

# The dominance of a damsel: defining femininity in louise bennett's jamaican

[Business](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In her 20th century poem *Jamaican Omen*, Louise Bennett describes the Jamaican woman using stereotypically androcentric language and imagery in an ironic tone to expose a feminine identity other than that of archetypal incapability and voicelessness, assigned to women throughout history. This redefined feminine identity is one of dominance, intelligence, and independence. The poet draws a parallel between the unconventional feminine identity and the identity of the colonized Jamaicans, who are associated with inferiority to the British colonists. In post-colonial Jamaica, the natives were seen as incapable of cultivating their own culture, however this was an opinion drawing from a stereotypical imperialistic view, thus ignoring the truth that Jamaicans persisted in maintaining and developing their own identity even under pressure from the British colonization. The stereotypical identity of a woman has been reinforced from the beginning of time (according to some), in the hypotheses of the beginning of the world. Particularly in religious scriptures, which have always antagonized women in favor of Godly men. One such religious example is in the Book of Genesis of the Bible, where untamable Eve gave in to evil temptation and caused human expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Bennett refers to the story of Eve by stating that Jamaican men call women “so-so (ribs)” (23), hinting at long-lasting resentment from the male side, as the woman was sculpted from a man’s rib to serve as his loyal companion. The poet also provides the conventional definition of a woman through Eve to give the reader context as to her new definition of Jamaican femininity. Bennett’s Jamaican woman is not the mindless, mediocre servant that religion has been assigning

throughout history. By manipulating this religious image, she illuminates the reality that women are actually the “backbones” (24) of their families.

The backbone is a particularly appropriate body part to compare women to, as it is not explicitly important in the functioning of a body, it is easy to forget and take for granted. However the body would not hold up without a backbone, much like a family would not function without a woman. Bennett compares women with men using androcentric language and imagery, yet she does not attempt to equate the two, as a way to highlight women’s value independent of their service to men. This deliberate choice of describing women as dominating (8), “strong” (29), and “tallawah” (30), especially in a concise poem, urges the reader to understand that women are self-sufficient and capable. An example of Bennett demonstrating that women are not trying to replace men presents itself in lines 31-32: “she no want her picky dem... fi start call her “Puppa”” (31-32). This citation demonstrates that women do not want to replace men in families, nor do they want to be equated with men.

Instead, the poet pushes the idea that women have their own independent roles as individuals and as mother-figures. Another example of female independence is that of appearance, as women wear clothing “like pantsuit is a style” (34). Pantsuits are stereotypically intended for working men, however by wearing the clothes like a style and not as an act the gender-specific rebellion, the poet once again underlines the freedom that comes with femininity. Referring to the apparel, Bennett displays how discreet women are in doing what they want to do rather than doing what they are

supposed to do, so much so that men do not realize that they were not the ones “(wearing) de trousiz all de while!” (36). However, Bennett does compare men and women to provide context for readers: “ neck an neck an foot an foot wid man” (21) provides a concrete measurement of progress and significance for both genders, without forcing the two to be interchangeable.

After illustrating femininity as dominant and independent, Bennett adds a layer of unbolting intelligence that comes with being a woman. The poet chooses to provide the reader with varying degrees of intelligence as to show progression in each woman’s life. That is to say, a girl who is once a a “Spelling-Bee champion” (12), will develop in her studies and in maturity to become a “ cunny” (1) woman, who is able to “ dah mount and meck de grade” (16). Bennett incorporates examples of liberated women throughout history to emphasize the existence of precedents to the femininity she defines: one of female influence and significance for Jamaican history. While physical strength is commonly associated with men throughout history, for example the all-male portrayal of Vikings or strong leaders like Alexander the Great; women represent meekness and helplessness.

Bennett integrates the example of Maroon Nanny, a Jamaican national hero, who “ teck her body, Bounce bullet back pon man” (9-10) to demonstrate how a woman was mentally strong enough to be the leader of fugitive slaves, and physically strong enough to repel bullets. This vivid example allows the reader to see that there have been damsels who were not in distress, who were the ones saving other people, instead of needing to be

saved themselves. In the seventh stanza of the poem, the poet references the Women's Liberation Movement, and connects it to the women of Jamaica, who "wasa work... her liberated plan" (27-28), even before the movement had started. The referenced work indicates that women did not rely on widespread change to accomplish their goals, instead focusing on changing their own lives, and creating cumulative impact on grand-scale liberation. Jamaican women had in fact started to liberate themselves before the radical idea spread to the West. Patience and persistence recur throughout the poem, to accentuate the qualities that will allow women to be recognized for all their value.

The first example of necessary patience is that the "Jamaican oman teck her time" (15) in order to accomplish their goals, rather than being passive, they allow for gradual ascend to their goals. Another example is projected through Bennett's 11th and 12th stanzas, where a traditional woman is supposed to "ban her belly, bite her tongue" (42), be patient and persistent in starting with small change and expanding to a larger scale. Only then is hope for recognition of value a possibility, as a "oman luck must come" (48). In this poem, Louise Bennett reveals a non-stereotypical femininity, one of dominance, intelligence, and patience, rather than obedience and incapability. This can be extrapolated to the true identity of Jamaican natives, who are traditionally perceived as victims and servants to British colonists. The implicit and gradual process of men realizing the significance of women, while women accomplish their goals and liberate themselves, resonates with the colonized Jamaicans, who had to develop and restore their historical and cultural identity under the British rule.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-dominance-of-a-damsel-defining-femininity-in-louise-bennetts-jamaican/>

Works Cited Bennett, Louise. " Louise Bennett Jamaica." The Heinemann Book of Caribbean Poetry. By Ian McDonald and Stewart Brown. Oxford: Heinemann, 1992.

12-14. Print.