on local culture. It is the most pressing issue in postcolonial time and literature and the most imperative for its crisis in postcolonial communities that confronted newly freed nations and countries in their quest for identity. The postcolonial novelists uncovered the dilemma of identity and the issues associated with identity. Marlon James is one of the significant postcolonial novelists. His novels display the struggle to find an identity, whether as an enslaved person or a postcolonial inhabitant of Jamaica. He presents the anguish of Postcolonial society struggling for its own identity. The novel *John Crow's Devil* explores postcolonial Jamaica through a religiously battle of good and evil. In this novel, James utilizes a small community show to propose the more considerable misery of a postcolonial society battling its own identity, but he infused this with religious fervour. The ghost of colonialism is subtler, but the instability and struggle for identity are clear to the reader. His subsequent novel, *The Book of Night Women*, also deals with the racism, violence and quest for identity as a slave of Jamaica. His novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is a fantastic exploration of identity and ethnicity. This study reveals insight into one of the fundamental issues, which is how the nonwhite (the colonized) depicted the personality of the colonizer in their texts.

His first novel, *John Crow's Devil*, is set in 1957, five years before the independence of Jamaica, in the fictional town of Gibeah, Jamaica. In this novel, there is a struggle between two men for the town's singular religious leader. Hector Bligh, a preacher in the small village of Gibeah in Jamaica, battled with liquor addiction and acquired the nickname "The

Rum preacher". One day a brimstone preacher, Apostle York, unexpectedly appears and violently removes Bligh from the pulpit and brutally beats him. The assembly attracted York's leads as he filled the otherworldly vacuum left by Bligh's empty and considerate service. Bligh returns to the congregation to find that his assemblage no longer needs him, and York is willing to retreat o violence to repel him.

His subsequent novel, *The Book of Night Women*, escorts Lilith, born into slavery. Marlon James follows the existence of Jamaican slave ladies during the British colonization of the Caribbean island. James attempts to describe from the perspective of women in general and slave women specifically. He does not avoid associating women with violence. They view as culprits, observers and casualties of violence. In the book of night women, brutality is constrained by gender. James highlighted the extreme violence of slavery and British Colonial rule. He explored one of the darkest and most painful chapters of the Caribbean and modern history in this novel. The story focuses on the fate of Lilith (daughter of a slave woman) and a tyrannical white overseer Jack Wilkins. This novel explores the white colonial rule and the complex history of slavery in Jamaica during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. *The Book of Night Women* stands in an intertextual relation to Frantz Fanon's work *The Wretched of the Earth*, to eradicate violence by using more violence.

His third novel, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* by Marlon James, published in 2014, won him the man booker prize of 2015, covering the three decades of Jamaican history from the mid-1970s to the early 90s. It includes the attempted assassination of Bob Marley in the 1970s, crack wars in New York City (1980s), and a changed Jamaica (1990s). This novel presents the attempted assassination of Bob Marley, an actual event in the history of Jamaica. His most recent book, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019), is Marlon James's first novel of the dark star trilogy, published in 2019. It is a combination of African myth, fantasy and African history. The opening line of this novel is "the child is dead. There is nothing left to know". James created this work of literary magic

by combining African cultures, mythologies, religions, customs, histories, rituals, world views, topography, and his imagination.

### Racism

The race is one of the essential parameters of the postcolonial theory that can effectively examine fiction. Racism is one of the biggest obstacles between the colonizers and colonized. Postcolonial theory is meant primarily to highlight the concept of racism in all its ramifications, marginalization and segregation perpetrated on the subalterns or 'others'. The theory shows how European nations (the white) conquered and controlled" the third world" cultures and societies and how their subaltern groups have responded to and resisted such infringements. The notion of racism is derived from the word 'race', and it is assumed that one racial or ethnic group is subordinate to another, and the unequal treatment is thus justified. Much Jamaican literature has focused on issues of racism and the black racial experience. Marlon James is one of such writers who incorporates the themes of Jamaican history, racism and issues of race in his novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. This novel covers the three decades of Jamaican traumatic history of colonialism and slavery; many cases relate to racism, class and colourism.

Marlon James's book *The Book of Night Women* presents enslaved people's lives at Montpelier, a sugar plantation in Jamaica where enslaved people were often treated brutally by their white colonizers, who whipped, raped, and even murdered them. One form of racism that exists in their novel is white privilege. Racial discrimination makes blacks get inhuman treatment, such as verbal and sexual abuse and makes enslaved Black people unable to determine their own lives. The protagonist in this novel is Lilith, the witness of this tragedy. She is a young enslaved person who seeks to be human in an inhuman world. The reality of racial discourse is set against the backdrop of a Jamaican plantation during the termination of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the concern about racism is rooted in the colonial home country. The phrase used by James to open several chapters in the novel is

"Every negro walks in a circle.

Take that and make of...."

This presentpaper brings to the fore an unpleasant situation in Jamaica where people have to suffer because of the race to which they belong. Even people in America suffer from ethnic complexities. They live in America. So, their ethnicity is American. But their race is Jamaican, and they have to face ethnic complications. They cannot express themselves as free as they were. They are living in gloomy conditions. Marlon James depicts the struggle of people trying to get a new identity that they do not achieve due to racism. Jamaicans are the worst sufferers in society; they are subjugated, belittled, dehumanized, exploited, and destroyed based on skin, colour, and race. One form of racism that present in *The Book of Night Women* novel is white privilege. In this novel, white privilege is embodied in the practice of slavery occurring in Montpelier Estate at the height of 18 century. This information from the initial part of the novel in chapter one. The system of slavery at that time was black chattel slavery. That system made the slave become a non-person: a chattel, a thing, an object to be bequeathed and inherited, sold and bought. This condition is seen when Lilith accompanied Isobel to go town, and they drove past a slave auction:

"SLAVES, BOUGHT AND SOLD.

She thinks that Miss Isobel sees her this time, but Miss Isobel is busy cussing people to get out of her goddamn way. The carriage can barely move now, for the sake of the crowd of people....."

This paragraph portrays how a slave auction happens. The black slaves are classified based on their virtues. The virtue determines the slave "s price. A teenage female slave is favourable because she can be a sex slave to produce more slaves. A strong male slave is also highly-priced because his strength may cover more works, saving the master "s money to buy more slaves.

## Theory

"Between colonialism and its genealogical offsprings, there is thus a holding and crossing over. Most postcolonial writers bear their past within them- as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially received visions of the past tending towards a future." Edward W. Said,"*Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World*." (54-55)

The postcolonial theory concerns the effect of colonization on culture and societies. It is a theoretical approach to examining the literature produced in the nations that were once colonies, especially by European powers such as Britain, Spain, France, Portuguese, Belgian, Italy and Germany. It is not a homogenous school of literary theory and criticism like other approaches to textual analysis. It is a loosely defined set of theories and approaches that reveal what occurs to the colonized whenever the colonizers have overpowered them. It essentially deals with the writings that have been composed by the colonized in colonized countries. Fundamental analysis of the literature, history, culture and discourse on the third world nations in South America, Asia, Africa, The Caribbean island deals with the study of the colonization (which started right on time as the renaissance), the decolonization (which includes winning back and reconstituting the local societies) and neocolonialism (a consequence of postmodernism and late free enterprise, when global organizations control the world). Focusing on the ubiquitous force battles among communities and the convergence of civilizations that brings about multiculturalism and polyvalence of culture, Postcolonialism examines the metaphysical, moral and political concerns about cultural identity, language, power, identity, race, gender, nationality and subjectivity.

The founder stone of postcolonial study is Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). He is a Palestinian-American scholar and literary critic and established the scientific study of postcolonial theory. Edward Said's *Orientalism* depicts the imbalance between the east and west by showing the superiority of the west over the

east. West always dominated the east, so Edward Said applied the terms 'orient' for west and occident for east. It is the first work investigating the relationship between two different cultures- east and west.

"Orientalism is a style of thought based on the ontological and

epistemological distinction between the orient and the occident".

In his other work, *Culture and Imperialism*, Said analyzed the presence of empire in some works and referred to writers from colonized and postcolonial countries. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is an influential Indian scholar, literary theorist and important feminist critic who produced "subaltern studies". Do her works include *Three Women's Texts, A Critique of Imperialism and Can the Subaltern Speak? And Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1987). The work *Can the Subaltern Speak?* She tries to overthrow the concept of binary opposition between orient and occident, self and other, and centre and marginal. According to Spivak, the subaltern belongs to third world countries. They had divided by class, race, religion, gender, region etc., so they couldn't speak. These divisions do not permit them to stand up in unity. She criticizes Deleuze and Foucault for committing 'Epistemic Violence' that projects Eurocentric knowledge onto the third world nations. She makes a harsh comment on the dominant male society. Homi Bhabha is another significant postcolonial theorist who made distinguished contributions to Postcolonial criticism and cultural studies. His works include *Nation and Narration* (1990), *In a Spirit of Calm Violence* (1994), *The Location of Culture* (1994) etc. He developed several vital concepts like hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence etc. He also raises the question of cultural identity.

Postcolonial theory and studies' most disputable and significant issue is identity crisis or quest for identity and racial discrimination. Postcolonial theorists and critics have considered the issue of identity and racial discrimination as the considerable impacts of colonialism on local culture. These are the most

pressing issue in postcolonial time and literature and the most imperative for the crisis in postcolonial communities that confronted newly freed nations and countries in their quest for identity. Identity is characterized as "the certainty of being who or what a man or thing is" as per Oxford English definition of identity. Edward Said and Frantz Fanon perceive identity as influenced by the colonial impact on colonized, which made them feel inferior. According to Frantz Fanon, an identity crisis is a historical association between the colonized and colonizers. On the other hand, Edward Said associated the identity crisis with political discourse. His thoughts are constructed on the Foucaultian view of power and knowledge; Edward Said translates the relationship between the colonial power and colonized countries and individuals.

The timeframe which followed The Second World war was the time of an act to ask for decolonization and freedom of countries that were subject to the frontier ability to push ahead toward improving social and individual characters. Therefore, identity became the central issue in postcolonial time and literature for its crisis exists in all the postcolonial social orders. The problem of identity drifted on a superficial level because of the condition of the postcolonial period and the troublesome conditions that the recently liberated countries and nations faced in their seeking and formation of self-identity. The review investigates the loss of identity that the singular experiences while searching for identity during the provincial and postcolonial times, focusing on Jamaican literature to show the concern. The postcolonial novelists uncovered the dilemma of identity and the issues associated with identity. Marlon James is one of the significant postcolonial novelists. His novels display the struggle to find an identity, whether as an enslaved person or a postcolonial inhabitant of Jamaica. He presents the anguish of Postcolonial society struggling for its own identity.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, curving for own identity is one of the significant issues that recently liberated countries from colonial authority

obsessed with. The scholars and writers introduced alternate points of view and contentions about the issue of personality. Yet, in totally cased, there is a general arrangement that crisis is one of the aftermaths of colonialism and its strategy directed during their ruling of colonized nations. The concern is somehow likewise connected with how social orders and people, whenever they were colonized, presently are confused with tracking down their real identity. They wind up among at various times; they believe they are detached from the previous history and not attached to the present atmosphere of decolonization.

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