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POLITICAL VIOLENCE AS SHOWN IN “A BRIEF HISTORY OF SEVEN KILLINGS”

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Abstract

Violence has become an indispensable part of the current global world. Art has become a major relief for those who aim for strong retribution against the current method of subjugation through violence. The acts of violence in various forms has been recorded in many a book. Some of the notable mentions include *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D Salinger, *To Howard Hughes: A Modest Proposal* by Joe Haldeman and *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess to name a few. The changing times have been firmly recorded via the faithful means of literature. An addition to this permanent but effective record is the Man Booker Prize winner of 2015 “A Brief History of Seven Killings” by the novice author Marlon James. The book seeks to bring into the forefront Jamaica’s most turbulent times during the time of Reggae legend, Bob Marley. This article is a study on the issue of politically motivated violence as is depicted in the book. It aims to look at the effect of violence and how people cope with different mechanisms to escape from the mad hell it brings.

Key words: Booker Prize, Violence, Marlon James, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *A Clockwork Orange*

Introduction

Violence has become an indispensable part of the current global world. Though, the very act and meaning of violence is a thought that has been detested for centuries and will be so for the eons of time to come. The maxim of violence has become the very torch of civilization and even growth. With the passage of time, the mode of propaganda and protest has seen a marked change. This change has had a very disturbing and unsightly effect on the masses and the state of affairs in a country.

Art has become a major relief for those who aim for strong retribution against the current method of subjugation through violence. A key factor is that protest through art remains a permanent record of what had happened in the

times of mention and is an archive of the bitterness, cruelty, pathos and hardships faced by the society. Hence it is no surprise that the major pillars of power in different countries view art and literature with fear. Men of letters have made it a point to leave a distinct mark in each decade on what the politics and the policy of a country had in store for the citizens or on a more tragic note even generations to come. A fine example is the *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. The book shows the grotesque nature of power politics as a foil matched against the innocence of children. The acts of violence in various forms has been recorded in many a book. Some of the notable mentions include *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D Salinger, *To Howard Hughes: A Modest Proposal* by Joe Haldeman and *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess to name a few. The changing

times have been firmly recorded via the faithful means of literature.

The latest addition to this permanent but effective record is the Man Booker Prize winner of 2015 “A Brief History of Seven Killings” by the novice author Marlon James. The book seeks to bring into the forefront Jamaica’s most turbulent times during the time of Reggae legend, Bob Marley. This article is a study on the issue of politically motivated violence as is depicted in the book. It aims to look at the effect of violence and how people cope with different mechanisms to escape from the mad hell it brings.

Political Violence as shown in “A Brief History of Seven Killings”

“A Brief History of Seven Killings” is the third book of Jamaican novelist Marlon James. It won the Man Booker Prize in 2015 over other favourites that included an equally critically acclaimed novel *The Year of Runaways*. The novel tells the story of the attempted assassination of Bob Marley, who is referred to throughout the entire course of proceedings as “the singer”, and its aftermath. Jamaica went through one of the most violent periods in the 1970s and 80s. The Guardian is of the opinion that; the work is a story about Jamaica that doesn’t take place exclusively in Jamaica. The text is more impressive than just an easy read. It is a difficult piece with a stop-start structure that doesn’t quite fit into the single narrative category as any other novel. The entire text is a huge cacophony to put it in simple words. The cast of characters who presented at the beginning of the text, which is near seventy-five, is seen jumping up randomly and in no predefined order to tell their pieces of the story. The entire flow of the events within the scope of the text is told through the desperate voices of the many characters. The author includes representatives from all walks of life including teenage gunmen, gangland enforcers, ghetto ‘dons’, politicians, groupies, music journalists, CIA men and even the ghost of a murdered politician lamenting that no one listens to the dead any more. The book brings together a variety of Jamaican experiences, which doesn’t fall merely into a category of local or of the masses. But it also shows how the lives and actions

of a few people throw the lives of the various characters into a fix.

The text follows the characters with the setting of the Jamaican society being that which prevailed in the years following the turbulent times of the 1970s to 80s. The centre of the action involved in the text takes place in the invented ghetto of Copenhagen City, where many of the book’s murders are plotted and take place. Though the ghetto’s name is a figment of fiction, it reminds us of actual places within the urban sprawl of Kingston, places such as Tel Aviv, Spain, Gaza and Angola-areas which are within Jamaica but also refer to a wider world of conflict in which it participates. The narrative takes us through the clogged streets to follow the cocaine trade and to New York in the eighties, where Jamaican gangsters enjoyed a reputation of extreme violence. The names of certain ghettos are ironic as they are a far cry from the peaceful names envisioned as they become scenes of major violence. Soon, Copenhagen City becomes a massive battlefield of epic proportions and not just any sunny place for holidays. The text is not just a mix of voices but also an amalgam of various diverse cultures in the form of language. We find a mix of Jamaican and American accents, not just in the case of friendly conversations but also for the unpleasant exchanges.

The central highlight of the text is the fact that the events in the text took place due to primarily two things – the decision taken by Marley to hold the peace concert on neutral grounds and the rivalry between the two major political factions in Jamaica. It brings into view a more shocking, vivid life and the wider story behind the carnage that took place in the pages of Jamaica’s history. As the general elections of 1976 loomed, crime and violence on the streets of Kingston took on a political dimension. Large areas of the city, controlled by rival gangsters, divided into factions supporting the ruling socialist government of Michael Manley’s People’s National Party (PNP) and their conservative opposition, the Jamaican Labour Party (JLP). The US government, fearing another communist republic in the Caribbean, sent in the CIA to infiltrate and influence events. How attacks by the rival factions worsened, and the police cracked down with the

draconian force. More than eight hundred people were killed- cops, innocents and those on both sides of the conflict.

Now, the chief source of the sudden rage in violence is in one way Bob Marley. The fact that all he wanted was to do a concert for bringing in peace is understated by the key fact that is always on the main cause of everything listed in the text. The main build-up of the text in question is of course the attempt on Bob Marley's life on December 3 1976. During that year the island experienced an accelerated political violence as the ghetto areas of West Kingston became fire-scarred danger zones fought over by the centre-right Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and the socialist People's National Party (PNP). Marley is known to have been caught up in it, as politicians exploited his fame for their own ends. Certain sites and even interviews had questioned the use of the term "the singer" rather than Marley's own name itself. For this matter, the author states that it was due to the fact that he was never in good touch with "the" Bob Marley himself. He banked on what other sources could tell him or on the figments of what he had seen or remembered in his childhood.

A type of political correctness demands that one should not be too unkind to him. Marley is represented as having questionable dealings with both the PNP leader Michael Manley and the JLP leader Edward Seaga. After a bomb explodes in a suitcase in Kingston airport, government soldiers began to patrol Kingston's political borderlands, raping and killing along the way. The bomb only encouraged more acts of random violence. The chaos that followed only increases by folds with each passing day. The ruling party called for a state of emergency. A JLP loyal ghetto don by the name Papa-Lo is seen exchanging money with the singer at the Kingston race track. In the aftermath of the PNP winning the election, Manley's rivals stand to lose their housing schemes and other benefits promised to them by Seaga. The attempted assassination took place on the background of this and on the eve of the Smile Jamaica concert. Marley however remains a shadowy presence throughout the course of the text and is masked under the guise of 'the singer'. The entire fact of bring up Marley into the forefront

is to use him as a cipher or a pre-determined end result to deconstruct what exactly happened and how the sheer surge of violence took place on such timid and seemingly non-political grounds.

The attempted assassination is used as the concrete basement to build the epic that is the text. The author uses this, base to bring in the killers motivations and how it played the hinge to Jamaican politics of the times and the American Cold War policies. The text is not in any way a historical record of any sort. The author clearly stated in various interviews that many of the characters are what one can call truth fictionalized. A close scholar of Jamaican politics can identify many of the characters with actual people who lived and were a part of the pandemonium that ensued in the country during the 70s.

Marley could have in one way, brought this on himself. The one thing that stands out in the entire flow of the story is that he never took a side with any of the warring parties but chose to remain neutral. This was an 'unacceptable and ridiculous' notion according to the then prevalent mindset of the people of the ghettos and others in general. For an area that was riddled by intense violence of the political kind, choosing a side was the only lifeline. If one had to survive the carnage, one must choose a side-regardless of how one liked it or not. Since Marley never did so he was dragged into the on-going chaos. This couldn't be really called not taking aside. Marley had dropped a hint about his stance towards all of this in a less cryptic form later on, but that was basically connecting a form of religion/life called Rasta and the CIA. He felt that formal politics belonged to the materialist society and tried to keep away from it. But, for some reason or the other, he was suspected to be siding with the PNP. This was the ultimate grave that Marley dug for himself. Both parties, like any in any part of the country, were interested in the so-called "areas" that Marley spoke about and kept their ears open for the same.

'The singer' was in a way the root cause of what later became a bloody chapter in the already turbulent history of Jamaica. With historical and political causes adding fire to the flame, his status as a raging pop icon and 'an untouchable existence of

one whom the Jamaicans still hold in awe and reverence' was the basic standoff point for the two parties to gain their stronghold in the elections and the numerous ghettos.' The singer' adopted rhetoric from the Black Power and the civil rights moments of the 1950s. His combined views on the issues did not make him a renegade leftist. On the other hand, Marley wasn't joking when he sang about his memories of a similarly downtrodden 'government yard', and didn't need instructions on the dons' multiple roles as providers of stuff the state wasn't supplying, such as arbitration and policing of sorts, on top of their function as political goons in a working criminal enterprise. The only thing that he seemingly did wrong here was holding the One Love Peace Concert. He disregarded the JNP leader's request to hold it in an area where the party had a majority and instead went ahead and held it in a politically neutral area. He even somehow cajoled the two leaders to come on stage and link hands. Yet, some people as the author notes still see Marley as a suspicious person with hidden agendas even after his death. Papa-Lo even wonders if "the singer" realizes that his "real haters are blacker than him" and that many of them think that 'a ganja-smoking Rasta becoming the face of black liberation is a public relations disaster for the country'.

Marley's shooting is a good device for getting at the keep point of the text (violence), because no one seriously disputes that it was triggered by the 1976 election campaign, which was the most violent in the country's history, contested by the two sons of the light-skinned post-independence elite: Manley and Seaga. The major political partnership that prevailed during this time echoed and overshadowed one that prevailed in music and the main aspect for a Marley era Jamaica. Jamaica's Prime Minister Seaga and his Labour Party used gangs as enforcers in the slums of Copenhagen City, which became the party's fief. Both the JLP and the rival and opposition PNP had armed gangs in their service, for whoever controlled Kingston, and whoever won the Kingston election won the nation's domination. This war led to poverty and violence. It was the kind of trauma described and transmuted into song by Marley himself. Amidst all the bloodshed, he announced a free concert to promote

peace in Kingston. Marley was then dragged into this tug of war between the political functions of the country. At the same time, outside forces including the CIA, anti-Castro Cubans and the Colombian drug cartels were converging on Jamaica with money and guns.

The text finds no trouble constructing a plausible narrative connecting the attack to many aspects of Jamaican history and the outline sticks very closely to it, especially in the opening stages. The characters are all freely imagined even when all they do is fill the roles of real people, with the exception of Marley, who is seen through the eyes of a range of first-person narrators, and whose stage time is judiciously rationed. But a point of interest in the text lies in the fact that it does not merely live in the shadows of blood-shed and appalling violence. There are certain instances in the text that provide a sort of life raft or a breath of fresh air even if the entire sense of the text always leaves a bad after taste once you pass through the pages. The individual can be caught up in larger historical currents while never losing the desire to fight against them.

Nina Burgess is a kind of hit and run character in the text. She is someone who was "hell-bent on escaping the life that fate had all but drawn up in lines with just numbers left to colour". She is a fascinating combination of a chameleon and a nihilist. Nina believes that no matter how hard or fast you run away from Jamaica, 'it' always inches up behind you-it here refers to a terror that fuses both the immediate threat of violence and the memory of past brutality. And yet, many of the characters in the text seem to dread the impending doom, with Nina desperately trying to find a light in the darkness. She manages to chart a path by attaching herself to different men. Under various pseudonyms, she proceeds from Marley to an American who actually does help her to get to the US, then to a mentally ill patient whom she cares for as a nurse, and finally to a comatose gangster in the hospital in New York City where she works. . These are the desperate attempts she makes to free herself from the hounds that relentlessly haunt her. She grabs at every straw that heads her way hoping that one or the other will eventually help her reach a promised land. She

morphs from Nina to Kim to Dorcas not just by simply changing her name but also her back story, rhythm and tone in which she speaks out of nothing but pure and raw fear, by doing so she somehow narrowly manages to evade fate that visits others: rape, drug abuse, prison and death. Her resistance shows a spirit of determination and resolves to tug the reader out of despair in a tale that can seem harrowingly violent and hopeless, proven by the many victims who are doomed from the moment they are born.

The characters have their own takes on the entire proceedings in the scope of the text. Besides the main set of notable characters, the rest consists of gangsters who open the bigger picture from the ground up on the working relationship of organized crime and Jamaican Parliamentary politics. Claudie Massop, the JLP gang boss of a ghetto has a counterpart called Papa-Lo who is cast as an enforcer of the old school, still capable of murdering a schoolboy when necessary but sick at the heart witnessing an election struggle. His younger ally is Josey Wales. He is seen to be better adapted to the changing tide of the state of affairs. Josey is made to seem dangerous not so much as due to the irretrievable damages caused by previous slum clearance, gang warfare and police brutality-so is everyone around him-but because of the fact that he is attuned to the present scenarios in the wider world.

The opportunities Josey sees come from the external pressures that made the 1976 election, in the eyes of the many participants, a Cold War proxy conflict. Manley's PNP government, "in power since 1972, had annoyed the bauxite companies, Washington and large swathes of local elite opinion with its leftist reforms and friendliness to Cuba". Manley blamed a rise in political shootouts and some of the country's economic setbacks on a covert destabilization campaign, and the Americans were widely understood –thanks partly to the writing of Philip Agee, a CIA whistle-blower- to be shipping arms and money to Seaga's JLP. Seaga's supporters countered by putting it about that Castro was training the other side's gunmen, and portrayed the sweeping police powers introduced by Manley's government as a step towards a one-party state.

Either way, no one was badly off for guns and grievances when Manley offered himself for re-election.

Each sect portrayed in the book has a spokesperson that can generally sum up what is and what will be. Nina is one such spokesperson for the Kingston middle class. Having looked at Josey in the eye on the night of the shooting, she understands that he will kill her if she sticks around for too long. Now, her pathetic condition is what drives her to the extreme ends of her tether. She even has a one night stand with Marley in hopes that it will prove her means of escape. She becomes a nihilist due to these circumstances. One of the other non-gangsters who are used as a binding agent is Alex, whose continuing investigation of Marley's shooting serves as a parallel plotline and adds a metaphysical grace note. His viewpoint comes in handy in the dense middle section, in which he is acutely aware of his embarrassing status as a white American reggae fan seeking the truth about Jamaica as he interviews people. His nosing into the underground business is not taken lightly and he faces the brunt of it. The crime plot becomes less an overview of the way society works, or don't work and more a means of sustaining narrative interest while looking at the characters' inner lives. Weeper comes into the scene as a close inspector and gives an earlier diagnosis of social ills: the nastiest of the gunmen are introduced into the area – among them is the killer of Bam-Bam's parents called Funny Boy- are models of sexual self-hatred who rant constantly about 'batty boys'. The text is a field or a shout out soapbox where everyone complains about-a lost the capacity for feeling, these moments are good for a breather as we could get.

The ghost of Arthur 'Artie' George Jennings, who seems to be a pre-independence political figure pops in at irregular instances in the text. He was once considered as a person who could have set Jamaica on the correct track of harmony and better standards – a testimony given by Bam- Bam himself. He claims to have been pushed off the balcony by the future handler of the PNP. Characters sometimes see him before they die.

The characters go about their narration as a kind of interior monologue, sometimes addressing the reader directly-usually in the conversational tone, though Papa-Lo throws in some preachy talk-but mostly talking to their own minds and digesting recent memories while scenes unfold around them. The language used by the various characters that pop in and out of the narrative effectively blurs the devices used which was presumably there to help set up a strong illusion that the words in the page are unmediated natural speech. The two outsiders, the journalist and the CIA man think in 1970s-flavoured American English. Everyone else whose inner voice that comes into play slides around Jamaican English and patois, a predominately spoken language that is used in standard English spelling in order to make things easier for non-Jamaican readers. Respectable people like Nina use the uptown household one but starts 'chatting badly' only when she is angry or upset, and doesn't sound any different from Americans most of the time. Papa-Lo's thoughts are rich with mixed registers. While Bam-Bam is at the rock bottom of the entire cast, he has the least amount of words to rub together into proper sentences. Many of the gunmen are proud of the language they use. It shows their true character that is free from any form of restraint from the powers above and also is a mark of their aggressive behaviour. Though, according to Josey, it is not good to show off. He thinks in more Standard English than his peers but takes a bitter pleasure in posing as an 'ignorant naigger.'

Marlon James sweeps his readers up in a flow that can sometimes feel overwhelming as the characters take turns commandeering short chapters. But James' need for each is significantly urgent. All of his characters-gang members, CIA agents, journalists, even the ghost of an assassinated politician who likes to compare his head to a 'smashed pumpkin' and remind the readers that "dead people never stop talking"- have distinct perspectives. They have their own languages, too. The web of connections among his multitudinous cast and their various relationships to 'the singer' emerges as James spins a saga that explores how individuals, propelled by intense desires and delusions, help to shape vast historical and social

orces. They are even unable to save themselves from these circumstances.

Conclusion

Tradition has been carried on by the never-ending siege of writers who made a statement on the current deteriorating scenarios that play havoc in the society. Writers have wielded their faithful mates to lash out against those who chose to run away with the power bestowed on them. They remain a source of faithful archiving on what had happened years ago and what led to the current situation in society. Marlon James has faithfully followed the tradition and has successfully opened a new era in writing through his book 'A Brief History of Seven Killings'. The book shows the tides and changes that occurred in the 'outcast' country Jamaica during the bloodiest year in its post-independence history. The book shows the true side of the story, cleverly woven in between fiction, and hence is a mirror. It is a proclamation to all those who wish to oppress the citizens. It boldly states that even people have the power to turn the tide against the worst of the power politicians no matter how hard or years it takes. James drives home the singular fact that the saying "A pen is mightier than the sword" is the very maxim of the current millennium and will be in the days to come.

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