

## Paule Marshall and Feminine Aesthetic

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### Abstract

This paper analyses Paule Marshall, black woman author, who orchestrates the theme of innocent and experience in her texts by offering a paradigm where her women's growth towards self-enlightenment may be seen as a two-fold process; one of the psychic fracturing and the other of seeking wholeness and it also throws light on Afro-American culture and literature which progressed to intense fascination and culminated into a cultural reunion.

**Keywords:** Paule Marshall, Feminine Aesthetic, Black literature.

It is honestly held and understood that Black literature is nothing but the literature of an oppressed and suppressed sect of people, It may sometimes be, of necessity, of Anglo-Saxon-American in form but never constant in tone or in philosophy; as it best it reflects ultimately the black experience or the life of the black people in America i.e., a sect of oppressed people who refused to be dehumanized into machines, those who refused to give up their ancient inheritance of secular play, warmth and gaiety of love and joy and sect of people who were continually aware of the deepest spiritual yearnings for freedom, peace and human dignity.

Generally speaking, the common and recurring themes in Black American fiction are identity crisis, racial problems like color, caste and class, protest, importance of tradition for Black American culture, need for meaningful relationships and quest for identity, which all get beautifully reflected in the works of black writers of the present century. Miscegenation is yet another major theme in Black fiction. The African tradition in African-American literature is a literary creation that embodies different ways in which the African-American writers explore what Africa is, what it means to him or her and what it means to the world. This tradition appeared in varied forms in poetry and prose and got reinforced from generation to generation. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Africa was viewed in African American literature and songs as a lost homeland but in the twentieth century the image of Africa was regained. Thus, the

African American literature seems to have begun as a fading memory of a lost native land, progressed to intense fascination, and culminated into a cultural reunion.

The 1920's in American history were marked by a Social-cultural awakening among Afro-Americans and the origins of the Afro-American writers' moral values were both religious and secular. Frankly speaking, the moral concerns of the twentieth century Afro-American novel are profound and wide ranging. By the beginning of the 1920's the African-American writers had inherited a well-established literary tradition to draw upon for creation of new works and synthesis of artistic expression of the previous three hundred years and the result was the Harlem Renaissance. The intellectual and literary movement that exploded in Harlem between 1917 and 1929 came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance, a name that indicates the black artists' self-consciousness in art, music and literature. The Harlem Renaissance is an important phase of black American self-expression. The term 'Harlem Renaissance' became so popular to the effect that most scholars and students agreed that the 1920's was a decade of extraordinary creativity in the arts for black Americans and that much of that creativity laid focus on the activities of African Americans living in New York, particularly in the district of Harlem. In poetry, fiction, drama and prose as in music, dance, painting and sculpture, Afro-Americans landed their prints with a new sense of confidence and meaningful purpose coupled with the sound sense of achievement never before experienced by so many black artists in the long troubled history of the peoples of African descent in North America.

Expressed in various ways, the creativity of black American undoubtedly came from a common source the irresistible impulse of blacks to create boldly expressive art of some high quality as primary response to their social conditions, as an affirmation of their dignity and humanity in the face of poverty and racism. Black Harlem in literature is an original twentieth-century topos, a modern motif created by African-American writers inspired by the fervor of the racial transformation of the Manhattan neighborhood North of central Park and reinterpreted over the decades by writers of different races. The novels of the Renaissance reflected an extraordinary range of thinking on the basic issues of Black American existence. On one hand, novels by such writers as Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen and Walter White deal primarily with the values and lives of the black middle class. Next the abounding new voices of Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen, W.E.B. DuBois, Rudolph Fisher, George S. Schuyler, Wallace Thurman, Walter F. White are the voices of the black writers of Harlem Renaissance. The primary aim of these writers was to act as truthful interpreters of the black race and overall controlling symbols of blackness formed the basis for the projection of major themes in their writings. Self-assertion and vitality of the black race were the recurrent motifs reflected in the works of these writers of "New Negro" mood. Alia Locke Jessie Fauset and Zora Neale Hurston are some of the notable writers of that period. From 1960 to the present African-American writers have employed African cultural traditions in multifarious ways. The

works of Robert Hayden, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, Lorraine Hansberg, Nikki Giovanni and Margaret. Walker have further advanced tradition in varying degrees.

African-American literature in the twenties continued to develop under the heavy cloak of “Theological terror” as it reacted to White society’s view of blacks. The most African-American novelists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are concerned with the plight of the black human, her position within the family, in society and the world at large. As her position within the family is the focal point of this unending spiral of relationship, this is their primary concern. At the same time, the black woman writers wrested for recognition and had to fight against shift opposition from their own male counterparts, and this led to a constant criticism of any male characters created by these writers Black Me write a lot about the “castrating” black female and feel righteous in doing so. But when black women write about incest, rape, and sexual violence. Committed by black men against black women of all ages in the family and in the black community at large and talk of them as castrators and oppressors of black women, they are accused of sowing seeds of “division” in the black community and of promoting animosities not only between sexes in general but between males and females in the black family itself, but instead of being constrained by such dominance, the literature of the women is expansive and liberating. There are black woman writers, poets, novelists, dramatists, critics, scholars, researchers, intellectuals, and ideologists hard at work. They are found at wielding their pens like spades unearthing forbidden treasures buried in old soil. It is an adventurous literature and scholarship.

There are three prominent novelists, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker who emerged as strong women writers in African-American fiction. Through the study of Toni Morrison’s writings, one may come to a definite turning point in the history of black women’s literature. Alice Walker’s contribution to the scene of contemporary American literature is really something significant and enormous for she succeeded in redeeming the image of the stereotypical black woman through the effective, sensitive, and realistic portrayals in her works. Paule Marshall stands out as a pioneer of the black women’s renaissance. In her works, she has emphasized the need for creating distinct human beings who are affected by culture and society. The women writers like Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, Dorothy West and Paule Marshall are said to have placed black women at the center of their narratives.

Paul Marshall was born in 1929 and raised in Brooklyn, New Delhi. After graduating from Brooklyn College in 1953, she started working as a Magazine writer and researcher and eventually began to work on her first novel **Brown Girl, Brownstones**. This publication took her to great heights in the literary field bringing fame and name from literary circles and this popularity enabled her to publish such highly acclaimed works as *The Chosen Place, The*

*Timeless People, Praise Song for the Widow, Sole Clap Hands and Singh and Reena* and collection of Short stories. Paule Marshall is a breakthrough writer in many respects. She is the feminist, womanist, deconstructionist and Reconstructionist. Her fiction epitomizes the black diasporic women's quest for wholeness, for integration of the various parts of one's self-race, ethnicity, gender, historical process, and the exploration of the self of the specific individual in the community. In keeping with the significance of women of her ancestry, she consistently crafts the contours of that heritage from a black woman's experience.

Till the arrival of Paule Marshall on the literary scene, most writers projected the major themes like history, colonialism, slavery, racism from a male perspective. Standing out as a pioneer of the black women's renaissance, Paule Marshall is considered as the first black woman writer who treated these issues from a black feminist point of view. In the words of Barbara Christian, Marshall is the only black woman writer who engages limited states society, the new world as well as the international context. "One central motif in her works is a major theme of American literature; the adjustment of immigrants to a new material environment and culture and their attempt retain the spirit and integrity of the "old country". Paule Marshall is the first woman novelistic tradition to go beyond the established short lines and offer realistic representations of different models of black womanhood. She attempts to seriously capture the network of sentiments, motivations and misfortunes that are part of human behavior. By presenting black women as social, political and cultural actors, Marshall captures the diversities and complexities of their experiences and informs that her women are not victims.

Paule Marshall occupies a pioneering position not only as a sculpture of complex characters and a transmitter of a Afrocentric culture but also as a creator of feminine aesthetic which assumes that woman possesses a unique stand point on their experiences and perspectives. This aesthetic also demands that woman embrace the ideology of self-definition and self-valuation which stresses on replacing externally derived images with authentic female images. In here in this aesthetic, then is the idea that women be the center of the entire discourse, the hub of all activities. A practitioner of such an aesthetic must be confronted with a task that is twofold: to break the patriarchal pattern of representation and, also try to make room for women with and within their script. Her texts document lives of black women who insist on What Toni Morrison calls, "speaking the unspeakable" or what Michael Foucault calls, "thinking the unthought" **Brown Girl, Brown stones, Soul Clap Hands and Sing, The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, Praise song for the Widow, Daughters**, are the books that have established Marshall's reputation as "one of our finest American novelists". Applauded by critics, these books not only attest to her great gifts as a storyteller, but also are filled with particular blend of wisdom, generosity, humor and passion that has distinguished her writing over the years.

In all her works, Paule Marshall is ostensibly concerned with the issue of reclamation of self. In exploring the potential embodied in self-reclamation, Marshall demonstrates a progression of theme over the course of her work and moves from a focus on an individual's growth to over expanding implications of community, culminating in an affirmation of an overriding collective identity. Marshall's literary odyssey from **Brown Girl, Brown stones** (1959) to **Daughters** (1991) reveal that she moves from a special individual defining her identity as a part of her community to more common place protagonist discovering identity or making self-recovery by becoming enveloped in a more transcendent community and culture. Thus, Marshall expands her theme from an emphasis on individual self to a broad statement concerning the self in Black Diaspora. Her fictional design, therefore, constitutes what Sandra Govan calls "ripple principle", a series of concentric circles developing outward spirally from individualistic to collectivistic ethos", from microcosmic to macrocosmic patterns bearing architectural propensities" (Baker 16).

Brown Girl, Brown Stones, the very first novel Paule Marshall, took a giant leap into the world of ontological transmutation of black women's existential conditions in America. The novel charts the growth and maturation of its heroine, Selina Boyce, the rebellious black girl born to silk and Deighton Boyce, Americans struggling against odds in a hostile society. The book projects the different stages in her development as she journeys from innocence to experience, from ignorance to knowledge, testing the various phases, doubts, fears, hopes and conflicts of an archetypal adolescent girl. The novel first offers a glimpse of the world as a donnee for the young Selina but also chronicles the stages in her maturation while presenting key elements of the major conflicts of the story. Book one entitled "A Long Day and Long Night" introduces major characters and establishes the patterns of movements each of them generates. As the title suggests, it also sets up the basic tension between Selina's parents, Silla and Deighton. The second book entitled "Pastorale" signals a farewell to innocence as the prepubescent Selina stands poised on the brink of her own physical maturity. It highlights Selina's development as a young woman. The third book called "The War" gives vent to World War II which serves as the basic historical event, but the struggle over the land between Deighton and Silla. The fourth book "Selina" deals with the protagonist's embracing of her own identity and her readings to confront the world with a newly formed sense of self. Seeking explorations with the psychic dilemmas, oppressions, trials, triumph, rejections and idiosyncrasies from the insider's point of view, Marshall examines the innate qualities of her characters that make them neither the queens of the universe nor the helpless actors enacting their own tragedy. Marshall opines that the basic commitment of a black life in all its complexities. Harris writes thus:

“This strong, bitter, frustrated, disappointment, loving, vindictive woman, who keeps striving in the face of all disappointments, is perhaps one of the most complex black women characters in contemporary American literature” (P 57).

The Chosen Place, The Timeless People (1969) is Paule Marshall’s second novel, a monumental novel which is described as “the best novel to be written by an American black woman...and one of the four or five most impressive novels ever written by a Black American...the novel is a new dispatch from the combat zone of the self” (Bone 54). This novel does expand Marshall’s theme of reclamation of black female psyche set in the fictional landscape of a Caribbean island, Bournchiffs, a place of mythical past, it is as if Seline represents the identity crisis of youth Merle Kinbona, the protagonist of this novel is an image of the crisis of the middle years, the crisis of generativity (Skerrett 69). She is the second of Marshall’s trio of women who comprise “a history of human psychological development” (P 68) and who have embarked on an odyssean journey back to self-discovery. However, in this panoramic novel of epic proportions, Marshall provides Merle Kinbona with a much broader canvas on which etch the contours of her identity. Rather than creating a novel which focuses on character development, Marshall has written one in which the character must confront the setting. As Merle is not growing up but realizing herself in the context of black life in order to regain the forfeited self. Eugenia Collier writes:

“The novel **The Chosen Place, The Timeless People** then, is the next step in Marshall’s ever broadening vision of the relationship of the individual with the community. A vision that links Black culture in the Western hemisphere with its African past and the promise of future, it sees this black culture as different from European-American, which has been the oppressor....” (59).

Marshall moves from individualistic ethos to collective ethos, “from the way world affects an individual psyche to how many psyches create world” (Christian 112). Merle Kinbona reconstructs her fractured psyche through an encounter with a society that comprises blacks and whites, rich and poor, male, and female and members of every social strata. It is a world made up of also those blacks whose lives are inextricably wed to their collective history, rituals and culture more as manifested in their concept of present and past time. **Brown Girl, Brown Stones** and **Praise song for the Widow** are fictions of the private life, while **The Chosen Place, The Timeless People** deals with the public life. The novels strength, its range of psychological themes, the international and interracial cast of characters, and most distinctively its economic and political dimensions make it seem a vastly different kind of novel indeed.

In her self-described magnum opus, The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, Paule Marshall has crafted a brilliant multifaceted gem of a novel. More than layers of place and time,

and persons, it is an interlocking crystalline structure that teaches history, mediates on the consequences of a slavery and colonialism, and presents a vision for potential reconciliation and change in the personal, social and even international levels. **The Chosen Place, The Timeless People** is also a novel about color and class. Bourne Island, its setting, offers a microcosm not only of colonial and technological exploitation but also a map of the fallacious divisions based on class and color an island where most inhabitants can trace their lineage to prolific Duncan Vaughen. All these “big issues” and more, resonate throughout Marshall’s novel. But true to her story telling heritage, she creates characters that speak and act to historical and international forces as they confront local and personal, social economic and political issues. Thus, focusing on the characters, Merle and Harriet, Paul Marshall’s novel remains as vibrantly contemporary today as when it was originally published in 1969.

**The Chosen Place, The Timeless People** is a novel not only about race, racism and slavery but also about one of the most pervasive problems of the contemporary world-that of Western imperialism and neocolonialism. But presenting a colonial situation which not only defines black people as plantation slaves in the deep American South and an Caribbean island but also holds them in bondage economically and psychologically through neo-imperialist relationship, Marshall brings into focus both the African-American experience and the experience of the under developed communities in the Third World countries. In her second novel, argues Barbara Christian, as

“Marshall creates a microcosm representative not only of Bourne hills but of other under-developed societies in the Third World that are captive both psychologically and economically by the metropolises of the West, yet somehow possessing their own vision of possibility. (P 167).

In the form of Merle Kinbona, Marshall has created a character who is not only a representative of black people in America but even Third World revolutionary. She, therefore, must not only contend with her own culture, history, rituals, and communal mores but also engage herself in the struggle against the heavily impinging power of neocolonialism.

Silla Boyce in Brown Girl, Brown Stones, Merle Kinbona in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People and the other major female characters in the fictional world of Paule Marshall represent not only the personal self but also the self that is collective. Marshall feels that the artist could move beyond the personal self and continues: “It’s not only my experience when I talk about “my” or “I”. I’m really talking about the collective “I”, clarifies Marshall (P 411). The self that Marshall actualizes in her canon is not the self that is reduced to an overtly sloganistic, propagandist, politically motivated purposes as one often finds in black male literature, but a compromise, multifaceted revisionist, reconstructionist, positive self that embodies the trials,

aspirations, rejections and endurances which so many black men and women in America commonly share. In the words of Stephen Butterfield,

“The self is conceived as a member of an oppressed social group, with ties and responsibilities to the other member... The self belongs to the people and the people find a voice in the self” (P 3).

Houston A. Baker reiterates Butterfield's point when he says that “black American culture was never characterized by the individualistic ethos of white American Culture. It is characterized by a collective ethos! Marshall as women writer does not negate the personal self, “the individual ethos”, but grants that self that ethos a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, composite tone so that it is accepted as an authentic and representative expression of the entire Community “This is the reason why, writes Marshall, “She (Silla) becomes the collective voice of all Bajan women, the vehicle through which their former suffering found utterance”. It is this fusion of the private and the public, the personal and the collective, the character and community, the sculpture and the space that provides a viable context through which Marshall's characters carve out their articulate and energized identities.

The community, “this collective ethos” weaves a tapestry of certain rituals, myths, religious beliefs and practices and presents its people a specific cultural ethos through which they try to express their deep troubles and aspirations. It is through this ethos they try to reconcile and resolve the chaotic situations in their lives and finally find unity and wholeness of their being. In **The Chosen Place, The Timeless People**, the circles of history, myth and rituals constitute the cultural force through which the submerged consciousness of Merle Kinbona and other Bournehills people is brought into full play. In **Praise song for the widow**, Papa Legba, the folkloric trickster figure of West Africa and the ritualistic ‘Beg Pardon’ dance become the agents through which Avery Johnson, the jaded protagonist, rejuvenates herself into Avatara, the incarnation of wholeness and human rituality. Thus, Marshall's novels are praise songs for the reason that she relentlessly analyses all her characters in relation to their community and culture. Creation of complex and ambivalent characters within the context of black community and culture was an unheralded chronicle and Paule Marshall in the first novelist to actualize that chronic into the canon of Black American Literature.

To conclude, it may be said that Paule Marshall is an author who is an adept at understanding and illustrating the complexities of life in particular for young and older female characters within novels such as **Brown Girl Brown stones**, **The Chosen Place, The Timeless People** and **Daughters**. Marry her characters are confronted with the challenge of resisting gender, ethnic and immigrant-based categories that restrict or limit ways in which they can define and redefine their lives. Her women are mysterious, tragic and more often take us into dark recesses of their souls. Yet they are strong in many ways. They love the ground temporarily

but recover it finally. By granting centrality to the triply oppressed members of black community in the narrative discourse, by voicing out their triumphs, aspirations, idiosyncrasies, by incorporating in her texts feminine themes such as motherhood, marriage, sexuality, mother-daughter relationship and black sisterhood, Marshall granted authenticity, to black feminine self and established Herself as a writer in difference. Like many writers, who recall and restore the forgotten and suppressed histories of their people, Marshall evokes the power of remembrance and the need to appropriate the past as a means for the understanding the present and controlling the future. In brief, let it be said that Marshall is a black woman author who archest rates the theme of innocence and experience in her texts by offering a paradigm where her women's growth towards self-enlightenment may be seen as a two-fold process; one of psychic fracturing and the other of seeking wholeness.

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