

# Memoirs of a nonconformist

AUTHOR: KAMAL SIDDIQUI  
REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

Academic Press and Publishers Library, 2015.

There are people who seem to be genetically inclined to act like Mary's contrary lamb. Kamal Siddiqui, a former civil servant who had reached the highest rung of the civil bureaucracy, was a freedom fighter, a left-leaning activist who had been subject to police investigation during his years as a Chemistry department student at Dhaka University, had been hauled up before court for his pains, had taken part in the vandalizing of the USIS library in Segun Bagicha, and.... Well, you just have to go through *In One Life: the Memoirs of a Third World Civil Servant (Part 1)* to have a comprehensive picture of one such seemingly genetically-driven nonconformist. Even his surname was a mistake committed by the Punjabi clerk at the prestigious PAF Public School, Sargodha (Pakistan), from which institution he had passed his Senior Cambridge examinations. So Siddique was turned into Siddiqui and has stayed with him.

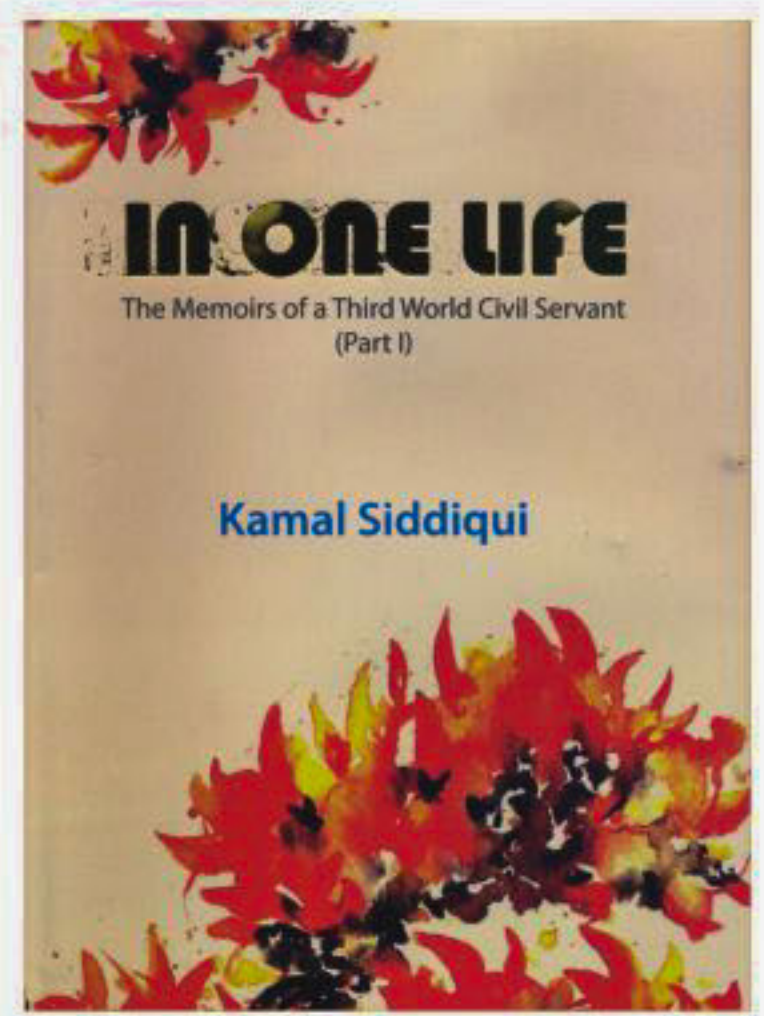
Siddiqui's book, while being a memoir of his journey from childhood to the early years as a member of the Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP), is equally a perspective on left-wing student activism in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), specifically Dhaka, and more. Let the author elucidate: "My story... is not a sanitized version of what happened, rather the truth as it occurred to me... this story tries to pinpoint the difficulties and challenges under which civil servants, playing second fiddle to politicians and military dictators, have to work in a least developed country, oscillating between immature democracy and outright autocracy... it tries to flesh out the social, political, economic and cultural realities of the country in which I grew up and lived most of my life." In realizing these objectives, he has succeeded in varying degrees, although, I suspect, he will have to flesh out in more comprehensive details the trials and challenges facing the senior civil servants in another book, as the volume number 1 of the book under review seems to indicate will be forthcoming.

Siddiqui acknowledges that he had embraced Marxism in his youth, and, even though he has undergone gradual transformation in his belief system into a liberal humanist, in a sense he remains an "unrepentant Marxist, if that means an unconditional and a priori commitment to the...disadvantaged, sidelined, oppressed, marginalized, humiliated and reduced to a state not fit for human beings...." So, given this position, it does not come as a surprise that the author, in assessing the post-Cold War global scenario, believes that "socialism and social welfare throughout the world stood to be replaced not by a humane capitalism but monetarism and neo-liberalism in which greed and selfishness in the name of super-profit and supremacy of the market emerged as the only gods to be worshipped."

Throughout the book Siddiqui comes across as assertive, occasionally outspoken in his assessment of people, institutions, events, and society. He does not mince words, nor pull punches, much like his days of student activism, when, among other things, he was a vigorous participant in actions that contributed to the unceremonious ending of the 1964 Dhaka University convocation, and, for which he was expelled from the institution (to be reinstated later as per court directives), or when, as a symbol of protesting the Vietnam war, he was part of a small group that vandalized the USIS in 1965. Siddiqui, though, has made his position clear that, in

being forthright, he might have hurt the sentiments of some people, and that his judgment on people and issues could be faulty and wrong, but, from his standpoint, he was being sincere.

To take a few examples of the author's trenchant observations, his assessment of Dr. Akhter Hamid Khan, the originator of the Comilla model of rural development, would run contrary to popularly held views on him (as much as people know about Dr. Khan these days). Siddiqui believes that he was blind to the Comilla model's shortcomings, was no revolutionary, but an advocate of a pacific evolutionary archetype where there was no room for drastic land reforms. On the enigmatic EPSL (East Pakistan Students' League) leader of the 1960s, Sirajul Alam Khan, he holds that Khan was extremely anti-left, and was instrumental in goading vacillating elements in the Awami League towards making the Bangladesh independence agenda a fait accompli, which was his last positive contribution to the cause of Bangladesh.



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During the liberation war, he was almost totally immersed in Indian General S.S. Uban's plan to create a force dedicated towards eliminating the Bengali leftist elements rather than the al-Badars, Razakars and the Pakistani forces. He later on formed the JSD to prevent the radicalized Chhatra League sections from embracing the traditional left parties and to direct them towards a self-destructive course of actions.

Among his striking, and thought-provoking, observations is one on the academically outstanding students of his (and subsequent) time: "My general observation about them is that they could not go beyond a point in their quest for academic excellence. Many of them have published books, monographs and articles with prestigious publishers and in international research journals of repute but these have not left behind any indelible imprints on the sands of time." He offers likely explanations for this phenomenon that readers might find plausible or contentious, but at least food for thought. He comments on perceived or real deteriorating standards of education in Dhaka University, and places a major share of the blame for such a situation having come to pass on President

Ershad's "evil design to destroy the standard of university education." Comparing the Dhaka University of his and present times, he goes on: "The most important reason for high academic standards in Dhaka University in our time was the recruitment of high quality students and teachers. Merit, rather than political considerations, was the only criterion in recruiting students and teachers."

Siddiqui, to reiterate, provides both a kaleidoscopic, as well as incisive, view on various issues of his time. He is nostalgic about Dhaka as a livable city with a "small population and a Mofussil (small town) touch," and courtesy and manners among students that transcended intense political rivalry. Well, Dhaka, for several consecutive years now, has been classified by a relevant rating organization as being among the top two or three most unlivable cities in the world, and the political culture and manners have deteriorated to an abysmal level. He looks back on when he first noticed the racism that is quite endemic in our own society, including among the educated middle classes, especially when it comes to marriage. His strident remark on this issue is germane: "The truth is when people in Bangladesh, or for that matter South Asians criticize apartheid in South Africa or racism in the US, they conveniently forget their own dark secret."

Siddiqui is evidently most comfortable discussing political matters. When he had not yet reached the age of ten, he witnessed first hand the election campaign of Amena Begum of Awami League/United Front in the 1954 general elections, partly because it was also organized from their home. Amena Begum won against her Muslim League opponent, but it was "alleged by both the rival groups that the other group was involved in false voting." Some things never change! Or, as the French adage goes, the more things change, the more they remain the same! He had confronted NSF (National Students' Federation) terrorism while a Dhaka University student, and an active member of EPSU (East Pakistan Students' Union), including threatening NSF activists menacing him with throwing concentrated sulfuric acid at them (he was, to recall, a Chemistry student), actually hurling one without severely hurting the victim, and, consequently, being left alone by that group for the rest of his days at the university.

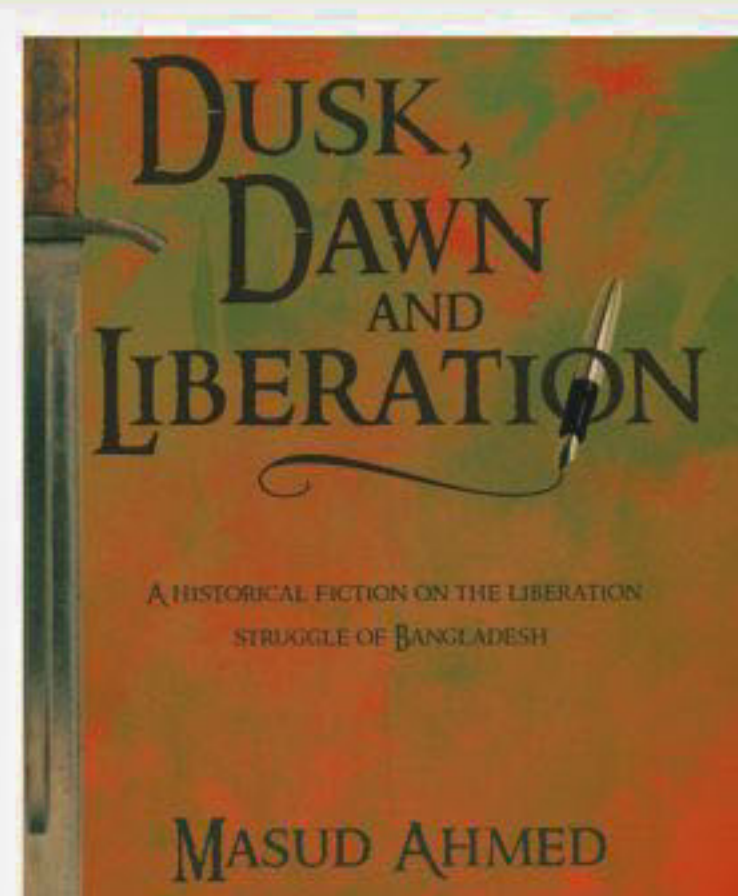
Siddiqui marvels at the perspicacity of a former Bengali Sargodhian, then Major Ziauddin of the Pakistan army, who, while the author was undergoing probationary training at the Civil Service Academy in Lahore, told him in 1969 that the country would split in two years' time (that is, 1971)! And he talks about another ex-Bengali Sargodhian, Major Manzoor, who also deserted from Pakistan to join the liberation war. Eventually, Siddiqui left leftist politics because of how it was being practiced, although retaining some of its fundamental ideals as guiding policy of his life. On a lighter note, he mentions all the traditional beliefs and superstitions he had come across in his impressionable years, but these did not seem to have left any deep imprint on him as he added on years. A small error has crept in when he talks about Khaled Musharaf being killed in the November 7 uprising of 1976. The year, of course, was 1975. If Part 1 is any indication, Part 2 (and 3, if relevant) of *In One Life: The Memoirs of a Third World Civil Servant* should be most interesting and enjoyable.

The reviewer is an actor and educationist.

# A historical fiction on the liberation war of Bangladesh

AUTHOR: MASUD AHMED  
REVIEWED BY NAFEEES IMTIAZUDDIN

The book *Dusk Dawn And Liberation* is compelling reading. This is the ultimate test of any book, fact, fiction or fusion of both. This book is hard to put down once started. Even though I am thoroughly familiar with most of the history, I was drawn in from the very first narrative the setting, not mentioned, being in Larkana, Sindh, in the then West Pakistan. I found myself racing through the book turning page after page to see what came next. Events that most of our generation not just know but actually lived. The author's ability to create suspense in a known narrative proves more than anything, that he is a very good story teller.



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*Dusk Dawn And Liberation* is a seamless fusion of facts and fiction. But on reading it is difficult to see where the facts blend into fiction. Except may be the tragedy of Mr. Rauf. Having said that, the question quickly jumps to mind-- or is it? Is that fiction, or just the identities hidden? Because it could as really be true. Very good technique from the author.

A major contribution of this book is that the sinister minds of the Punjabi Pakistanis, instrumental in the creation of the disparities, the refusal to hand over power and finally the crackdown and genocide, is exposed. The President, "drunk" mentioned over and over again is either because the author was overwhelmed by the thought of how such a repulsive creature could be a President, or to demonstrate the degeneracy of his entire army and ruling cliques. Disgustingly replicated in the then East Pakistan by Tariq, code name for Niazi, exposes this heinous mindset of almost every Pakistani Army officer or soldier many of whom are quoted. Several instances of the 'managerial' inefficiency and communication mentioned in the book leaves the reader in open mouthed disbelief of how such goons could be at the helm of power. This is a very good insight that the author provides. Even as the entire Eastern Province is being overrun by the allied forces and the Pakistan Army is on the back foot on almost every front in the Western Province. General Tariq (Niazi) can't get a single responsible top brass on the phone. General Rao Forman Ali says, 'I am junior to you, how can I advise you?' The Governor says, 'I am a dentist, what shall I do?' and the Principal staff Officer to the President General Piru was busy playing squash.

On reading the book, attitudes of the West Pakistani, politicians and military right from the start towards the Bengalis can be seen to be the main reason for the genocide they unleashed. Their decision not to hand over power, to simply tell Mujib not to react, to start flying in troops, to carry on farical talks and finally to launch the crackdown all appear to be taken almost casually. Evidence explicit that Bengalis were, in their minds, not even human. General Tikka is quoted on the 27th March "What? In two nights only 4000! No, this is not acceptable. Don't you know the price of a bullet"? Obviously more than the life of a Bengali! Lt. Col Najjar Hossain, "give them a good thrashing, they will behave." Lt. Col. Gulistan Badaune's "Why should the defendants be given an opportunity for self-defense"? "Have all of them shot by brush-fire" quoted in 1967 are used by the author to demonstrate the mindless

arrogance and depraved mindset, which led to "the trouble would be sorted out in 48 hours" theory. Even as the Pak army was losing large numbers of its men, both officers and troops, the inherently embedded arrogances was on display as Maj Farkan asks, "When did these rice-eating lousy people learn how to kill and more so, military people," and frigate sunk Lt. Cmdr. Makdum Shahwondering how the Bengalis could fight a sea battle "I know about these fellows. They have never boarded anything other than country boats in their life". Exposing and establishing for posterity, the single biggest reason for the genocide, the hatred of the Pakistanis for the Bengalis. The author uses direct quotes from the Pak military, almost top to bottom, to establish this fact. Again a good technique because it is irrefutable and the author does not make comments.

The style is interesting. Narrative to drama to dramatic possibilities to almost a visual. At the beginning the narrative is of events in post-election 1970. The antics of the Nawab and President, though the stuff of drama, is real. The story of Mr. Rauf and his family is told in tragedy. In the unseen Minoo we see dramatic possibilities-- all that could have been, should have been. Flashes reminiscent of war films to portray the final days of the war of Liberation have been used effectively recreating the volatile atmosphere then prevailing. Which is a rather creative idea. The unities of time, place and action have been handled very well, even in the very fast moving segments.

Characterization has been honest and the author does not fail to make mention of the futile but brave efforts of Admiral Ahsan and Commander Yakub. Describing the mature coolness of the leader of the Bengalees, Sheikh Mujib as a "big ocean going vessel not influenced when mighty waves pound on it" is apt and an important contrast to the Pak Generals.

The divisive dilemma of Mr. Rauf and his son Asad is another facet of our war of independence which is certain instances still remains unresolved. The author in bringing this into the discourse has actually included another segment of the then East Pakistan. There were many families where the older generations who recalled inequities suffered under a larger Hindu population continued to hang onto the homeland for Muslims Pakistan, not being able to confront the new reality. The younger generations, not bearing baggage of the past had often to join the liberation war severing family ties.

The names of the Nawab with questionable parentage, the aryan lady and a few others have not been mentioned. If the author has done this to add to the aura of fiction, I don't really see how. Not revealing the names in the initial parts of the book to create suspense can be a technique, but leaving those out altogether has its downsides.

The language is simple but not simplistic. The author succeeds in creating impact. On reading this book 43 years ago the readers of those times would have screamed for revenge. Today, forty three years later when the shadows are longer the same readers would still ask for justice.

The reviewer is BTV News Presenter.

# A tale of slavery on Caribbean islands

AUTHOR: MARLON JAMES  
(Marlon James has recently received Man Booker Prize 2015 for fiction, particularly for his novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings* published in 2014.)

REVIEWED BY MAHFUZ UL HASIB CHOWDHURY

When I read *The Book of Night Women* by Marlon James a few years ago, it took away my peace of mind for some days with its terrific power of describing the ordeals and tribulations suffered by the female slaves in Jamaica during the colonial period, during 18<sup>th</sup> century to be more precise. This book is hard to put down once a reader begins to go through it. The authorial excellence of the young Jamaican writer emanates from each page of his books including *The Book of Night Women*.

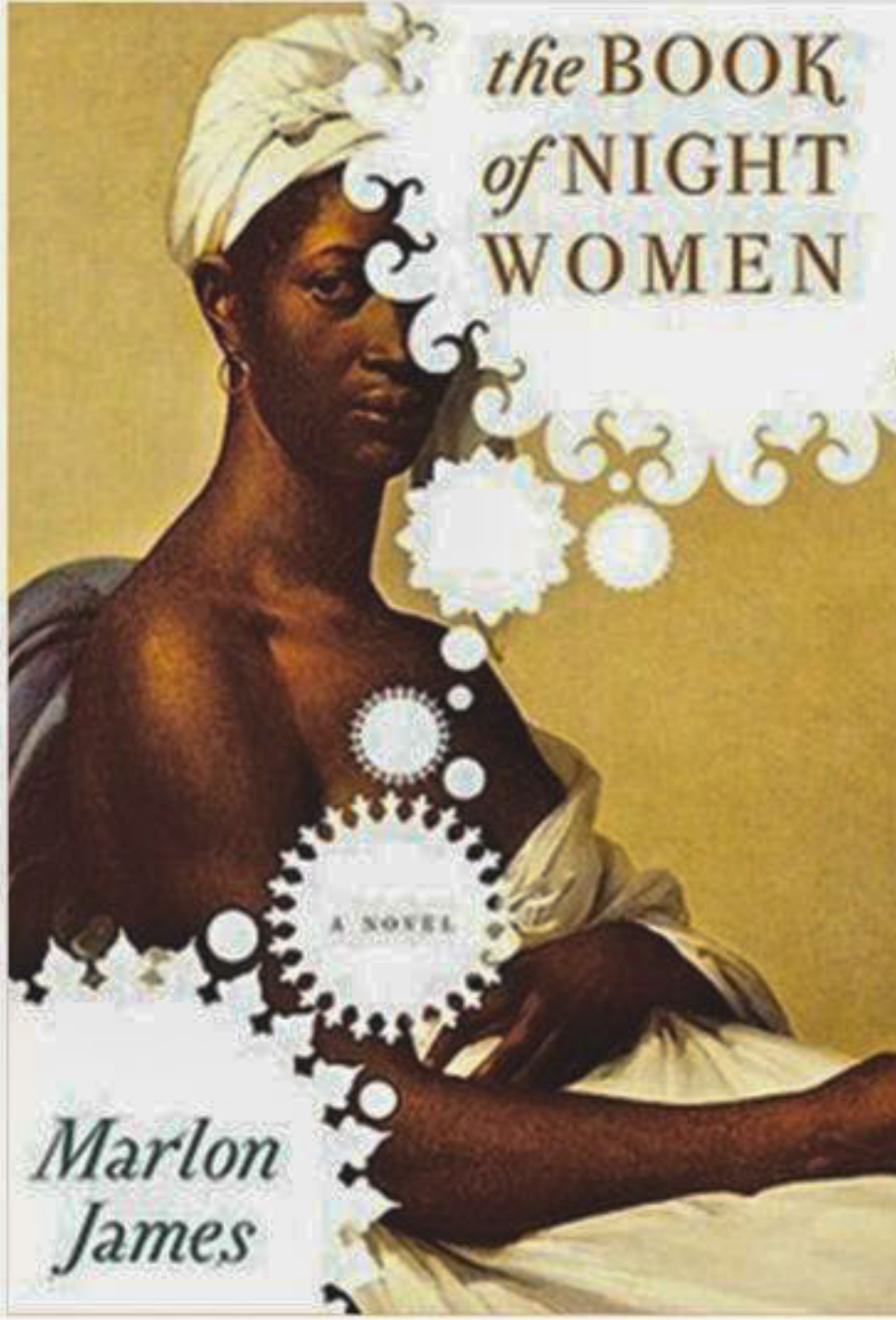
On a sugar plantation in Jamaica in the concluding years of 18<sup>th</sup> century, a female slave passed away while giving birth to a baby girl. But the baby, called Lilith, survived. As she grows up, it is strongly presumed by other inhabitants of the plantation that this girl has an extraordinary sensory perception, called ESP in short. She unwittingly caught the attention of the leader of a secret cabal of Jamaican women all of whom were slaves. They hold clandestine meetings at night and know some tricks of necromancy. Moreover, these women had another ulterior motive and they talked about their strategies to carry out their plans during the stealthy meetings. That motive was to revolt against their masters and to set themselves free from the stigma of slavery. This novel vividly describes the ferocity including sexual assaults the female slaves had to

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undergo under the inhuman circumstances that prevailed in Jamaica during those years. Lilith witnesses some of the atrocities committed by the colonial masters on that plantation and she infers perhaps her mother also had to stand all these repressions while she was alive. The depiction of slavery and brutality in this novel by Marlon James triggers a sense of pathos in the minds of readers and the readers eagerly wait for justice to strike the culprits of the book. This is how Marlon James makes us a part of his story because the feeling of ago-

nies that occupied the mind of Lilith flashes across our thoughts too and we feel almost equally distressed while turning over the pages of this moving novel. A number of questions huddle at the back of our minds—can the female slaves succeed in their rebellion? Can they get themselves liberated? Or are they going to be subjugated to more horrible forms of torment in case they fail? *The Book of Night Women* tells how the diabolic impacts of slavery jeopardized innocent people on the colonized Caribbean Islands during the previous centuries. Through the engrossing story of *The Book of Night Women*, Marlon James almost touches the authorial height of towering novelists like Toni Morrison, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Alice Walker. This novel reminds us of some other anti-slavery masterpieces like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sharon Draper's *Copper Sun*, and Julius Lester's *Day of Tears*. All these novels denounce slavery, injustice, exploitations, abuse of power and add a substantial amount of value to the indomitable spirit of human beings to fight against evil forces and thus these tales including *The Book of Night Women* jingle with a deeply universal appeal.

Marlon James has made Lilith one of the unforgettable characters in the arena of current works of fiction. Her growth from the tender age of a lonely, deserted girl to the cachet of a hardy and courageous woman drives forward



the plot of the novel. As the story progresses, she gradually turns out to be an emblem of love, confidence, hope and moral fortitude. She has been characterized by Marlon James as a quiet girl, but her strength lies hidden under

cover of her quietude. Silence is sometimes much stronger than loud expostulations—Lilith is an embodiment of this aphorism. And this is how she represents the focal theme of the novel because the night women all were soundless during daytime but they plotted to fight back during the dark hours of midnight. As literature is regarded as an avocation that often presents messages to readers by means of symbols and allegories on top of plain words, *The Book of Night Women* by Marlon James is filled with noteworthy instances of symbolic craftsmanship of the author. Marlon James received Dayton Literary Peace Prize as well as Minnesota Book Award in 2010 for *The Book of Night Women*.

Marlon James was born in Jamaica in 1970. He has addressed Jamaican history in most of his novels. History cannot be isolated from literature. Marlon James has secured global recognition by achieving different valuable awards for the masterfulness he exercised in fictionalizing history in a trustworthy and striking way. In his most admired novel *The History of Seven Killings*, Marlon James touched upon the political violence that destabilized Jamaica during the years spanning from 1970 to 1990.

The reviewer is Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Metropolitan University, Sylhet.