

5.2 **A contribution to the definition of women roles in dancehall. Stories lived through femininity**

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× **Abstract**

Dancehall can be defined in many ways, the primordial definition through my personal point of view is classifying *Dancehall* as a Jamaican born artistic product from a financially debilitated population that can be represented in two different but still connected concepts: Dance and Music. *Dancehall* can also be seen as a collection of experiences from Jamaicans daily lives, resulting in the creation of a new artistic style form that reflects the struggles of the Jamaican population. Jamaican women were categorized based on their economic status, their skin colour and with the relationships established with men. There is a clear urgency to research these topics on an academic level in order to get a record of not only the intricate details of this culture, but also particularly focusing on the freedom observed in Jamaican women with their sexuality as a way to conquer a place in the *Dancehall* community.

Keywords: Jamaica, dancehall, women, culture, politics, post-colonial.

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1. **Understanding Dancehall**

It is impossible to dissociate Dancehall from Jamaica since it can be seen as collection of experiences from Jamaicans daily lives. It is the creation of a new artistic style form that reflects the struggles of the Jamaican population. To better understand certain important political events of the time, as well as the rebel aspect of the jamaican people, and the 'struggles' of jamaican women, we need to analyse the behaviour of jamaican society, specially in 'downtown', the poorest part of it. When I use the term 'rebel' I am giving it a positive connotation, in the sense that it was necessary great amount of courage so that this rebellious feeling would culminate in moments that would forever change the history of the Jamaican people. Rebellion is not the only key characteristic in Dancehall, actually this nature of being engaged came from within the movement and the need for expression, craved by the people. Some of the most important moments for the enslaved people of Jamaica were the abolition of slavery, emancipation, the right to vote, slight economical and social changes, all achieved through different rebellion movements. These people, in their majority men, fought for their freedom and the freedom of their island, sometimes unfortunately these heroes of history would not prevail when facing the British supremacy, being hanged as an example to those who dared to go again the colonizers, with the goal of wanting to keep these individuals peaceful, not allowing them the will to fight back on what was rightfully theirs. But eventually, the British empire would grant them their wishes. *Dancehall* can be defined in many ways, although, the primordial definition through my personal point of view is classifying *Dancehall* as a Jamaican born artistic product from a financially debilitated population that can be represented in two different but still connected concepts: Dance and Music. *Dancehall* can also be seen as a collection of experiences from Jamaicans daily lives, their emotions. Ever since the colonial ages,

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Jamaican women were categorized based on their economic status, their skin colour and according to the relationships established with men. During my master's degree thesis, I developed a panoply of methods that allowed me to contribute to one of the definitions of the role taken by women in Dancehall. I used my autoethnography as basis. From 2015 I have been travelling to Jamaica, observing the culture, the behaviors of the people, contacting with the dancers, organizing cultural trips where people from abroad would travel to Jamaica in order to contact with the creators of the dance moves. Giving them the chance during the trip to experience Jamaican culture to the fullest. Creating Dancehall Portugal, made me start organizing events, from 2014 with the major goal of developing Dancehall in Portugal and also spread the words about it, giving the opportunity to the Jamaican dancers to come to Portugal and teach their own creations. Recently I became manager of a female dancer, gaining even more awareness of how the social, political and economic system deal with Dancehall, and its commercialization. I created a construction of methods gluing them with my autoethnography. I worked with four female Jamaican dancers that were present and still have a huge impact in the female section of Dancehall, interviewing them, also created a platform that is available on YouTube named Dancehall Medz. Dancehall Medz end up being a space where the information in the dancers was saved, knowing that a lot of Dancehall information is still in the people that created it, there is an urgency to do a proper documentation of that same information, allowing it to be available to the community. With this study it is shown that there is a clear urgency to research these topics on an academic level in order to get a record of not only the intricate details of this culture, but also particularly focusing on the freedom observed in Jamaican women with their sexuality as a way to conquer a place in the *Dancehall* community. Focusing on how essential they are to the *Dancehall* genre but yet not thoroughly praised and valued by the same community they help build.

2. Women 'struggles' are continuous and continue...

It is impossible to separate Dancehall from Jamaica. The political and sociocultural changes that the country suffered through the years, ended up influencing Dancehall. This dance style embodies form and function as a singular experience, in the sense that the Jamaican culture gave it its origin. It is imperative to keep in mind that when we dive into Dancehall we also dive into the Jamaican culture, more specifically the reality that is lived daily in the ghettos/downtown.

The idea that Dancehall is an artistic phenomenon for both music and dance is not wrong, nonetheless we need to take into consideration that this phenomenon is inseparable from the culture it originated from. In case we want it to keep thriving with the same innate characteristics that seduce every year women and men from all over the world to join the community, it is fundamental that it is respected and that we also respect its natural evolution.

We can think about Dancehall as a space where to this day people reunite to dance, listen to music, to express and create a parallel life that separates them from the painful Jamaican reality or that it separates them from the social reality in which they fit in. It becomes a way to personally express and at the same time collective, that allows an almost therapeutical moment of introspection that is unconscious to those who participate.

My research allows me to affirm Dancehall as a phenomenon that is alive and that promotes a series of behaviours and thoughts that end up motivating people to rethink their way of being and living, and this incentive does not quite correspond to the Jamaican reality. The real and original behaviours do not translate in the behaviours that the outside community ends up manifesting. We can think of Dancehall as a complex space with a characteristic vibe. That same vibe stores energy and vibrations that were felt in the Dancehall through the years by those who originally intervened. After all the research work and the respective analysis, connecting also the theories and propositions from my own experience, I state that the vibe is to this day fuelled by the Jamaicans that continue attending to parties and allow this to continue happen in the streets of Jamaica. Those vibrations and energies are added to Dancehall which makes the movements store one of Jamaica's richest treasures: its energy, history, its people, all of this transmitted through vibrations that connect with the essence of each human being involved in this 'magical' moment of 'giving birth' to Dancehall.

2.1. Jamaican women, the creators of the feminine treasure within the vibe of Dancehall

In this concept and information construction that I propose, I admit that the vibe transmits the history of black Jamaican women that have been fighting for years for a place to stand in their society. It shows a reality that is lived in Jamaica by these women that are judged or socially placed by their skin colour, ethnicity or social status. Additionally, it's the stratification provoked in the female gender, a consequence of male supremacy in ghettos/downtown and consequently in the Dancehall. It preserves the competition generated among women, motivating a need for affirmation that is urgent among Jamaican women, diminishing the idea of group work.

The movements that are created and dedicated to women have a very specific vibe to them, it stores emotions that were felt back when Jamaica had their people turned into slaves. Even though these feelings are not directly impregnated in the movements, they are a consequence of the rebel revolution that was force on the female gender inside the financially debilitated people of Jamaica. The struggles they faced in consequence of the skin colour, ethnicity, economic status and the relationships they established with men led to a very strong will to affirm themselves in a society where male supremacy creates a stratification in the female gender that is due to: the relationships held with men, economic status, education level or even their status within Dancehall.

2.1.1. The concept of beauty in Jamaica, the rising of a “Dancehall Queen”

The concept of beauty in Jamaica is something present from back in the days until today, creating a huge impact in Dancehall community. It created a new notion of fashion when it came to the space where it was taking place. Women had and still have today to show up as they want to be known into the dance hall space. Not connecting themselves with all the categories they would be forced to belong, in the eyes of Jamaican society. Although they were not accepted in upper class competitions that would highlight women beauty, other competitions were created giving them the space to 'show off' and present their beauty and body attributes while dancing.

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These competitions were mainly created by man, opening the space to the women from downtown to present themselves in competitions that regularly would appeal to a sensualized/sexualized image of themselves. Impacting once more in fashion. Winning the competition would grant them a respected title, and a status within the culture, which would give them a certain kind of power within the community.

In the 1990's, Carlene Smith organized Fashion Clashes regularly, as Margarita Bonning explains in *Performing Culture: Dancehall as a ritual and spectacle* (s.d.). A clash can be considered as a fight between two dancers or two teams while dancing, including many times aggressive movements that can even involve physical contact.

Clashes are very common in the Dancehall community and they happen almost every night between different teams in Dancehall parties. In this case particularly, the clash was organized and not spontaneous. The name of the event was 'Dancehall Vs Uptown'. Uptown would be represented by Miss Jamaica, also *Caribbean Queen of Beauty*, that placed on the top 10 in the conquest to win Miss Universe in 1990, her name was Erica Aquart, and Dancehall would be represented by Carlene Smith, a symbol of sensuality and beauty within the community, a feminine icon of the 90's culture. Carlene Smith won, crowning herself with the crowd support as Dancehall Queen, 'giving birth' to one of the most important titles a woman can carry within Dancehall Community – The Dancehall Queen.

In one of the interviews, I did to Carlene Smith 'Dancehall Medz', she shared: "I am aware that one of the most acclaimed Queen competitions, "Jamaican International Dancehall Queen" was organized by a man, and initially the jury would be all males. This would demonstrate the full power man had over women in Dancehall since the women that won would be validated by either and all male group or a mixed group with not enough women."

Personally, I disagree when it is said that female Dancehall, in particular in its origin country, is referred to as a sexual liberation that women face while dancing, when in fact she is just affirming her identity in the Dancehall community, defending her space.

From my familiarity with some of the creators, as well as following the interviews I did with Stacia Fyah, Latonya Style, Queen Latesha and Kimiko Versatile, I conclude that some creators are aware of this fake sense

of freedom within Dancehall and that is why they are such activists to defend the world/space for women in Dancehall, because the problematics surrounding gender that are experienced in Jamaica are far from being comparable to the one experienced in Europe. The creators that are not aware of these situations, they still experience them due to certain life experiences such as having jobs being denied to them, lack of support, etc, that end up influencing their own movements just like it does with other creators that are in fact aware of certain frustrations that happen daily and that they feel while not having a place to be themselves in Dancehall. Even though their talent is undeniable there is still a constant need for validation of their contribution to the development of this danced phenomenon that has had worldwide impacts in a variety of different people.

Using my own personal experience, I state that all we experience when we dance Dancehall is the essence of these experiences through movements that are filled with the emotions, vibrations and most deep desires of these creators. They pass on to other women feelings of freedom, power and, they transmit everything they want to accomplish, helping therefore, women all over the world to connect with their own femininity and motivating them to explore more of themselves.

The aesthetic of the vibe of the female movement is incredibly complex in the sense that the movements are not meant to be graceful: they are strong, harsh, emancipated, powerful and sexual, translating to unique movements that transpire in a beauty never seen before where women nature is shown. They show their power, the power of the female body without any taboos or second intentions, they do it because they can, and they should have their right over their own body.

3. Urgency to keep studying and mapping the Role of Women within Dancehall

Sonjah Stanley Niaah (2014, p. 130) elaborates a vision for Dancehall as an unexplored philosophical terrain, highlighting the importance of creating a Dancehall map with a holistic view of its practice, beyond the interpretations that come from texts to include interdisciplinary approaches, investigations centred in performances, and on the main dancers as well as its overall influences.

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The documents available that deal unique and exclusively with the role of women in Dancehall in general are very scarce. In the majority of the cases, the female gender is only discussed in one chapter that will later complement the whole paper like in Donna P. Hope's *Inna Di Dancehall* (2006, p. 36) with the chapter *Love the punaany bad*, which literally translated to English rather than patois means: "Loving the vagina 'a lot'". This was without a doubt, the most useful document I was able to find that tackles gender and ethnic issues, also related with the colour of the skin within the female gender, having always in mind that we are talking about a community that lives in poverty, in ghettos/downtown.

If the objective is to deepen the knowledge around women in Dancehall, research is key. People who explore papers as the previously mentioned will be able to have a generalized view on women and their conquests, as well as the male supremacy in Dancehall, and showcasing all the issues that appear and directly affect women. It is my intention, to fill in the lack of global visibility Women in the Dancehall world are given by raising awareness to these issues through an academic lens and through the Portuguese society where Dancehall should be given a bigger attention to since it is a post colonialism expression of art that can be especially centred on Women. Which means that the repercussions of colonialism are still felt in these dance manifestations of movements, creating a unique connection among women, where they awaken their instincts, their sexuality, their vision for movement, their need to defend their space and their expression.

It is fundamental, especially for women all over the world that decide to enter in this culture, to have awareness of the role of women in Dancehall. Even though this role has not yet been fully explored from a dancing point of view, there are a variety of distinct motivations that makes this dance expression to be so protected by women. The male supremacy in Jamaica is to this day still very present in the Dancehall industry, and many times the female creators are motivated to perform sexual acts as an exchange for success in the community.

I give as an example the case of Dancehall Queen Danger, that won the Dancehall Queen competition in 2014, the supposedly most desired place to acquire within the culture and the maximum expression of talent and their femininity. In December 2019 she stated on social media, as a dancer for the artist Spice, who is a worldwide phenomenon, that she was raped by the road manager and Spice's 'baby father'. The dancer

never talked about it previously to the social media, she was constantly threatened by her aggressor and, this aggression ended her career, she ended up leaving the dance team she belonged, known as 'Team Spice'. I ask myself, if I was in her place where I was living in a Montego Bay ghetto/downtown with a daughter and a family to support, would I say anything or not? Through this perspective I think I would probably hold my silence; we are observing a culture where everything that is feminine is seen as not powerful, according to Donna P. Hope (2006). Spice stated in a livestream that she has been in the industry for 20 years and she has only gained recognition about 6 years ago. She went to a lot of hardships where she was hungry, she had to sleep on the streets and a variety of different struggles, all because of the passion she held for Dancehall. How many of the women that we worship in Dancehall culture that we see as goddesses, unstoppable, powerful, have been raped on their way to success?

My research, as well as all the methodology that I used, allows me to state that every woman deciding to be a part of this phenomenon have a moral and ethnic duty towards the creators of knowing the original role for women, of understanding the gender issues that Jamaica is facing, which are not necessarily the same ones we face in Europe (although, the female affirmation has not yet been reached) and that it exists a long path for it to be reached.

From my experience and my research, the role of women within Dancehall is yet far from being defined. There is a need to bring these topics to the academic field raising the urgency in paying attention to them. Simple things such as getting a visa in order for them to be teaching their own creations abroad, is a 'struggle'. Although the men also don't have easy access to the visas, women have a major difficulty to be validated by the Jamaican system and allowed to travel. Recently assuming the role of manager of a female dancer I found myself struggling with her, in order for her to have the opportunity to spread the words about her own contribute to the Dancehall community.

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