

# Historiographic Analysis of the Jamaican ‘Shakatani’ Scotoma from the Short Stories of Erna Brodber

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To use historiography in the analysis of the fictional writings of a Jamaican novelist to identify aspects of psychopathology of Jamaican people.

**Method:** Each of 12 stories of “The World is a High Hill” by novelist Erna Brodber was assigned an explanatory title and a ‘psychic centrality’. A narrative qualitative analysis of the fourteen main themes of each story was created using a Lickert scale, calculating the psychopathological penetrance or weighted significance of each theme.

**Results:** The four main psychic centrality containments that emerged from this analysis were the black/white racial paradox ( $n = 4$ , 33%) and the partisan/political paradox ( $n = 1$ , 8%), the sexual/duplicity paradox ( $n = 5$ , 43%) and the social/spiritual paradox ( $n = 2$ , 17%). Five of fourteen themes reached maximal penetrance: family (92%), representation of generations with families (92%), issues of intimacy (92%), sex (75%) and issues of dependency (67%). Seven themes – personal and social conflicts (64%), issues of child development (53%), sexual identity (50%), pregnancy (48%), and political (42%), racial (36%), and religious (33%) conflicts reached moderate penetrance. The two themes of migration (30%) and homosexuality (14%) reached minimal penetrance.

**Conclusions:** The analysis reveals a profound and practical historiographic representation of the contemporary scotoma that currently paralyzes many Jamaicans as a product of the enslavement of Africans in the New World, and mirrors the clinical syndrome of personality disorder revealed from contemporary Jamaican medical research.

**Keywords:** Caribbean short stories, historiography, personality disorder, psychological blind spots, psychological scotoma, Shakatani

# Análisis Historiográfico del Escotoma ‘Shakatani’ Jamaicano en los Cuentos de Erna Brodber

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## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Utilizar la historiografía en el análisis de la narrativa de ficción de una novelista jamaicana, para identificar aspectos de la psicopatología del pueblo jamaicano.

**Método:** A cada uno de los 12 cuentos de El mundo es una alta colina (“The World is A High Hill”) de la novelista Erna Brodber, le fue asignado un título explicativo y una “centralidad psíquica”. Se hizo un análisis cualitativo narrativo de los catorce temas principales de cada cuento, usando una escala de Likert para calcular la penetrancia psicopatológica o significación ponderada de cada tema.

**Resultados:** Las cuatro contenciones principales de la centralidad psíquica surgidas de este análisis fueron: la paradoja racial blanco/negro ( $n = 4$ , 33%), la paradoja política/partidista ( $n = 1$ , 8%), la paradoja sexual/duplicidad ( $n = 5$ , 43%), y la paradoja social/espiritual ( $n = 2$ , 17%). Cinco de los catorce temas alcanzaron máxima penetrancia: la familia (92%), la representación de generaciones con familias (92%), los problemas de la intimidad (92%), el sexo (75%) y los problemas de

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dependencia (67%). Siete temas – conflictos personales y sociales (64%), problemas de desarrollo infantil (53%), identidad sexual (50%), embarazo (48%), y los conflictos políticos (42%), raciales (36%) y religiosos (33%) – alcanzaron una penetrancia moderada. Dos temas – la migración (30%) y la homosexualidad (14%) – alcanzaron penetrancia mínima.

**Conclusiones:** El análisis revela una representación historiográfica profunda y práctica del escotoma contemporáneo que paraliza actualmente a muchos jamaicanos como resultado de la esclavitud de los africanos en el Nuevo Mundo. Asimismo, refleja el síndrome clínico del trastorno de la personalidad revelado por la investigación médica jamaicana contemporánea.

**Palabras claves:** Cuentos del Caribe, trastorno de la personalidad, historiografía, puntos ciegos psicológicos, escotomas psicológicos

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## INTRODUCTION

Historiography is the philosophy of methodology of history; it is a method of analysis of historical documents to determine a given society's outlook, ideology and beliefs and to identify dynamics and social forces that compel change (1). Hickling (2), drawing on the writings of Karl Jaspers (3), focussed attention on the necessary marriage of historians and psychiatrists in the promotion of contemporary national problem-solving and resolution of national psychopathologies. The recent book of short stories by Jamaican sociologist, historian and writer Erna Brodber (4) – *The World is a High Hill – Stories about Jamaican Women* – has prompted this historiographic analysis of the 'narrative emplotments' of contemporary Jamaican society as seen through the eyes of a female novelist. Its medical relevance is related to a recent phenomenological analysis of personality disorder in Jamaicans that identified a clinical triad of power management issues, psychosexual issues and dependency issues as the core issues of a psychopathological scotoma with the coined name 'Shakatani' from the Swahili words *shaka* – "problem" and *tani* – "power" (5). This historiographic analysis explores the relationships of the fictional tales of twelve contemporary Jamaican women, contemporary Jamaican history and contemporary psychopathological Jamaican syndromes illuminated by this fiction, in an attempt to identify psychoanalytic insights of Jamaican society.

## METHOD

Applying a narrative qualitative analysis, all the short stories, the foreword and the interview of the book were read, and each short story was given an explanatory title that represented this author's interpretation of the main theme of the piece. The numbers of named male and female characters of each story were counted and recorded (Table 1). Each story was then given an explanatory title by this analysis that represented the 'psychic centrality' of the story. Psychic centrality refers to "...a sense of psychological containment or organization of diverse individual points of view creating a historical map of collective experience..." (6).

This analysis then identified and tabulated fourteen main themes of each story. A scoring system for assessment and analysis of the thematic representation of each theme was created, using a subjective Lickert scale of 0 to 3, where 0 represented the absence of the theme, one represented the minimal presence of the theme, 2 represented a moderate presence of the theme and 3 represented a marked presence of the theme in each short story (Table 2). The collective totals and means of each thematic representation were calculated and assessed. The mean scores of the collective representation could therefore range from a minimum of zero to a maximum of 3. The collective or cumulative mean score was then taken to represent the penetrance or weighted significance of each theme.

## RESULTS

There were twelve short stories (Table 1). Although the book was sub-titled "*Stories about Jamaican Women*", the book specifically named men on 54 occasions, and women on 63 occasions.

### Psychic centrality containment

The psychic centrality analysis (Table 1) provides a qualitative encapsulation or containment of the variety of psychosociological contradictions enclosed within the crucible of each short story. Four main psychic centrality containments emerged from this analysis:

- (a) The Black/White racial paradox. This was the psychic centrality containment of four (33%) of the short stories.
- (b) The Partisan/Political paradox. This was the psychic centrality containment of one (8%) of the short stories.
- (c) The Sexual/Duplicity paradox. This was the psychic centrality containment of five (42%) of the short stories.
- (d) The Social/Spiritual paradox. This was the psychic centrality containment of two (17%) of the short stories.

**The thematic representation within each short story**  
Fourteen themes were culled from the twelve short stories. A 0–3 Lickert scale was applied to each short story and from

the cumulative total of all twelve stories, a total score out of a maximum 36 was identified, and a mean score calculated (Table 2):

Table 1: Demographics

Female #	Name of main character	Analysis ‘psychic centrality’	Psychic centrality containment	Named female characters	Named male characters
1	Beverley	The red-naagar	Black/White racial paradox	5	6
2	Cynthia	White lover	Black/White racial paradox	8	7
3	Kishwana	Shower power	Partisan/Political paradox	7	5
4	Lilieith	Adulterer	Sexual duplicity paradox	5	4
5	Lilly	Tun’ back Rasta	Black/White racial paradox	8	6
6	Mary	The angel	Black/White racial paradox	6	6
7	Pauline	Social integration	Social/Spiritual paradox	4	5
8	Rosa	The good woman	Sexual duplicity paradox	3	2
9	Suzette	Serial monogamy	Sexual duplicity paradox	4	4
10	Ursie	Duppy conqueror	Social/Spiritual paradox	6	3
11	Vadney	Sexual abuse	Sexual duplicity paradox	4	3
12	Valarie	The prostitute	Sexual duplicity paradox	3	3
<b>Total</b>				<b>63</b>	<b>54</b>

Table 2: Thematic representations in each short story

Female #	Sexual activity	Sexual identity	Intimacy	Homo-sexuality	Pregnancy	Child development	Family issues	Generations	Personal/Social conflicts	Racial conflicts	Religious conflicts	Political conflicts	Dependency issues	Migration
1	1	1	2	1	1	2	3	3	0	3	0	1	0	3
2	1	1	3	0	1	1	3	3	2	3	0	1	2	2
3	2	3	3	0	1	3	2	2	3	1	0	3	2	0
4	3	2	3	1	2	3	3	3	2	0	0	0	3	1
5	2	1	3	1	2	2	3	3	3	3	1	3	3	2
6	3	3	3	0	1	1	3	3	2	2	1	1	3	1
7	2	1	2	0	1	1	2	2	0	0	3	1	0	0
8	2	0	3	0	1	1	3	3	0	0	3	1	2	0
9	3	3	2	1	3	2	3	3	3	1	1	0	2	0
10	3	1	3	0	1	1	2	2	3	0	3	1	2	0
11	2	1	3	1	1	1	3	3	3	0	0	2	3	0
12	3	1	3	0	1	1	3	3	3	0	0	1	2	1
<b>Total score</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Mean score</b>	<b>2.25</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>2.75</b>	<b>0.42</b>	<b>1.33</b>	<b>1.58</b>	<b>2.75</b>	<b>2.75</b>	<b>1.92</b>	<b>1.08</b>	<b>1.00</b>	<b>1.25</b>	<b>2.00</b>	<b>0.83</b>

Scoring: 0 = Absent; 1 = Minimal; 2 = Moderate; 3 = Marked

*Sexual activity:* This theme reflected the description and/or allusion to heterosexual activity in the story, and was related to the centrality of the storyline of each narrative short story. The total cumulative score for the theme sexual activity was 27 and the mean score was 2.25.

*Sexual identity formation:* This theme reflected the narrative description of the process of psychosexual determination in the main character of each story, or an overall discourse about the social generics of identity formation in the storyline. The total cumulative score for the theme sexual identity formation was 18 and the mean score was 1.5.

*Intimacy:* This theme characterized the social and emotional relationships between characters in each short story. The total cumulative score for the theme intimacy was 33 and the mean score was 2.75.

*Pregnancy:* The short stories described pregnancy as an outcome of sexual activities between characters. The total cumulative score for *pregnancy* was 16 and the mean score for pregnancy was 1.33.

*Homosexuality:* Mention or description of homosexual or lesbian activity. The total cumulative score for the theme homosexuality was 5 and the mean score was 0.42.

*Child development:* Description of psychological stages of childhood psychosexual development. The total cumulative score for the theme childhood development was 19 and the mean score was 1.58.

*Generational representation:* Grandparents, parents, siblings and children were taken as representatives of levels of familial generations in the relation of each story. The total cumulative score for the theme generational representation was 33 and the mean score was 2.75.

*Family:* Closely related to generational representation, the narrative of family bloodline or dynastic description within the storyline warranted a separate Lickert score. The total cumulative score for the theme *family* was 33 and the mean score was 2.75.

*Personal/social conflicts:* These included verbal or physical conflict, domestic fighting and violence, manipulation and psychological abuse, authority and regulatory challenges, organizational suspension and/or expulsion, theft, police arrest, or prison sentences. The total cumulative score for the theme personal/social conflicts was 23 and the mean score was 1.92.

*Racial conflicts:* The total cumulative score for the theme racial conflicts was 13 and the mean score was 1.08.

*Religious conflicts:* The total cumulative score for the theme religious conflicts was 12 and the mean score was 1.00.

*Political conflicts:* Any reference to the deep-seated divisions between the political parties in Jamaica and social difficulties or conflicts related to this schism. The total cumulative score for the theme political conflicts was 15 and the mean score was 1.25.

*Dependency:* An emotional or physical need where individuals within the story cannot provide for themselves and this need is necessary for their survival. The total cumulative score for the theme dependency was 24 and the mean score was 2.00.

*Migration:* The total cumulative score for the theme migration was 10 and the mean score was 0.83.

### **The cumulative thematic representation of all the short stories**

Table 3 differentiates the total cumulative scores of all themes into three levels of theme penetrance or weighted significance within all the short stories taken as a whole. These are minimal penetrance 1 to 10 (1–32%), moderate penetrance 11 to 23 (33–65%), and marked or maximum penetrance 24 to 36 (66–100%). Table 3 also identifies the cumulative mean scores of each theme (0.00 to 3.00).

Five themes had mean cumulative scores that reached maximal penetrance within Brodber's short stories. They were the themes of family (2.75, 92%), representation of generations with families (2.75, 92%), issues of intimacy (2.75, 92%), sexual activity (2.55, 75%) and issues of dependency (2.00, 67%). The label 'clan issues' represents this cluster of themes.

Seven themes reached moderate penetrance within the collective short story representation. They were personal and social conflicts (1.98, 64%), issues of child development (1.58, 53%), sexual identity (1.50, 50%), pregnancy (1.33, 48%), and political (1.25, 42%), racial (1.08, 36%), and religious (1.00, 33%) conflicts. The label 'psychosocial conflicts' represent this cluster of themes.

Two themes represented minimal penetrance within the book. These were representations of migration (0.83, 30%) and homosexuality (0.42, 14%). The label 'coping strategies' represent this cluster of themes.

### **ANALYSIS**

Narrative thematic analysis of novels and short stories and their ideas and philosophy reflect a historiography that is encoded in the narrative, plot, characters, themes structure and style. Bridging the gap between qualitative and quantitative research is also an important objective of this exercise. This present study allows us to take the exploratory journey in reverse, by extrapolating quantitative data from

Table 3: Penetrance of thematic representations

Thematic representation	Present total (mean) %	Significant total (mean) %	Marked total (mean) %
Family issues			33 (2.75) 92%
Generations			33 (2.75) 92%
Intimacy			33 (2.75) 92%
Sexual activity			27 (2.25) 75%
Dependency issues			24 (2.00) 67%
Personal and social conflicts		23 (1.98) 64%	
Child development		19 (1.58) 53%	
Sexual identity		18 (1.50) 50%	
Pregnancy		16 (1.33) 48%	
Political conflicts		15 (1.25) 42%	
Racial conflicts		13 (1.08) 36%	
Religious conflicts		12 (1.00) 33%	
Migration	10 (0.83) 30%		
Homosexuality	5 (0.42) 14%		

the qualitative narrative and thematic data in order to arrive at a concealed insight. The analytic value of a collection of short stories allows the writer to explore narrative sociologies and psychologies in small bite size packages that allows for the multiplication and magnification of the historiography. Thus a historiographic analysis of this book of short stories facilitates the critical analysis of causality into a slice of Jamaica's history of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that propels this kaleidoscope of Jamaican life. The subtitle certainly is misleading because, although it describes slices of the lives of twelve Jamaican women, the book also draws heavily on the stories of the behaviour of Jamaican men. This contradiction speaks to the very essence of this analysis that posits that this book of short stories by Erna Brodber conceals a huge scotoma or blind spot of Jamaican society. The wisdom and subtlety of Brodber's creative construction camouflages the deeper message that she intends. This historiographic analysis of Brodber's book seeks to elicit the wisdom and truths about the African Jamaican people who are descendants of Africans enslaved in the New World and who are revealed by this book.

The concept of psychic centrality (6) has come from the process of psychohistoriography (2, 7) that had its birth as a psychological diagnostic marker in the Jamaican mental hospital in the 1970s. The psychic centrality of these short stories reveals four seminal conflicts that Brodber suggests are afflicting the Jamaican people: racial, religious, political and sexual conflicts, and provides insights into the Jamaican scotoma – the blind spot of the Jamaican people – that have evolved from their experience of enslavement in the New World. The clearest sociological analysis of these contradictions emerge from the writings of British Social Psychologist Madeline Kerr (8) who identifies five contributory aetiological situations, which include: a split in constructions of parental roles, lack of patterned and culturally relevant learning in childhood, difficulties regarding skin colour, dichotomy in religious *versus* magical beliefs, and the per-

vasive and persisting impact of the slavery tradition.

The thematic analysis of Brodber's short stories presented here provides an insight into the three main thematic clusters that have been labelled clan issues, psychosocial conflicts and coping strategies and mirror the conclusions from Kerr's anthropological work in the 1940s in Jamaica. These findings resonate powerfully with those of the recent phenomenological analysis of persons with the psychiatric diagnosis of personality disorder in Jamaicans (5) that identified the phenomenological triad of power management issues, psychosexual issues and dependency issues as the core clinical triad of these patients. This research has led to debate on the prevalence of personality disorder in contemporary Jamaican society in recent newspapers with a strident call for evidenced-based policy and legislation (9). Erna Brodber's book of short stories exposes this Jamaican scotoma, this blind spot that Jamaicans are reluctant to recognize.

*Smadification* is a word coined by Rex Nettleford (10) symbolizing a social process of class acceptance, class ascendance and social mobility. The word encompasses concepts of power and agency, both concepts demanded prescriptively by Brodber's writing as a *sine qua non* for the descendants of Africans enslaved in the New World to work through the psychosocial and cultural contradictions of the psychological scotoma that presently entraps many Jamaican people at home and abroad. This prescription proffers a cogent, profound and practical methodology for the psychotherapeutic healing and resolution that this mental enslavement demands, but first requires the insight of the Jamaican scotoma that this book of short stories excavates in an attempt to facilitate transformation by exposing forces that block action and collective transformation. This book of short stories camouflages in plain sight this blind spot that has been the product of the enslavement of Africans in the New World, and urgently insists on a working through of this blind spot to a social and psychological resolution for a new society and a

new tomorrow for these offspring as we shape this new Jamaica and the emerging Caribbean.

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