THE ROLES OF WOMEN IN THE NOVELS OF PAULE

MARSHALL

A Thesis

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by

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DEDICATION

TO RHODA'S CHILDREN
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INTRODUCTION

Although she tries not to show it, she is hurt because her books have not received a larger following and, as an artist, she wants to be recognized, applauded and understood. 1

In her dissertation written in May 1983, four years after the above quotation was written, Dr. Dorothy Denniston states:

While it is fortunate that Paule Marshall has recently received some of the critical attention that she so richly deserves, no comprehensive study of her novels and short stories has been published to date. 2

Having read three of her novels and many of her short stories, one cannot help but wonder why there has been so little study of a writer, who, like Ms. Alexis Deveaux, I regard as a “pioneer.” I would strongly suggest that Ms. Marshall is a writer whose thematic concerns developed in an era that was not ready to embrace her message.

The young Selina of Marshall's Brown Girl, Brownstones, who refuses to succumb to what her Barbadian society thinks female children should be is a predecessor of Toni Morrison's protagonist,
Sula, in the novel that has her name as its title. Sula rebels against all of the societal conventions of her Medallion community in her quest for her identity. Selina seeks herself by,

Fleeing from what she feels to be unbearable restrictions to her development as a person, restrictions that will not allow her to experiment or to be creative; she opposes her tribe even as she seeks herself.3

In both Brown Girl, Brownstones and Sula, Marshall and Morrison, respectively demonstrate the negative repercussions of black traditional social structures that are too rigid, especially when it concerns the upbringing of future "respectable women". Selina's unconventional desire to do things differently gives her the opportunity to develop into the type of human being that she might be able to live with peacefully in the future.

Sula Peace's irrepressible inner urge to define herself in her community of Medallion results in her being regarded as a pariah and somewhat "mythical" figure by some members of her community. She, like Selina, turns out the way she wants. They are both able to create their individual parameters within which they define themselves.

Meridian, the feminist protagonist in Alice Walker's Meridian, serves as the catalyst who galvanizes the blacks in the South to
fight for their rights during the civil-rights movement by raising their political consciousness through educating them in their political rights. Before her though, there was Marshall’s Merle Kinbona in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, who in her case, stood her ground against the corrupt politicians of her native Bourne Island.

The feminist movement was not yet in vogue in the late 1950s and early 1960s to give Marshall’s novels the boost that it gave to later African-American female writers such as Morrison and Walker. The years during which Marshall wrote her first novels were times when the American society was dealing with the Civil Rights Movement, a movement that was primarily concerned with the plight of blacks as a group and not necessarily the distinct problems of the double discrimination encountered by black women, as both black and also as women. That discriminatory practice put them below their fellow black men and their white female counterparts in order of importance. The American society, as a whole, was not yet ready to accept the portrayal of black women as strong protagonists.

Among the themes that can be discerned in Marshall’s four novels, to date (three of which will be examined in this thesis), the most prominent is the search for identity by the female protagonists and the important roles women play in that search. However, while
it is true that the search for identity runs through all the novels, it should also be recognized that this search unfolds at different levels. In *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, it is on two levels: the personal, with regard particularly to the protagonist, Merle Kinbona, and the collective, as it concerns the people of Bournehills. They are a people who have been colonized and exploited by the British, a people who believe that in their collective search for identity lies the fuller and clear understanding of who and what they are as individuals. Their past communal lifestyle is depicted by Ferguson, a character in the novel, when he remarks that under Cuffee Ned the people of Bournehills

*Had worked together!* ... A man had not lived for himself alone, but for his neighbor also. They had trusted one another, had set aside their differences and stood as one against their enemies. *They had been a people!* (*The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, p. 287)

*Brown Girl, Brownstones* also develops at two levels, dealing as it does, with the collective Barbadian community in New York and the individual growth of Selina Boyce in particular. However, unlike *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, which is more focused on the collective, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* is more concerned with Selina’s personal development. *Praisesong for the Widow* deals primarily with the personal, focusing exclusively on the life of the
protagonist, Avey Johnson, and exploring to some extent the gradual disappearance of some black traditional religious cultural practices within the black Diaspora.

The focus of this thesis is on the different roles black women are ascribed in three of Marshall's novels, either in search of their own identities, or in their efforts to help other women find their identities. The first chapter deals with Black women as "guides" in Brown Girl, Brownstones. It focuses on the development of Selina Boyce, the youngest of Marshall's protagonists, and the dilemma she faces in her search for her own personality distinct from that of her parents. Chapter Two examines Merle Kinbona's role in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, how she succeeds in arriving at an understanding of herself, and how that in turn affects her community of Bournehills as a whole. Chapter Three, the final chapter, focuses on women and cultural redemption in light of the fact that they have to achieve do this redemption within a materialistic American society that has been strongly influenced by western values as portrayed in Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow. There is a specific emphasis on the spiritual aspect of healing that can also be employed by black women in the search for identity.

Commenting on the observation that her books are not as commercially successful as they are critically, Marshall states:
I think it unlikely that I will ever make it commercially with bestsellers and that kind of thing, but what has been very heartening and reassuring is that people who read well like the work. And that I tell you, is just so gratifying.

Rather than make her books more commercially appealing by writing novels that appeal to the needs of the dominant populace, she opts to maintain her principles by producing works that are closer to her interests. She comes across as a writer who is more concerned with the significance of her cultural heritage, which she sees slipping away and employs the most effective means she possesses to prevent that from happening.

Marshall's fourth novel, Daughters, which was published by Antheneum in late 1991, continues in the tradition of her thematic concern of black female identity in the Diaspora. The protagonist, Ursâ Beatrice MacKenzie, who has a Caribbean father and an American-born mother, not only encounters problems with her parents when she decides to be her own person, but also comes in conflict with her boyfriend and her best friend, who is a southern African-American. Here again, as in the three earlier novels, the different cultures that together constitute the black heritage merge. That novel will not be considered in this thesis.
NOTES


4. Deveaux, p. 133.
CHAPTER 1

BLACK WOMEN AS GUIDES.

Brown Girl, Brownstones, a bildungsroman, focuses on the protagonist Selina Boyce and her struggle for her own identity, to differentiate herself from her materialistic mother and her romantic father within the immigrant Barbadian community in New York. Or, as Marshall states, "It was a study of two opposing forces in life: the poetic as suggested by the father in the story and the practical and materialistic as symbolized by the mother and the necessity to reconcile, to balance these two forces is pointed up in the character of the daughter."

It is also a novel which portrays black women as guides in different aspects of life, women, who, together with Seliria's parents, will steer her in the right course in her quest for the attainment of an understanding of her true self.

The Boyce family presents for the reader the contradictory value systems with which the Barbadian community in New York in the 1920s had to contend. Their immigration was due in large part
to the desire to lead a better life than that which they had led in Barbados. This is reflected in the motto of their Association of Barbadian Homeowners and Businessmen which proclaims: "IT IS NOT THE DEPTHS FROM WHICH WE COME: BUT THE HEIGHTS TO WHICH WE ASCEND" (Brown Girl, Brownstones, p.220). The frigid reception which they were accorded on their arrival provides a source of external motivation. The acquisition of material wealth becomes a symbolic way of showing the outside world, and also of proving to themselves that they are a force worthy of recognition. Their determined gravitation towards materialism is also used as a buffer against what they perceived to be the hostility of the larger American society, for they were both cut off from the white racist society as a whole and considered "enemies" by black Americans.

The different perspectives from which Silla and Deighton view the handling of the harsh realities with which they were confronted in New York is a direct reflection of their very dissimilar upbringing, that is Silla's poor background versus Deighton's more comfortable one. The product of a poor cotton-picking background, the ownership of a brownstone house and the possible attainment of some of the goals articulated by the Barbadian community represent for Silla more than just a rise in status. They emphasize a tangible insurance for a more stable future for her family, especially her two
daughters. Deighton's overindulgent experience, on the other hand, renders him incapable of understanding the driving force behind Silla's desire. He opts instead to channel his energy toward keeping intact the Barbadian way of life he had known in his youth. As the literary critic, Barbara Christian, has observed: "For Deighton, life is more than acquiring things; he would have to sacrifice so much of himself to succeed in America that he would no longer exist." 2

Christian's observation, therefore, sets the stage for the conflict in the novel between Deighton and Silla. Deighton's strong adherence to his Barbadian way of life is so deeply rooted that it serves as his source of escape from the realities of the demands that living in New York makes on him, such as holding down a job as a man and the head of his family. That character quality contributes further to his inability to adapt to his new environment.

Silla, on the other hand, thrives on her husband's seeming failure as a man. She is spurred by her determination to make it materially both in America and within her Barbadian community. Deighton's attitude creates the forum for role reversals which upgrades Silla to the position of breadwinner from the conventionally usually expected positions of the passive woman. The pressure of this domestic position and the of meeting the goals set by the Barbadian community ultimately result in the graduai
ebbing of Silla’s emotional responses to the needs of her family.

Her strength of character is symbolic of the machines in the war factory, where she once worked. The reader, through Selina’s eyes, sees Silla in that “machine-like” state. Silla works as if in “pantomime” with her fellow workers in the deafening sounds of continuous machine operations. As Selina watched, she saw that, “Like the others, her (Silla’s) movements were attuned to the mechanical rhythms of the machine-mass .... Only the mother’s own formidable force could match that of the machines; only the mother could remain indifferent to the brutal noise.” (Brown Girl pp.99,100) Silla’s personal life experiences have affected her emotional responses to the needs of her family and herself. She has become so detached from the “living” aspects of life, as she is burdened by her material needs.

Even more stupifying is the image which the reader gets from an old Barbadian acquaintance of Silla’s as he talks with her at one of the Association’s dances:

But what wrong with you Silla, that you change up so since you come to these people New York? You don does dance! You must think I forget how you used to be wucking yourself every sat’day night when the Brumlee Band played on the pasture. You must think I forget how I see you dance till you fall out for dead right there on the grass. You must think I forget, but girl, I ain forget. (Brown Girl p.144)
Silla's striving for material well-being in the United States has left her with very little room for any emotional life.

Selina, as a first generation Barbadian-American, has never experienced any of her parents' Barbadian upbringing. She has the unenviable task of carving a point of reference for herself and the entire family from the extremely opposite positions and lifestyles of her parents. However, the realization of her inner urge to forge a balance at home between her parents is made all the more difficult by her sister's nature. Selina's sister, Ina, has a quiet nature which enables her to lead a life almost devoid of conflict. As a child, she would docily do whatever she was asked to do. As a young adult, she has turned to religion and marriage in order to satisfy her own peaceable way of life. On the other hand, Selina is torn between her love for her father and grudging respect for her mother.

Implied in the relationship between Selina and her father is a tinge of the Oedipal. However, this relationship is not characterized by the usual desire of the daughter being drawn sexually to the father, in competition with the mother. Selina's Oedipal leaning is shown through her emotional affinity to her father. Her role resembles that of a surrogate mother. She provides him with a buffer against the painful realizations of the real world in New York,
and the disdain of his own immediate community. She will not accept anything that even hints at defamation of her father or his memory, not even from her best friend, Beryl Chaneil, as Beryl discovers once when in the company of their mutual friends. As they all engage in listing what they want from their fathers, Beryl's innocent question, "What's your father gonna give you?" (Brown Girl, p. 197) triggers Selina's below-the-surface anger and she leaves the gathering in anger.

But she would have liked to turn and tell Beryl, very quietly, there in the dim hall with the others gathered apprehensively on the landing above, what he had given her. How one cold March afternoon long ago she had found him stretched on the cot in the sun parlor in his shirt sleeves, his head cradled in his arms and humming. "Is it spring?" she had asked, her breath coming in cold wisps. He had drawn her down beside him, loosened her arms and said, "Yes." And suddenly she had sensed spring in the air, seen it forming beyond the glass walls and had not been cold any more. How could Beryl understand that this was what he had given her? and its worth? (Brown Girl, pp. 197-198)

Selina's reflections have been quoted here in order to show the degree of her love for and protection of her father. Even as she longed for some material possessions, she was very content with the ability to appreciate life and its simple pleasures like her
father.

The tug-of-war in Selina's emotions manifests itself in her dealings with her mother. There appears to be a love/hate relationship between Selina and Silla in the first book of the novel. The progression of the novel, however, reveals that Selina's feelings are more tumultuous than antagonistic. Her seemingly antagonistic reaction to Silla is in actual fact, a defense mechanism. Despite her close bond with her father, she senses how much she really is like her mother. Her behavior toward Silla is fueled by her fear of turning out to be just like Silla when she gets older. She is scared by the possibility of becoming an emotionless person, incapable of showing any human feelings. Having as little as possible to do with Silla becomes a way for Selina to deal with her fear; the other is to think of Silla in abstract terms, as "the mother."

Selina's use of the definite article "the" strips Silla of the picture a reader might have of the ideal mother who showers love and attention on her children. It objectifies her and renders her an emotionally mechanistic woman. In spite of the complications, Selina knows that Silla is the only prop in her life. (Brown Girl, p.46) She could not stand her mother's philosophy of life, but she could not do without her, either. Given this conflicting situation, Selina needs help from other people to guide her in the right direction.
Suggie Skeete and Miss Thompson assume the roles of the two women who teach Selina about sexuality and real-life respectively. Marshall’s use of Suggie, a Barbadian, is a conscious attempt to show that not all Bardadian women are as materially inclined as Silla and her friends. Suggie represents those who, just like Deighton, derive more pleasure from the simple things of life than from the materialistic. Behind Silla’s tough exterior lurks an inner desire to feel needed. The growing sexuality of her daughters presents an unwelcome reality that she views with dread. Emphasizing the problematic aspects of sexual encounters in discussions with her daughters is a very effective way in which she tries to meet that need. Her solution is, however, ironic because although she makes both Ina and Selina understand that any unwanted pregnancy would result in their being sent out of her home, she also knows that if they left, she would have fewer reasons to want to succeed in the United States. By talking tough, Silla is able to keep her children where she wanted them at home, away from the temptations of undesirable attention from the opposite sex.

On a larger scale is the ever watchful eye of the Barbadian community. Within their unwritten code of conduct, any illegitimate pregnancy would have been viewed a disgrace to the parents of the girl involved. Suggie does not share these moral inhibitions.
Selina's unconscious gravitation toward Suggie is a result of the similarity between Suggie's lifestyle and that of her father. Suggie's frequent relationships and her total disregard for the "code of conduct" as dictated by her community sharply contrasts with Silla's unquestioning acceptance of the doctrines.

The level of contrast between Suggie's and Silla's personalities is further heightened by the fact that it is not with her mother but with Suggie that Selina, as a teenager, shares her hopes and fears about boys. It is Suggie who encourages Selina to explore her growing sexuality. As Geta Leseur states in her critique of the novel, "Suggie introduces Selina to the conception of sex as pleasurable, desirable, and fulfilling and offers a model in herself of an unconventional alternative to Barbadian mores of marriage, motherhood and monogamy." It is Suggie's irreverent tutoring that emboldens Selina and gives her the understanding and courage which she takes into her relationship with Clive Springer.

Selina's actions during the very first time she meets Clive attest to her growth. She successfully casts aside the strict preachings of her mother and unashamedly confesses to herself "that something inside her which had always been closed was slowly opening like a fan, shimmering with color, and that his touch was the long-awaited signal." (Brown Girl, p.232) She is now ready and
mature enough to put into practice all that she learned from Suggie and admired in her father.

Selina’s relationship with Clive Springer seems to subtly suggest the likely course of Selina’s self-knowledge, as the uncanny similarities between Clive’s and Deighton’s lives indicate. Clive and Deighton had a similar childhood. They both had mothers who worked diligently to provide for their needs. Selina is attracted to Clive not only because he is a fellow Barbadian, but because of his seeming dislike of the Association, and his resentment of everything for which the community stands. Clive’s stance on the materialistic issue is the same as that of her father. In addition to the fact that like Deighton, Clive has the same aversion for the larger Barbadian community, he, too, is interested in art. While Selina’s father toys with music, Clive experiments with the possibility of being both a piano player and a painter.

In an attempt to draw a further distinction between her father’s lifestyle and that of the Barbadian community, Selina’s thoughts just before she allows Clive to make love to her are of Suggie, Summer, and her father in his Saturday night outings with his women friends. And, in the act of lovemaking, she not only sees “Suggie languorous and laughing amid her tumbled sheets .... It was like being sick and having her father carry her up to the high bed and
sinking, feverish, into its soft depth ....” (Brown Girl p.239)

These, significantly, are the two people who were considered as pariahs by their own because they do not live by set standards. Selina’s thinking of them at the point when she loses her virginity, therefore, is her own form of sexual revolution. It is also in this relationship that the sexual aspect of Selina’s Oedipal ties to her father is given full rein. Clive becomes a surrogate for Deighton and gives Selina the Oedipal association.

She gives her love unconditionally, asking for nothing in return. Asking nothing, that is, until she discovers to her dismay just how unassertive and very much like her father Clive really is. The young Selina was prepared to make up excuses for her father’s failures, but the more mature version who, in spite of herself has internalized some of her mother’s no-nonsense attitude, realizes the futility of such a relationship and is able to let reason prevail. But that is not before Clive, who, acting in the role of “young Deighton” is able to penetrate her wall of self-denial and tell her, “You are truly your mother’s child.” (Brown Girl p.248) It is Miss. Thompson who helps her recognize the truth in that observation.

Miss Thompson, whose character is African-American and not Barbadian, is ideally supposed to assume the role of an objective observer in her judgment of the situation. Her portrayal also
suggests the fact that all black elderly women are seen as "mothers" of the young, irregardless of their place of origin, and that is the reason why she runs a hairdressing salon where women can safely and collectively discuss their problems. She is the voice of reason. Being an African-American woman from the South, she has experienced all the hard knocks of racist America, and survived admirably. She has experienced the two aspects of life that make up the characters of both Selina's parents. From her daughter's activities, she understands what the love of life can amount to when taken to the extreme as in Deighton's case. Having survived racist abuses in the South, she shares an affinity with Silla because she knows that blacks have to work harder at whatever they do in order to succeed in America.

However, even as she accepts the reasons behind Silla's drive, Miss Thompson has enough feelings to show love to her grandchildren when her daughter goes in search of her own pleasures. Selina, as a girl, recognizes that quality in her and adopts Miss. Thompson as her own surrogate grandmother who will give her the love, understanding and care that she does not get from her parents.

Miss Thompson, acting within the role of the unbiased observer, tries to impart to her young ward, Selina, the same kind of understanding she has where Selina's parents are concerned. It is
her wisdom which she brings from her experience that makes her succeed where others fail, in convincing Selina to attend one of the Barbadian Association meetings. She does this because, as she explains to Selina, she wants her “To understand .... So when you start talking so big and smart against people, you'll be talking from understanding. That's the only time you have the right to say whether you like them or not....But you got to understand why first” (Brown Girl p.218). Selina needs to understand her Barbadian community and the underlying reasons why they are so materially inclined rather than judging them from her father's disdainful viewpoint.

Selina's decision to go along with the challenge not only makes her come to terms with the materialistic inclinations of the Barbadian community, it also helps her build the foundation from which she would be able to successfully deal with racism within the larger American society.

Ironically, it is after her successful dance sequence (an art form which puts her in league with Deighton and Clive), that the path of her journey to her identity is thrown unceremoniously open, as she encounters her first ever blatant racist treatment. Her awakening is brought about by the mother of one of her white female dance partners. The woman congratulates Selina in a very
condescending manner after Selina's successful dance recital. In her commentary on this event in the novel, Deborah Schneider, notes,

At the party following the recital, in the home of a wealthy white family on the upper East side of Manhattan, the unconscious patronizing racism of the hostess brings Selina brutally back to earth reminding her that ... she has entered a world in which her presence will not always be unquestionably accepted, that she is, after all ... a black West Indian immigrant girl.  

The fact that the woman's comments were unconscious is a telling reflection of the wider society which sees blacks not as individuals with distinctive characteristics, but as a monolithic group. The woman not only projects onto Selina the stereotypical portrayal of blacks as wonderful dancers by actually congratulating her on upholding her race's gift for singing and dancing, but attacks Selina's self esteem by referring to the West Indian maid she once had as a "girl" even though she was as old as Selina's own mother. Her limited stereotypical point of reference renders her incapable of being able to comprehend how it could have been possible for a "colored" girl to have given the kind of performance Selina gave at the recital. The woman's comments make Selina see

Clearly for the first time, the image which the woman - and the ones like the woman - saw when they looked at her .... Her dark face must be confused in their minds with
what they feared most; with the night .... Like the night, she was to be feared, spurned, purified, and always reminded of her darkness (Brown Girl, p.291).

Selina's handling of that agonizing situation is a testimony to the level of maturity she has attained as she decides not to withdraw into her shell and blame the racist society for that unfortunate incident, like her father would most probably have done. Rather, with the better understanding of her people, she is able to admit for the first time in her life that, "She was one with Miss Thompson....One with the whores, the flashy men .... And she was one with them: the mother and the Bajan women, who had lived each day what she had come to know .... Who are we to scorn them?" (Brown Girl pp. 292-3). She is now able to better appreciate the realities of the American society that dictated her mother's actions, even if she still does not accept them.

Having successfully completed her role as a "guide" for Selina in the novel, Miss Thompson returns to the South from where she originally came because now Selina is mature enough to fend for herself. Selina's total acceptance of her new understanding of herself is made more poignant when, in a recollection of what Clive had told her earlier, she tells her mother, "Everybody used to call me Deighton's Selina but they were wrong. Because you see I am truly
your child." (Brown Girl p. 307)

She departs from her community prepared to take on whatever the wider world has in store, inevitably starting with a trip to her Barbadian home, but not before she ties herself symbolically to her community, which she has rejected for so long. There is no more obvious way to do that than by throwing away one of her two silver bangles within the area that comprises the dwelling area of the Barbadian community while leaving the other one on her wrist; bangles that from birth have defined her as one of Barbadian heritage.

Aided by Suggie and Ms. Thompson, Selina can now be able to come to terms with herself, taking from both parents those qualities which she considers to be useful in the development of her own identity.
NOTES


CHAPTER II

BLACK WOMEN AS POLITICAL ACTIVISTS.

Paulie Marshall's second novel, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* opens with an epigraph from the Tiv of Nigeria, West Africa, which states:

> Once a great wrong has been done, it never dies. People speak the words of peace, but their hearts do not forgive. Generations perform ceremonies of reconciliation but there is no end.  

The people who cannot forgive are the inhabitants of Bournehills, a section of the fictional Bourne Island, where the novel is set. This novel which reads more like the history of Bournehills than a work of fiction, portrays the dashed hopes of the vast majority of people who were once under the control of a colonial power. The book focuses on the people of Bournehills who, having
found themselves subjected to a similar exploitation by their own national leaders. The only person willing to help change their situation is a woman named Merle Kinbona, the protagonist in the novel.

Marshall consciously set out to portray women characters as protagonists in her novels. As she states in an interview with Alexis Deveaux:

Women do figure prominently in my books. And I'm concerned about letting them speak their piece, letting them be central figures, actors, activists in fiction rather than just backdrop or background figures. I want them to be central characters. Women in fiction seldom are .... My feminism takes its expression through my work. Women are central for me. They can as easily embody the power principle as a man.  

However, of all her three female protagonists, the one who comes closest to her prototype of a female political figure is Merle Kinbona in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People. Marshall's description of Merie is that of:

Someone who is terribly uncertain and dependent, almost psychotic....Her feelings about herself are fraught with insecurity and self-rejection.  

She further explains that these feelings can be attributed to Merle’s traumatic childhood. The product of an illegal multi-racial liaison, she was not only spurned by both her colonialist father and society but also lost her mother when she was just a baby.

Being the child of both the black and “white” worlds and not accepted by either, as in Merle’s case, is bound to create a yearning for an identity that one can call one’s own. Merle’s wild parties, which she gave while she was a student in London, and the lesbian affair she had with a wealthy white woman were desperate defensive ways through which she sought to assuage the hurt and emptiness she had experienced in her life. Marriage, to an African, signifies not only closeness to a fellow black, it also provides her with a sense of having found her roots, through a marital relationship, with somebody from the motherland. All her life, she had been trying to “belong” to the majority black population in Bourne island, and did everything she could to distance herself from the white heritage of her father. Ketu’s (her ex-husband’s) sense of positive self-pride presents her with a feeling of identity, effectively contributing to the stabilization of Merle’s restless and wandering nature.

On a personal level, Merle’s experience is identical to that of the people of Bournehills as a whole. As a child, she was not
accepted by her white father until he was on his deathbed. As a young woman, she was exploited and psychologically “destroyed” by a wealthy white woman. Bournehills, in like manner, was colonized by whites, who used the people for cheap labor and ruled all aspects of their lives exploiting them to the maximum.

The first introduction the reader gets to Bournehills is through the descriptions of the male members of the local elite. Their depiction of Bournehills is that of a place that has been in a state of perpetual underdevelopment since their nominal independence. According to these “elite”, Bournehills is so far gone that even if developers “set up a hundred development schemes at a million each ... [it] would remain the same.” (The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, p.56)

Foreign aid, which is geared toward attempts to solve the social and economic problems has not received much success because of the people of Bournehills strong suspicions of foreigners, their lack of faith in their politicians, and their general resistance to new ideas. As a result, simply pumping money into Bournehills will not solve the problems of the area. The elite would like to advocate a complete overhauling of the traditional system before substantial social progress can occur. The Bournehills people are so rooted in their culture that they are unwilling to change. To the
elite, that attitude translates into a situation of the pathological.

The inhabitants of Bournehills have become the "natives" of the free nation while the elite are now the neo-colonialists, who see themselves more as caretakers of the poor than as fellow citizens. They have become alienated from the larger community as a result of their English education and pretentious adherence to English culture. The narrator's unflattering view of these elite, as they delude themselves in the make-belief world of the colonialists, is exposed as she comments on one of their frequent get-togethers:

They were all, to a man almost, drinking imported whisky, scorning as a matter of status the local rum, which was excellent; all wearing dark-toned, conservative, heavy English suits in spite of the hot night .... Down below, along the sweep of driveway, were packed the large, late-model English and German cars they drove. (The Chosen Place, p. 53)

Since the novel begins in medias res, it is only through the use of flashbacks that the reader learns that Merle Kinbona, like her larger Bournehills community is engaged in a quest for identity. The introduction of elderly characters such as Leesy Walkes, Ferguson, Deibert, and Stinger, who indulge in the frequent nostalgic historic strength of Bournehills, presents a picture of the colonial history of their home. Their discussions, arguments, and proud references to
their ancestral hero Cuffee Ned gives a sense of past communal identity that stands in contrast to their present situation. It is through these reminiscences of the past that the entire history of Bournehills unfolds. The uninhibited display of pride in their past is contrasted with the shame the elite feel about their colonial past.

Marshall believes that for a people to understand their present and look forward to their future they must know their past. This belief of hers is portrayed in Merle, whose attachment to that cause is reflected in the course, history, which she read in England. Merle accepts how vital the history of Bournehills is to its survival, because it is only through that medium that the cultural heritage of which the others are so proud can be transmitted to the younger generation, and also aid in the building and maintenance of their self-esteem.

Her acceptance of the importance of history motivates her to teach her students about the battle between Cuffee and the white colonialist, Percy Bryam from the Bournehills perspective which, according to Leesy, was not “the history that was down in the books, that told all about the English (and) made it look like black people never fought back” (The Chosen Place p.32). She taught it just like Stinger told it, conjuring up the image of a lone black man withstandng the military assault of the much better equipped
colonial army for six months. In addition to her teaching, in her work with the more mature people in Bournehills, "She continues to exhort 'the little fella', as she calls the poor and oppressed, to resist, to organize, to rise up against the condition of their lives."

Merle operates as the link between the elite and the poor masses, and becomes the yardstick by which the reader judges the activities of the male politicians. Her exposure to the same type of western education, which they have, has not resulted in her being alienated from the poor in the same way as the male elite and their society wives. Although, educationally, she is one of them, socially and morally she is not of their world. The people see these qualities and believe in her and her dreams of a brighter future for all of them. Merle's acceptance by the masses stems from the fact that they fully realize that unlike the other members of the elite, she understands their problems and what their needs are. As the narrator puts it, she understands that,

As strange and as different as they are, as supposedly backward as they are, they have an astonishing sense of history. They know that until a people, an oppressed people, have actually wrested power from their oppressors they cannot really come into their own. The Bournehills people refuse many stopgap measures offered to them because in their minds, the change necessary is a revolutionary change. They will not accept anything less than the complete independence their hero, Cuffee Ned,
In this quote, the narrator, offers the answer to the reason why, as far as the elite are concerned, there is no changing or improving Bournehills, and why even with the set up of schemes that might have cost millions, the place is still as undeveloped as it is. The people do not want the semblance of independence, which the elite have accepted, but the total feeling that, at last, they are truly independent.

The degree of alienation of the elite is not simply economic and cultural. It permeates their social lifestyles and manifests itself in their preference for light-skinned wives and their uncontrollable pursuit of Caucasian women, as exemplified by Lyle Hutson, who, with his successful law practice, and light-skinned Island wife carries on a very open affair with the English wife of the Bourne Island newspaper editor. While Merle makes a conscientious effort to marry an African to help her with her quest for identity, Lyle (who acts as a representative for the male elite), sets his eyes on white women in order to further distance himself from his people. Lyle's actions in this regard only points out more glaringly the difference in perspective between himself and the other male politicians and Merle.
Lyle's character symbolizes the colonial black man who allows his thought processes to be shaped by the teachings of colonialists. The white colonial male, in order to prevent sexual interaction between his women and the colonized black man, placed his women on a pedestal, making them inaccessible to the "savage" black man. Frantz Fanon explores this phenomenon of sexual colonial mentality in his detailed description of the emotional turmoil a student from the French Antilles experiences in France. The young man, who, as a Negro, is a "savage," is granted a "civilized" status because he is a student and can, therefore, be bold enough to ask the permission of a white family to marry their daughter. 7 Fanon goes on to state that:

Enraged by this degrading ostracism, mulattoes and Negroes have only one thought from the moment they land in Europe: to gratify their appetite for white women .... And a certain tang of proud revenge enters into this. 8

Lyle's validation of himself as a man is, therefore, given an additional boost every time he has an affair with a white woman in his mixed-up colonialist way of thinking, which spills over into the manner in which he and his other elitist colleagues handle governmental problems.
The development plan which the politicians devise for Bourne Island parallels the course of action which most countries that were once under the yoke of colonialism or are just in the throes of guiding their countries to the more developed stage embark upon. Those actions, in a vast majority of the situations, give rise to neo-colonialist agreements that, in the end, leave the beleaguered host state in a worse shape than it was, while the foreign investor reaps all the profit.

The Bourne Island plan would invite foreign businesses to operate for tax-free periods of up to fifteen years and pay no customs duties for the same length of time. In addition to those concessions, the businesses have the assurance that they would be allowed to transfer all their profits back to their home countries, and, in the event that the business fails, they have the legal right to repatriate their capital too.

What that plan essentially gives up is the possible revenue that could accrue from taxes on foreign investments that would have been channeled into setting up agricultural schemes that would have helped the poor and at the same time provided everybody on the Island with food, thereby putting a stop to their having to import their barest necessities.
While the government officials congratulate themselves on what they regard as a masterpiece, Merle is the only one from Bourne Island, who is able to really appreciate the absurdity of the plan. Thus, she exclaims:

Signed, sealed and delivered .... The whole place. Is that what we threw out the white pack who ruled us for years and put you chaps in office for? .... For you to literally pay people to come and make money off us? .... Man, it's a joke. (The Chosen Place pp.209-210)

The question then arises whether a people who have labored under colonial rule can ever be truly independent. In the case of Bourne Island, with a government saturated with neo-colonialists, the answer would appear to be in the negative. Here, not only are the people under the rule of neo-colonialists, economically, their lives are still tied to Britain. The only cane factory in Bournehills, which is the production site of the most important cash crop in the community and is the place where the people work to earn their livelihood belongs to a Briton, Sir John Stokes. He has an unquestioned monopoly on the community's very lifeblood.

Sir John and his cane factory are symbolic representations of the post-colonial system in which those colonialists, who owned plantations and factories and used the indigenous people as a source
of cheap labor. In the West Indies, some of the ex-colonialists still regard themselves as "landlords" because, even with the independence of these countries, some of the national lands were still owned by them. As is the practice in such situations, Sir John is an absentee landlord, who visits the factory once every year.

If Sir John is the colonial landlord, Erskine Vaughan, the Bourne Island born local manager of the factory is more of a plantation "overseer." During the period of slavery, it was the overseer's responsibility to see to it that all the wishes of the plantation owner were carried out without giving any thought as to how they would affect the slaves. The factory, which served as a source of substantial income for Sir John and, which Vaughan supervised, is a haunting replica of a plantation, for it was like,

The deep hold of a ship. There was noise, for one - the loud unrelieved drumming and pounding of the machines that powered the rollers .... There was the heat, for another, which came pouring up through the metal floor from the furnaces below .... And the light in the place was dim and murky as in the hold of a ship .... The men working there appeared almost disembodied forms: ghosts they might have been from some long sea voyage taken centuries ago. (The Chosen Place p.194)

Indeed these men are "ghosts". They are the descendants of former slaves, who, though now free, still have to live under conditions not
much better than their forefathers had done, and appropriately
equipped, the narrator alludes to the slave ship voyages that brought
their forefathers to Bournehills. That "sweat shop" description of
the factory is made worse by the fact that these low paid workers
had to work with machines that, in addition to being outdated, were
in terrible working condition. The needs and interests of the poor
are relegated to the background by both their elected officials and
foreign business interests.

It is significant that, of all the characters in the novel, the
only other person, who, like Merle, understands the social and
economic conditions of the Bournehills people is Saul Amron, the
leader of the latest foreign development scheme. It took the special
understanding of Saul, a Jew, whose people have also suffered
persecution, to get to the root cause of all the problems in
Bournehills, a feat which the earlier developers and even the Bourne
Island elite could not accomplish.

Unlike his predecessors, who in their uneducated arrogance
thought that they had all the answers to the problems in Bournehills
and, as a result did not need any information from the inhabitants,
Saul immersed himself in their cultural lifestyle. His training as an
anthropologist made him sensitive to the undeniable fact that he
needed to understand the history of Bournehills in order to be able to
help find a possible solution to their development problems.

Working with people like Stinger, Ferguson, Delbert and, most important Merle, all of whom served as the repository of Bournehills’ glorious historical times, he was able to get to the real reasons why Bournehills was the way it was. He was then able to find out that most of the earlier projects failed mostly because the people were not consulted. They were consistently given things they did not need, and could which, therefore not have positively contributed to their development.

Saul’s unassuming attitude puts him on par with Merle, which makes it easy for him to be regarded by the people of Bournehills as one of their own. It is this close affinity and the wealth of understanding, which he achieves, that lead him to his most important discovery with regard to Bournehills as a place. He gets to acknowledge that because of their deep cultural heritage and practices, dating from the period of slavery to their successful liberation, Bournehills and its inhabitants “would hold out ... resisting, defying all efforts, all the halfway measures, including his, to reclaim it ...” (The Chosen Place p.402)

The portrayal of Merle’s character is that of an independent female representative through whose activities the reader is able to see the level of corruption within the governmental system in
Bourne Island. The male politicians are presented as corrupt, distanced from the people, and having no concern whatsoever for them. Merle, on the other hand, does what the elected politicians are supposed to do. She reacts to the news of the breakdown of the machines at the cane factory as if it were her personal tragedy. She vents her feelings of anger and frustration and calls on Saul to,

fix (the machines) so those people out at the gate can get their few canes ground before what little juice there is in them turns to vinegar .... Take some of the multimillions the newspaper said you're planning to spend on us and go out and buy a new one .... Do it, I say. Do something, but oh, Christ, don't stand there with your head hanging down doing nothing .... Fix it! (The Chosen Place pp. 389-90)

There is not much Merle can do politically to change the situation in the factory, because she is not an elected official. But her feelings for these people carries more weight than the actions of those in power. Although all she did was scream at Saul to do something, he was able to understand her deep personal concern about the situation, and that spurred him on to do whatever he felt was necessary to help the cane cutters.

Saul's attempt to solve the problem from the representative's office presents a very sad, but poignant picture of the attitude of those people who are supposed to protect the interests of the poor.
Pressed by Saul to do something, Mr. Hinds, the manager of the Kingsley Offices, which oversees the holdings of Sir John, replies:

Why, Dr. Amron ... you are getting on like they are your canes. But don't upset yourself. You don't know Bournehills people. They will manage to get those few dry sticks they grow over to Brighton if they have to head them the distance there. (The Chosen Place, p.392)

The fact that Marshall goes into detail to present the effects of Merle's outburst for the first time ties her personal life more tightly to the collective. Up to that point, the reader only knew through the discussions of other characters, and the one which she had with Saul that Merle suffered a breakdown after her husband abandoned her in London. Here, for the first time, what has been alluded to for so long is described in its entirety- her tendency to suffer from periods of schizophrenic relapses. This goes a long way towards indicating the degree of emotion that Merle puts into her desire to see that the poor are treated fairly, and how close she is to their cause. Her crusade for the poor is heartfelt enough to elicit the same kind of emotional consequences that her most serious personal problems call into play.

Saul's thoughts about Bournehills and Merle give credence to the above assertion. Acting in his almost prophetic role, it is he who draws the obvious parallel between Bournehills and Merle in
their search for identity. Just as his remarkable understanding of
the cultural relevance of Bournehills' history led him to the
conclusion that the people's opinions were of crucial importance to
Bournehills' development, he was perceptive enough to see that
Merle's individual life was a reflection of the problems that
confronted Bournehills as well as its other inhabitants. On the
occasion of his visit to Merle's home during her illness, the
disorderly nature of her room represented to Saul,

The struggle for coherence, the hope and desire for
reconciliation of her conflicting parts, the longing to
truly know and accept herself - all the things he sensed
in her, which not only brought on the rages but her
frightening calms as well. (The Chosen Place p. 401)

At the same time, Saul senses that,

The room expressed something more ... something apart
from Merle. It roused in him feelings about Bournehills
itself .... Like the room it, too, was perhaps a kind of
museum .... And it would remain as such. (The Chosen
Place p. 402)

On the other hand, there is the possibility that Bournehills will
stop being a museum in the future, and Saul would, again, have
something to do with it. Acting on the frustration which he senses
in Merle's inability to directly carry out the necessary changes,
Saul, after the breakdown of the machines, organizes the village council (which he formed), into groups that take care of the transportation of the canes to Bristol. This is the only time in the novel that we really see the people working together as they did in the days of Cuffee Ned. On this occasion, everyone is interested in helping the other and, in the end, they succeed in grinding their canes. The feeling of togetherness which they thought they had lost is revived through an adversity.

Saul's final "task" is that of encouraging Merle to undertake her trip to Kenya in search of her spiritual strength. Just as he makes the people of Bournehills realize that they can still be one, he helps Merle build enough confidence in herself to enable her once again to confront her past. From the close bond which he formed with her, he was able to recognize the inner strength that was beneath her seeming insecurity. Merle now becomes capable of undertaking that fateful journey. Her selling of all the colonial memorabilia, which she inherited from her white father, and the pair of earrings, which she wore as a reminder of her life in England, becomes symbolic of her willingness to give up ineffectual ties to the past and go in search of the necessary strength to confront the future. This decision by Merle also has its very important cultural significance. She now has the opportunity to visit the continent
from which the black culture she has wanted to embrace all her life originated. Merle, however leaves with the understanding that she will be "coming back to Bournehills." (The Chosen Place, p. 468)

Her commitment is so great that she thinks, "Whatever little I can do that will matter, for something must be done here." Ultimately, as Merle contemplates the role of the individual within her community, she sees that role in a very definite way. For her, "A person...has to take a stand in the place which, for better or worse, he (she) calls home, (and) do what he can to change things there" (The Chosen Place p.468).

The novel ends on a hopeful note because we witness the development of Merle as she grows from just being a woman who occasionally suffers from schizophrenic occurrences and protects her true self from the scrutiny of the public, to one who without the help of politicians, is able to carry out some of the reforms in which she believes. As for the people of Bournehills, they have waited for Cuffee for generations. They might now have somebody like him in the person of Merle, who, it is hoped, will see them through the difficult times when she returns from Africa.
NOTES


3. ibid., p. 124.

4. ibid., p. 128.


8. ibid., p. 69.
CHAPTER III

BLACK WOMEN AND CULTURAL REDEMPTION

Paule Marshall's fascination with black cultural life, as it affects Africans in the Diaspora, extends back to one of her early short stories, "To DaDuh: In Memoriam." The autobiographical short story pits Marshall against her grandmother as they each proclaim the virtues of their distinct civilizations. New York for the ten-year-old Marshall with its iron and steel structures and snow-covered ground represents the height of civilization. Daduh's summer kingdom with all the plants and communal love depicts the ideal picture of what constitutes the essence of life. Her yearning for the simple traditional way of life which she knew and loved, and which she valued more than Marshall's version of civilization, is successfully transmitted to her grandchild. In recognition of this mission, Marshall in her later writings, has transformed Daduh from being just "a grandmother" into a black cultural repository.
Explaining this concept in her brief introduction to "To Daduh," she says:

Apart from this story, Da-duh also appears in one form or another in my other work as well. She is the old hairdresser, Miss Thompson in Brown Girl, Brownstones, who offers Selina total, unquestioning love. She is Leesy Walkes ... in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People .... And she is Avey Johnson's great-aunt Cuney in Praisesong for the Widow .... She is an ancestral figure.  2

In an interview that she did in 1985, Marshall explained that the theme of Praisesong for the Widow, dealt with "The materialism of this country [the United States] and how it often spells the death of love and feeling and how do we as black people, fend it off."  3 Her art then becomes a way of addressing this assessment of what she witnesses in the society, serving both as an observation and a warning to future generations of African-Americans, even extending to and including other Africans in the Diaspora.

The plot of the novel revolves around the Johnson family and their severance from their African-American cultural ties, which is exacerbated by Jerome Johnson's desire to ensure that his family moves from their lower class status to one that is closer to the "American Dream." They were defined as a people with a very distinctly rich culture through the execution of supposedly ordinary
everyday acts. Jerome (also called Jay), derived a great deal of pleasure from listening to songs by The Southerners and The Fisk Jubilee Choir. He also enjoyed reciting Langston Hughes' poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," and Paul Lawrence Dunbar's "Little Brown Baby" to his daughter.

The subconscious acceptance/acknowledgement of that cultural heritage serves as a fountain of strength to the poor young couple. They needed the strength in order to successfully cope with the ills of racism and the problems that poverty entails. It ultimately culminated in a relationship that was filled with happiness and contentment.

Structured much like The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, Praisesong begins in medias res. It is not until the plot begins to unfold that the reader, who is familiar with Marshall's works, grasps the similarities between Jerome's relentless pursuit of the "American Dream" and that of Silla Boyce in Brown Girl, Brownstones. Like Silla, Jerome's reasons for wanting to succeed in America are economically based. However, Jerome's and Silla's uncontrollable quest for material success leads to the gradual erosion of those aspects of their humanity that were vital to their definition of themselves as people of African descent. The attainment of a wealthier status gave financial security to Silla,
Avey, and Jay. As a form of exchange, they gave up too much of themselves. Jay is an unhappy man in spite of all his wealth just as Silla is left with her brownstone house but without a husband or someone with whom she could share that for which she had worked so hard.

While Silla had to work on her own in the pursuit of her dream, Jay has the unwavering support of his wife, Avey, who also dreamt of the day when they would be able to move from Halsey Street into a larger apartment on another block, a clean, quiet, tree-lined block with no trolley .... The thought of rooms, of large, warm, sunny rooms, sustained her through the long hours at the typewriter and the tedious work, through the hectic mornings and evenings and weekends, through the hardship. (Praisesong, p.119)

In many ways, Avey's feelings mirror Silla's. As she struggles to buy her own brownstone home, Silla with determined stoicism tackles all the indignities that go with her menial jobs. The belief that they can someday live in a better neighborhood provides these women with all the encouragement they needed to see them through all the hard times that they encounter. Silla does get her brownstone house. Avey, on her part, actually moves to the area of North White Plains, where she is surrounded by white neighbors.
Avey is the only character among the three status seekers who is given a second chance to rediscover the heritage which she has lost. The first person who plays the important role in making Avey realize just how far from her roots she has strayed is her great-aunt Cuney.

The novel opens with Avey suddenly deciding to cut short her annual cruise which she normally takes with two of her elderly friends as a result of a dream/vision in which she and her dead great-aunt Cuney were involved in an eerie-like physical struggle. Cuney’s appearance in Avey’s dream triggers Avey’s memory back to her childhood years. Cuney, like Leesy Walkes, Ferguson, and Stinger in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, serves as the repository of the proud culture of the descendants of African slaves who were brought to the New World.

Cuney’s adamant request that Avey as a child, spend her summer vacations in Tatem with her provided her with the avenue through which she could teach Avey about her ancestors. Ibo Landing proved to be the perfect spot for those lessons in ancestral history. As the story goes, Ibo Landing was the spot where a group of slaves who had been brought to Tatem turned right around and walked back home on water because they did not like what they saw after they had surveyed the land. This myth helped to instill in people like
Cuney a feeling of pride and increase their yearning for a better understanding of their historic ancestors and their traditional ways of life.

Marshall takes Avey's search for her black cultural identity beyond the realm of the ordinary. Unlike Selina and Merle, who have earthly guides, Avey's include ancestral characters. The use of ancestral characters on one level, represents the narrator's desire to capture the intensity of Avey's "rebirth." Is it just coincidence or is it fate that Avey finds it impossible to make a connecting flight back to New York after she abandons her cruise, and is left stranded on the Island of Grenada? It would seem that Marshall wants the reader to feel that even the ancestral gods want Avey to come back to them, for not only is she stranded, she arrives at the same time that people from Carriacou who live in Grenada, are on their own annual pilgrimage of ancestral worship and cultural reaffirmation.

This annual cultural journey which has been passed down from one generation to another, is an offshoot of the traditional African religious practice where dead ancestors and gods are given thanks and sacrifices by their descendants in appreciation of their guidance all year long. Strengthening the extent to which fate is involved is the fact that of all the people in Grenada, the one person Avey
meets is Lebert Joseph who will also be her guide in her return to her roots. Marshall describes him as being "of an age beyond reckoning." (Praisesong p.233) This description has a lot in common with the African belief that the older a person gets, the closer he/she is to the ancestors.

Marshall links Africans in the Diaspora with the African traditional healing beliefs and goes beyond by actually allowing Lebert to symbolize the spiritual forces that will be involved in Avey's spiritual healing process by the ancestors. This observation is espoused by the critic, Eugenia Collier, in her observation:

Although Marshall never states this explicitly, it is obvious that Lebert Joseph is the incarnation of the African deity Legba .... Legba is the liaison between man and the gods. He is vital to numerous rituals .... Thus Lebert Joseph, in his implied role as Legba, contains many linkages: (between) Africa and the Diaspora. 4

According to Femi Euba, the Yoruba dramatist, Esu-Elegbara is the Yoruba trickster figure and fate god who has control over peripeteia and acts to a large extent as the messenger between the gods and man. Elegbara is also sometimes regarded as the guardian of the gate and as a result, he is likened to the biblical Saint Peter. 5 Euba goes on further to explain that although Esu-Elegbara "originates from the Yoruba culture which, by extension, would
include only a fictional although significant part of the African ancestry in the Americas, embracing Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Trinidad and some parts of North America, the number of those who believe in and worship him can be expanded to "include the blacks in Africa and (other areas of the Americas.)" The people of Carriacou, some of whom might have had Yoruba ancestors, have kept this aspect of their tradition in their imagination through the period of slavery down to the present day.

The uneven length of Lebert's legs and the resulting limp as he is described by the narrator is another characteristic that draws from a direct reference to Legba. According to Yoruba mythology, the length of Esu's legs bear testimony to his role as intercessor between the gods and man because "he keeps one anchored in the realm of the gods while the other rests in this, our human world." The events that occur on the very first day that Avey meets Lebert lend more credence to our acceptance of his role as Legba. Avey could not tell her friends the real reasons why she decides on the spur of the moment to cut short her cruise. However, with Lebert, she neither experiences any feeling of shame nor expresses any reservations as she willingly pours out her troubles to a man she has just met. Even when she finds it very hard to continue, Marshall tells us that there was no problem on Lebert's part because,
The man already knew the Gethsemane she had undergone last night .... His penetrating look said as much. It marked him as someone who possessed ways of seeing that went beyond mere sight and ways of knowing that outstripped ordinary intelligence and thus had no need for words. (Praisesong, p.172)

Lebert Joseph has, therefore, assumed the various roles that are usually attributed to traditional African medicine men. He is first of all, a medicine man who acts as a counselor by listening to people's problems and tries to find solutions; he is a seer, who has the privilege of being able to "see" things that are beyond human understanding; and he is a ritual elder.9

The description of Lebert as a man thus far should not cloud the indeterminate characteristic of Legba whom he symbolizes. As a god, Legba is both male and female. In recognition of this phenomenon, Lebert is given some feminine characteristics as he demonstrates his traditional Juba dance for Avey. The soft voice with which he renders the song, the manner in which he twirls around in his invisible skirt, and the peculiar way in which he moves his shoulders and elbows, all recapture the movement of the Carriacou women when they do the "Juba".

That dance exhibition is intended to draw the readers's attention to the full understanding that, although Lebert comes
across as a man, it is the female qualities which he also possesses that put him in league with the other women who constitute Avey’s roll call of guides. His role as an intercessor between man and the gods is effectively played out in his ability to talk Avey into agreeing to go on the cultural reaffirmation trip with him. Symbolically, Avey has to let go of her old lifestyle in order to make way for the new one of which she is in search. Lebert’s preparation of the special Carriacou drink for Avey is, therefore, the symbolic commencement of her spiritual cleansing, for it would result in her throwing up. It is at the commencement of the trip from Grenada to Carriacou that Avey meets the women who will provide her with the support she will need on her journey. Lebert relinquishes his rights for a while as he hands Avey over to the oldest among the women on the boat that is to take them to Carriacou (Praisesong, p.193).

Avey’s physical purgation on the boat is the beginning of the cleansing process that is supposed to relieve her of the inner emotional turmoil that she experiences within the flashback. Avey has such painful spasms that leave her literally “hanging limp and barely conscious over the side of the boat after each one ....” (Praisesong p.205)

The women with whom Lebert leaves Avey, as soon as they boarded the boat, provide Avey with the physical and emotional
support she needs as they literally shield her from the other passengers, when she regurgitates. These women act as "mothers" to Avey. Like aunt Cuney before them, the women are included in a long line of women who aid Avey in the search for her black cultural identity. Throughout her agonizing ordeal, "They held her ... lips close to her ears spoke to her, soothing, low-pitched words which not only sought to comfort and reassure her, but which from the tone even seemed to approve of what was happening." (Praisesong p. 205)

Their care for and total understanding of Avey's ordeal is suggestive of the role a mother might have taken were it her child in such pain. Very carefully, they mother Avey back to reasonable calm.

Avey's unconscious goal is the achievement of "identity." She needs a "laying on of hands" -- a concept stemming from the traditional African belief that some individuals in the community (male or female), have been spiritually blessed by ancestral spirits or gods. These individuals, therefore, are believed empowered with the ability to "heal" the sick in their midst by ceremoniously "laying hands on" their patients. Traditionally, it is assumed that as these "healers" lay their hands on the victim, and perform other religious functions, that affliction the victim suffers is spiritually removed.
This practice of the “laying on of hands” has been incorporated into the writings of many black women novelists. Ntozake Shange’s, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow is Enuf*, offers a very poignant study of the concept. The coming together of seven women, who have each experienced similar agony and history that has driven one young woman to the verge of attempted suicide, creates a strong cultural and spiritual base from which all operate. Together, they are able to pool individual strengths into a collective force upon which they draw in the gradual healing process of the troubled girl resulting in the abandonment of her suicidal inclinations.

In Gloria Naylor’s *Women of Brewster Place*, Luciella Louise Turner, who all but gives up on life after watching her marriage collapse, is literally bathed and rocked back to life by the motherly Mattie Michael. Black women have historically employed the “laying on of hands” in order to help themselves to preserve their sanity. This exercise extends beyond physical female bonding. It equips these women with a special kind of insulation from the problems they encounter both from the larger American society and within their individual communities.

Rosalie Parvay, Lebert Joseph’s daughter is the last in the chain of women who serve as guides to Avey. The narrator bestows
upon Rosalie the credibility of one who has the powers to "lay hands on" another by depicting Rosalie as having a striking resemblance to her father. Avey's perception of Rosalie, when they meet for the first time, is that of one who "might have sprung whole from his (Lebert's) head, a head-birth without benefit or need of a mother, an idea made flesh." ([Praisesong p.216]) From this statement, the reader can deduce that she has also inherited some of his spiritual powers.

Rosalie's administration of a bath that is almost ritualistic in execution is the avenue through which Avey finally experiences, "a laying on of hands" ([Praisesong p.217]). The exercise is vividly described by the narrator:

She (Rosalie) went about the bath with great discretion .... And whenever Avey Johnson flinched or stiffened, she would stop ... and bring her hands to rest quietly on her for a minute or two before continuing .... (p. 219) Avey Johnson who knew it was futile to protest, felt the roughness of her small palms along the entire length of her thighs ... Until finally under the vigorous kneading and pummeling, Avey became aware of a faint stinging as happens in a limb that has fallen asleep .... (p. 223) The warmth, the stinging sensation that was both pleasure and pain passed through the emptiness at her center. Until they reached her heart. ([Praisesong, p. 224])
Rosalie, with the aid of her apprentice, gives Avey the careful spiritual/physical massage that her body needs. As Rosalie bathes different parts of Avey's body and then massages it with cream, Avey's stiff bones and muscles are made to relax. Her pent-up feelings of unhappiness, worries and subconscious aches are expelled. Rosalie not only accomplishes the task of assuring that Avey is clean, she symbolically "washes away" Avey's past life in preparation for the "new."

Rosalie lays hands on Avey, but does not have the full authority to communicate with the ancestors in the same way as her father because, as yet, she has not attained that level of spiritual importance in the community. Her role and that of her female apprentice will be terminated after she and her apprentice escort Avey to the crossroads which separates their town from the actual place where the cultural affirmation dance is being held.

Singing and dancing form a major component of ancestor worship in a lot of traditional African societies. It is almost mandatory that Avey be made to experience this aspect of ancestor worship, since she has been spiritually cleansed. The responsibility of taking Avey over to the other side into the sacred ground of the dance rests with Lebert.
Crossroads are also very important in the worship of Elegbara because his altar (yangi) upon which daily libations are made by worshipers are "commonly found at the threshold of a house, at crossroads or at the approach to a market." 10 Lebert as Legba and as a messenger between the gods and the living, assumes his rightful position at the crossroads. Marshall's description clearly attempts to merge the identity of Lebert and Legba. She writes,

It was unmistakably him. There in the light was the head with its bald shiny crown and faint rocking motion. And the wrinkled gnome's face .... The man suddenly appeared older (if that were possible!) .... his body more misshapen and infirm than ever before. (Praisong pp.232-233)

Lebert is now one of the ancestors - waiting to welcome Avey back into the fold of their ancestral children. The symbolic task of going over the crossroads signifies that Avey is ready and willing to embark on the final lap of her rebirth. Up to that point, she has had the guidance of various characters. What is now called for is the acknowledgement and acceptance on Avey's part that she is prepared to re-enter the life which she had previously disavowed. Her getting up of her own volition during one of the dances in order to join in the festivities, represents the unspoken acceptance of her "new" life.
Avey's successful completion of the ritual process and the decision of whether or not she should be accepted into the community depend on the members. Whatever decision they arrive at is to be the final word. As Lebert, and some other elderly people at the celebration bow before her in a kind of welcome ceremony, Avey is once again provided with a "family" base from which she can build a new identity.

The totality of Avey's spiritual affirmation, the ancestral involvement in the process, and her final acceptance by the other Carriacou blacks can be summed up in Euba's explanation of the way in which both Elegbara and his other devotees work in the "healing" process:

Since ... several gods might be involved or have to be consulted in the process ... these deities are the audience whose approval must be sought. They are the metaphysical audience ... But there is, in fact, a physical audience. These are the respective devotees of the metaphysical audience, with whom the actor-devotee must interrelate during the course of his eventful (fateful) day. For the efficacy of his wishes depends on the way he interrelates or interacts with them, inducing a type of audience participation. It is important to note that the therapy-the catharsis-has come via the metaphysical audience that has been satisfied, and without whose encouragement and satisfaction the actor does not have control of his character and therefore his fate ... The catharsis has come to the actor, from the metaphysical and then
on to the physical audience who feels the therapy through interaction.  

Avey’s recognition of herself is further embraced when she immediately stops introducing herself as just Avey, but as “Avey, short for Avatara,” (Praisesong p.251) the exact way her great-aunt used to make her introduce herself when she was a young girl.

As Avey bids farewell to the people and the place that gave her back her identity, the reader is left with a strong feeling that her new “awakening” will not just end with her. Her age and the important position of authority which she occupies in her family will provide her with the necessary tools to effectively teach the youngest part of her immediate community, her grandsons.  

Through the spiritual redemption of Avey Johnson by her fellow black women and Lebert/Legba, Marshall demonstrates the need by a majority of Africans in the Diaspora to reclaim their cultural heritage. Avey conveys the positive message that it is never too late in one’s life to embark on that journey. Lebert Joseph’s, representing the ancestors, offers the feeling of hope that they are always ready to welcome the returnees back into their fold, just as aunt Cuney, in her capacity as an ancestral figure, is prepared to look out for the “lost souls.”
NOTES


2. *ibid.*, p. 95.


6. *ibid.*, p.10

7. *ibid.*, p.10


10. Euba, p. 6

11. *ibid.*, p. 7

CONCLUSION

The foregoing chapters have examined Marshall's three novels and their theme of quest for identity on individual basis. This conclusion examines all three novels, looking at their thematic contents and their narrative similarities.

Marshall seems to be suggesting in her novels that Africans in the Diaspora cannot come to the true knowledge of who they are within the structure of a dominant white culture. A successful achievement of self-knowledge by blacks can be arrived at through different ways. The three female protagonists in the novels discussed achieve their desired goals in their quest by pursuing different avenues: Merle opts to undertake a physical journey to Africa in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People; The same results can be achieved by embarking on a trip to the place where one's family calls home in the Americas, like Selina does in Brown Girl, Brownstones, by going back to Barbados. And Avey, in Praisesong for the Widow, successfully forms a bond with a group of other Africans in the Diaspora who have kept their African cultural traits through
generations when she meets the people of Carriacou. Whatever route a quester decides to take, the end result will be the same.

With the special exception of Lebert, the characterization of Marshall's principal black male actors in all three novels is largely negative. In spite of the fact that there is no imposition of the authorial voice as a medium of castigation, there are subtle inferences of disapproval that cannot be missed in the narration.

The narrator exposes the political ineptitude of the Bournehills politicians by casting them in the roles of elite who are so out of touch with the poverty of the lives of the masses. The activities of the elite which are reminiscent of those who inhabit neo-colonial African countries, reemphasize the bitter truth that having black politicians at the helm of power in black countries does not automatically translate into equality for all.

Deighton's love of life and its pleasures when seen in the context of the destructive materialistic goals of Silla has its own force. However, within his character lies the self-defeating results which become apparent when that way of life is taken to the extreme. He is finally crippled by his unbridled romanticism; he is ever wanting to get the very best out of life without putting in the necessary effort. He increasingly emerges in the novel as a romantic escapist. The sense of relief he feels when he hears the
news that Silla has successfully sold his land in Barbados is a
testimony to this view of him. For him, “It was as though Silla by
selling the land, had unwittingly spared him the terrible onus of
wresting a place in life. The pretense was over. He was broken,
stripped, but delivered ....” (Brown Girl, p. 115)

Of all the men in her novels, Jay appears to be the one who
would have had the best of both worlds. But even he ends up in the
same disillusioned shape as Deighton. He begins poor but happy like
Deighton. And while Deighton lacks the extra drive that he needs in
order to succeed, Jay possesses much more than he needs and uses it
to the maximum. He ends up being far more successful than Deighton
but sadder and even more out of touch with his defining heritage.
His situation translates into a case of death-in-life.

In contrast to the male characters, Marshall’s female
characters are depicted in their roles as “doers”. They set goals for
themselves and are not swayed from their path until they achieve at
least some of those goals.

In contrast to Merle’s public-spiritedness, Bournehills
politicians are shown to be socially irresponsible. Placing her
background side-by-side with that of Lyle’s whose education was
virtually sponsored by the community, Merle’s unselfish nature
amounts to a subtle but effective condemnation of the politicians in
Silla realizes and acknowledges the fact that a vast majority of her problems are deeply rooted in the tenets of the larger American racist society. Recognizing that, she does not accept her condition for what it is. Even as she loses a great deal of her human responses, she musters her energies to rise above her downtrodden status. That determination makes her plunge herself into the activities of her Barbadian Association, accepting without question their tenets on social advancement.

In the area of narrative technique, an analogy can be drawn between the "Middle Passage" and Avey's cultural identification trip from Grenada to Carriacou. That journey becomes a reversal of that which characterized the events that occurred during the "Middle Passage." The boat which transports Avey to Carriacou can be likened to the ships that were used to transport African slaves to the Americas. In this case, Avey and her husband, in their wholehearted pursuit of what they regarded as civilization, have become "slaves" to a foreign culture. The trip takes her to the place where the closest brand of African culture is still being practiced. While the original middle passage resulted in death for the African, in Praise Song for the Widow, it signifies the rejuvenation of Avey. It is Avey's final acceptance of the black culture she had abandoned
that symbolically reveals the survival of the black culture.

The flashback technique, as used by Marshall in both The Chosen Place, The Timeless People and Praisesong for the Widow, contributes to the dramatic presentation of the events of the novels. Ferguson, Leesy and Stinger constitute the links between the past and the present in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People. The narration presents a detailed description of the current situation of Bournehills, but it is only through these characters that the reader is able to grasp the history of the people. They constantly weave in and out of the narration, and in the process throw more light on the reasons for the dismal conditions of Bournehills. Ferguson's continuous references to Cuffee Ned's successful exploits provide glimpses of the pride the people enjoyed at one point in their history. The juxtaposition of that glorious past with the present situation in Bournehills reinforces for the reader the reasons for the seeming apathy among the Bournehills people. They will never be content until all vestiges of colonialism and neo-colonialism are destroyed.

The entire "Sleeper's Wake" section in Praisesong for the Widow is presented in flashback. The reader's last contact with Avey in the first section of the novel titled "Runagate," leaves her on the verge of breaking into a feverish fit. It is within the confines
of her troubled sleep that Avey recalls in vivid detail the difference between what her life used to be and what it is presently. Marshall, through Avey's recollection, gives the reader her complete life history in just one night as she struggles through the effects of her fever. Before the flashback, it is somewhat difficult to comprehend Avey's sudden decision to desert her cruise halfway into her fully-paid vacation. It is within the flashback that the complicated and detailed reasons are played out in their entirety spanning nearly a quarter of the novel, but consuming a period of less than twelve hours.

Marshall's literary technique and structural development gives the narration a three part structure consisting of the conflict (enacted in the flashback) followed by a climax, leading to the resolution. By juggling the content around, Marshall places the conflict closer to the resolution. That arrangement gives the conflict more impact making its closeness to the resolution draw attention to the fact that there was some hope for Avey.

Marshall does not only show her strong preference for the black cultural way of life as against the more material American style through her thematic leanings. Her themes are consistently strengthened and enhanced by her adept narrative technique that together distinguish her work among the writings of the very best
modern black authors.
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