

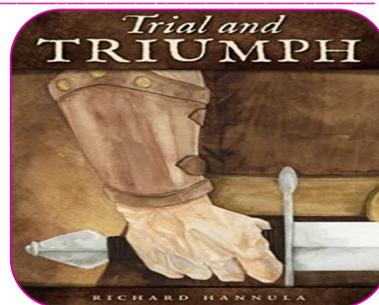


TRIALS AND TRIUMPHS OF WOMEN IN PAULE MARSHALL'S FICTION

S. Moorthi¹ and Dr. M. Natarajan²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Dept. of English and Foreign Languages , Alagappa University, Karaikudi.

²Asst. Prof. of English, Dept. of English & Foreign Lang., Alagappa University, Karaikudi.



ABSTRACT :

Struggles and hardships faced by Black women have been a part of American history and a number of writers have highlighted the predicament of these women. Their situation will change if they resist. Those women who stand against this prejudiced treatment alone can taste the freedom in their life which forms the crux of the novels of Paule Marshall. Women who have determination, strength and power can weep out the problems encountered by them in their life. The male constructed idea of women as docile beings is shattered by this writer as she believes in women's power and determination. Therefore her women characters have enormous power to encounter the trials and tribulations in their life. The issues of racism, classism, sexism, identity crisis form major themes in the oeuvres of Marshall and she focuses on the life of black women in alien land. Black women's ability to cope up with the whites and their culture shown in her novels places her as a unique writer among the contemporary writers. In this article, the woes of Marshall's women resulting from racism, slave treatment meted out by whites, and the impact of indigenous culture are taken up for analysis. Marshall's ambitious women struggling to get due recognition from the society for retaining their self-respect are forced to behave in hard, straightforward, and frustrated way. During their hot rush up of the journey to reach their destiny, they throw their hindrances and barriers away even it is their husbands. In this way, Marshall displays their strong will, determined mind, and authority and unique way of handling the complex situations as well.

KEYWORDS : Culture, identity, black, reconcile, journey.

INTRODUCTION

Paule Marshall is an Afro-American writer of extraordinary power. She engages herself to demolish the stereotypes, myths and images about black women. She raises many questions against accepted ideas about women. Marshall's women characters differs from their predecessors because they are neither mute spectators in the family nor dictators of the family. They are neither educated, middle class, bourgeois, disunited from homeland nor victims of sexism, capitalism, circumstantial forces, nor unliberated caged birds. Selina, Silla, Reena, Merle Kinbona are unstereotyped women. They are rebellious, defiant, uncustomized by alien forces, who burst against social construction or system with a great strength and power. They stand for humanity which is denied to them in America. It is rightly observed by Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* "They are not creatures so abused by pain. (232). This view is applicable to the women of Paule Marshall. Silla Boyce in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* leads a typical life and becomes an example for other Barbadian Americans Community. Mary Helen Washington writes this view:

She is its touchstone for she proclaims loudly the deep troubles and aspirations of her people. "She is not only the mainstay of the Boyce family but she is prominent in the Bajan communication. She is the

pioneer, forging of path through unfamiliar territory, cutting bush for those behind her, crushing whatever is in her way with her powerful break gift of words. She expresses in the accent and idioms of the Bajan community, its fears and aspirations. She is the Avtar, of the community's deepest value and needs. (Washington 313).

Marshall's women become complex when they are seeking their identity and individuality amidst the mental dilemma, oppressed tribulations, vexed over refusing victory, and unrecognized talents. Her women characters are neither queen of the universe nor feeble actors enacting their own tragedy. The novelist feels that the sole responsibility of a black woman writer is to portray the black people's life among all these complexities. She gives her guidance to the black women writers in her work *The Negro Women in American Literature*:

One is for the Negro woman writer when dealing with Negro life and Negro characters, to write about that life and to depict those characters in full, in all their complexity and richness, to insist in other words, on the common humanity which joins us to all men everywhere. (39)

The same perspective is revealed during her interview with Joyce Pettis.

There is something, which motivates and guides my work. The sense that you can portray black women in a black community as it truly is that you do a great service to that community because once you see yourself as you really are and that doesn't mean a glorification but with our failings and our strengths that you begin to have a sense of your right to be in the world. (18).

Silla, Selina, Merle Kinbona are the mighty people explore the dualities of their lives. They are paradigm for their patience, determination, astonishing strength and power. At the same time, they too have some flaws. Sometimes their behavior is applauded, and in some other circumstances they deserve condemnation. One can love them and also hate them. According to them, there is no much division between good and bad. For them, none can be barely beautiful or merely ugly. Life is mixed of both fundamental dualisms. It is succinctly expressed by Marshall in *Reena and Other Stories* "the idea that a thing is at the same time its opposite and that these opposite contradiction make up the whole." (28)

This contradiction of thoughts forms the lives of women. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Silla Boyce is a combination of soft nature and hard nature, attraction and repulsion to family members; and she is lovable and despicable. This dualism shapes the character and sequence of the events in the novel. She is neither a theist nor an atheist. She believes in god but she advises "Each man got to see god for him." Marshall states about Silla Boyce's character thus:

The mother is complex strong- yes. Determined to make her way and yet, at the same time quite capable of destroying those she loves, reaching out to her children, yet at the same time driving them away. (The Negro Women 37).

A critic sums up her character in the following words:

Here is a mother who loves her children but cannot simply express it. Here is a woman who has a deep longing for love and caring arms of her husband yet cannot forgive him for his romanticism. Here is a woman who has an irresistible desire for white value ideals, but who spends her weekends making black puddings and coconut bread which tie her to her Afro-Centric back ground. In Silla's temperamental contradictions, her capacity for love and revenge, for inflicting pain and enduring it and her self awareness and colonized group which are ordained in America. This strong, bitter, frustrated disappointed, 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. (Truder, No Outlet 56-57).

Marshall's women are fluctuating constantly between love and hatred, recognition and disapproval, acceptance and rejection, victory and defeat. Merle Kinbona, Ursa Beatrice are such characters with ambivalent attitude, they could not stand on one thing firmly. They raise their voice for other people but when it comes to their turn, they fail miserably. They could not spell out their feelings, emotions, and sentiments. Marshall's novels are:

Filed richly with human beings. They all have the capacity to love, to make mistakes, to cling to some ideal of life. There is a great deal of ecstatic, and some painful love making. The mothers are strong and tend to devour. Most of them have fervent realism which miscarries. (Buckmaster 14).

Merle Kinbona and Reena struggle hard to wipe out the racism and oppression. Their efforts do not succeed. Realization of their defeat paves the way for identifying the cause of the pain which gives room for reconciling with indigenous culture. Their constant struggle reveals the pain they endure and it lasts forever and it becomes a part of their living. They need to learn a lesson from the society what is their responsibility as black women. The black feminist critic, Geraldine I. Wilson observes,

Have been characterized and actualized by our contradiction are sometimes paternalism with our men, children our evilness (Sometimes Situations Require It) and by our independence, our response to oppression, our beauty our anger, our strength, our resistance, our humour, or spirit, our songs, our tears, our toughness our ability to do the job our deep pain, our love and our laughter. (14)

Paule Marshall is the first black woman novelist indicates the onus of black woman in her fictional writings. Nellie McKay states,

There is a little effort to conceal the pain and just as little to create the ideal but a great deal, to reveal how black women, incorporate the negative and positive aspects of self and external reality into an identity that enables them to meet the challenges of the world in which they must live. (McKay 186).

Marshall explores the characters that are shaped by their behaviors and attitudes which make them neither immaculate heroines nor dishonest individuals nor destitute victims. Silla, Merle Kinbona, Cassis are deplorable, desolate, and exploited women in Marshall's women characters but they do not become prey to the situational pressures. Kristin Hunter writes: "Victims are flat, one dimensional characters someone rolled over by a steam roller so you have a card board person." (86) Marshall's women are volatile in nature and more rounded. In this respect, she is different from her predecessors and contemporaries. Unlike Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes*, Celie or Margaret and men in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Ursa in Gayle Jones's *Corregidora*, Marshall's women are never sexually exploited nor duped physically by father or stepfather or her husband.

Paule Marshall examines this in *Talk as a Form of Action*

The women in my novels really present a departure from the kind of women that you see in so much of contemporary black women writing. They are not victims. They are oppressed women..... They are insulted and humiliated and so forth, but their whole way of reaction to that their whole ability, to find means of giving vent to their anger and frustration, their ability to exercise a kind of control of loves.....suggests that they are not victims. (196).

Marshall remarks further:

"I am not going to portray black women as eternal victims I am not going to give the impression that the whole thing that one reads in so much of the literature of rape, of incest and so on is a pattern in the black community. I am saying that they do exist but that is not the total story of our community." (201-202)

She never attempts to expose the black community in a bad light instead she shows them in a positive way. Her women characters are humans with some weakness, and strength. They always "feel human instead of like old mule" (*Brown Girl, Brownstones* 14). Silla Boyce has 'no outlet for her blues'. She bears her pain within herself. She does not want to expose it to the community. Merle Kinbona is ambivalent with indigenous culture and settled culture. This fractured psyche animates the flow of the story. She struggles hard to join her fractured psyche into one whole. Ursa Beatrice in *Daughters* tries to break the shackles which is chained by her father, Primus Mackenzie. Silent oppression and authority of her father makes her snap her relationship with her father but she miserably fails. Avey Johnson in *Praisesong for the Widow* is in mental dilemma whether to reconcile with her culture. Marshall's women have diversified destinies, they spend their life with misery and misunderstanding. As Thomas Clask puts it in *Promise and Fulfillment: A Review of The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*.

Each one of the Marshall's women is spinning; out their destinies from their own beings. They are tragic because they don't know what they are and since they don't know why they behave as they do. They make for themselves infinity of misery and misunderstanding. (Clask 31).

Darye Pinckney adds further:

Paule Marshall does not let the black women in her fiction lose while they lose friends, lovers, husbands homes or jobs they always find themselves.....Marshall insists that the women with enough nerve can win even when the deck is stacked and the other players are hostile. 'Nerve', here means making radical choice and making of one's mind to heed an inner voice. (Pinckney 26).

Silla Boyce is a typical woman with enormous courage, determination and will power. Her ambitious nature kindles the hunger for victory tantamount to whites in America. This blind-folded destination demolishes the odds in her way. She says that "people got to make their own way and nearly always to make your way. In this Christ world you got to be hard and sometimes misuse others, even your own." (Marshall, *Brown Girl Brownstones* 224).

Silla opines black woman in sexist America "Best be swift if not somebody come and trample you quick enough." (225) She expresses them to "keep your head up and not have these whites people push you 'Bout' like yours cattle." (172). Silla therefore strongly tells her community that they need to establish a place in the hostile country. Thus, she, without her husband, Deighton Boyce's knowledge plans to sell his land in home town to buy a brownstone building in Brooklyn. Her ambitious way of life blinds the values of relationship, whatever comes across as barriers to her goal gets crushed, even if it is her husband. She says "be-Jesus Christ I gon do that for him then. Even I got to see my soul fall howling into hell. I gon do it." (172) Silla's life teaches her fellow black community how much the identity is important for them. They know their values. They can resist and recover but never become victims to whites.

Selina Boyce is another woman whom Marshall portrays in an assertive manner. Her coming-of-age is the main theme of the novel. Mingling with people of her community teaches and shapes her physically and psychologically. She comes to know of cultural importance from her father and materialism from her mother. Her admixture of these two notions causes her stagnant in alien land. Her mother's chameleon behavior irritates her. She, like her mother, runs over hindrances to achieve her destination. She equips herself psychologically that is why she can recover soon when her affair deserts her. Though she praises American-Barbadian people for their revolutionary thinking and determination, she cannot accept the cultural codes of ethics and rigid conformity. Thus, at the end of the novel, she throws one of her bangles in brownstones to express her frustrations and keep the other one with her. Her act of this, before going to Barbados shows that she is ready to mingle with her own identity. It proves that she comes out of her community conformity and alter her own destiny. Bessie Banner discusses:

Selina develops and survives as the first really, liberated young, black woman in American fiction because she learns to appreciate the permanent values as well as the limitations of the various human beings she encounters. Despite handicaps and shortcomings each has suffered as the result of a blind oppressive white society determined to keep them in the place. (10).

Selina's breach of conformity is not only for personal survival but also is for her fellow black sisters and the oppressed ones. Her journey back is a "kind of reverse middle passage." (Washington 324)

Like Silla and Selina, Reena is another dominative and bold character of Paule Marshall. Her radical thoughts in adolescent age rewards her suspension from college. Her thought-provoking talk on intellectual freedom earns her name and fame. She feels that her integration with a white leftist organization does not give what black community requires. Reena's social thought leads to divorce her husband. She feels she can bring sea changes only if she is in politics. She intensely involves herself with various political, social causes to sensitize the blacks' bad experiences in the society. Her maturation and revolution start when her affairs reject her for black complexion. Her disappointment in personal life in the name of racism intensifies her

political moves. She believes that her political vision definitely brings positive changes in her life as well as the lives of her people. Evelyn Howthorne expresses that

Like Alice Walker's Meridian Reena shows and thus helps to define the American black women in her political role. Like Meridian, Reena continues to serve her political vision carrying her perspective of the need for political and economic adjustment in the society into the present time. (45).

While commenting on these two women characters Selina and Reena, Elwanda D.Ingram says:

Paule Marshall's two women characters Selina and Reena fit these characteristics (Of Assertiveness). Reena demands a name change, becomes politically involved, and divorces her husband. Selina frees herself from the restrictions of her Barbadian cultural background, becomes a dancer, and deludes to leave home. They are just two examples of a type of woman character who learns that she must establish her own identity in order to be herself, in order to be her own assertive persons. (27).

Merle Kinbona of *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* is liked much by Paule Marshall, which she reveals in *Reena and Other Stories*. Marshall says "Merle remains the most alive of my characters" (109). Robert Bone aptly comments that Marshall has created a timeless character. A creation worthy of Camus." (54)

Marshall's artistry of characterization in life-like portrayal of Merle Kinbona proves her mastery. Merle is shown as real and alive. It is a complex and rounded character. She fights against desolation and despair. She laments, wails, grins, and trails everyone and everything with her in impetuous race. But what melts her heart most is Bournhills and its people.

Sascha Talmor states "She is the queen, the primeval goddess of the Island, a life force, an earth mother who is the Island, its past, present, and future." (Talmor 80).

It seemed that her dark face mirrored not only the faces of the children and those of the men and women in Delbert's yard as well. She appeared to contain them all, so that for a moment.....he didn't see her simply as Merle, but some larger figure in whose person was summed up both Bournehills and its people. (Marshall, *The Chosen Place*, 260).

Allenfuso, one of the characters in the novel, remarks that 'she is somehow is Bournehills'. Colonists were lured by the Bournehills natural resources and decided to occupy it. They felt that it needed to be modernized. But Merle stands strongly against the modern technology in Bournehills. Her determination poses threat to white American colonists. Linda Pannil rightly observes this:

Merle is a colossal figure, almost always in motion while the roads seem to twitch under her. It is this force that frustrates the plans of the colonial lords from America. She is intensely committed to Bournehills. Her loyalties are to "The Little Fella" the ingenious poor, and she encourages them to rise up against the conditions of their lives, primarily to resist the courtesies of the dollar by ensuring economic autonomy.

Merle Kinbona actively participates in rebellion and establishes changes for herself and her black community. She brings devastation for the colonizers and the oppressors. She invigorates her life and Saul, the Jewish scientist. Harriet Amron who supports the WASP organization, cannot survive on the island, at last commits suicide.

Part saint, part revolutionary. Part obeah women... she commands the loyalty of the villages by virtue of the obeisance. They accord her suffering. Her devastated life emerges with ravaged landscape and economy of Bournehills. Her toughness and resiliency contain intimations of the new beginning. She is the challenge and testing ground for the white characters, an agent of destruction or catalyst of growth. (54).

Merle becomes an archetypal character. The central characters in Alice Walker's *Meridian* and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* are drawn directly from Merle. Barbara Christian views Merle "An extraordinary prefigure of contemporary African - American woman characters who seek wholeness not only, in their personal lives but in their political context." Christian adds further in her biographical sketch of Paule Marshall. She writes.

Both Merle and Meridian are new literary characters in Afro-American women's novels who are presented as complex women struggling to understand themselves as black and female. In seeking their own

identity, they find, they must pursue substantive social transformation. They are female literacy characters of a social and political depth seldom seen in either Afro or European American literature and enveloping a character such as Merle Kinbona within a graphic analysis of her particular society, Marshall has announced the major theme of African- American women's fiction of the 1970s in which black women are finally being presented both as complex, developing persons and active participants in the social world. (12)

Paule Marshall is the first black woman novelist to go beyond the confined limits. Her characters represent the various issues of black women in the society. She captures the real emotions, sentiments, customs, culture, pains, and humiliation of the black and oppressed people. She proves that life has dualistic contents. Women's diversified experiences inform that her women are not simply victims. Sabine Brock praises Marshall that "It was a very avant-garde way in the fifties to portray women seeking after power and admitting it freely that would have been avant-garde even for white women" (Brock 198). Thus Paule Marshall has presented all the sufferings and struggles of black women and also their extraordinary power to defy alien forces that are inimical to their identity throughout her fiction with remarkable verisimilitude.

WORKS CITED

- Bessie, O Banner. A Study Of Black Heroine In Four Selected Novels (1929-1959) By Four Black American Women Novelists. Zora Neale, Hurston, Nella Larsen, Paule Marshall, And Cane Petry. Doctoral Dissertation. Southern Carbondale; Nois University, 1981. Print.
- Bone, Robert. Merle Kinbona, Revolutionary Past Obean Women A Review Of The Chosen Place, The Timeless People. The New York Times Books Review, 1969. Print.
- Brock, Sabine. Talk As A Form Of Action, In Lenz, 1984. Print.
- Buckmaster, Henrietta. Search For Status: A Review Of Brown Girl, Brownstones. Saturday Review, 1959. Print.
- Christian, Barbara. Paule Marshall. An Unpublished Essay, 1984. Print.
- Clask, Thomas. Promise And Fulfillment. A Review Of The Chosen Place, The Timeless People. The New York Times, 1967. Print.
- Hawthorn, Evelyn. Ethnicity And Cultural Perspective In Paule Marshall's Short Fiction. Melus, 1986. Print.
- Ingram, Elwanda. Selina And Reena: Paule Marshall's Assertive Black Women. Mawa Review, 1986. Print.
- Marshall, Paule. *The Negro Women In American Literature*. A Panel Discussion In Exum, 1974. Print.
- . An Unpublished Interview With Joyce Pettis. Richmond, 1991. Print.
- . *Reena And Other Stories*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1983. Print.
- Pinckney, Daryl. *Roots*. The New York Review Of Books, 1983. Print.
- Trudiers, Haris. *From Mammies To Militants*, 1983. Print.
- . *No Outlet For The Blues: Boyce's Plight In Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Callaws, 1983. Print.
- . Talk As A Form Of Action. An Interview With Sabine Brock. In Lenz, 1984. Print.
- . *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1981. Print.
- . *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1969. Print.
- Mckay, Nellie. Reflections On Black Women Writers. Reviving The Literary Cannon. In Farhham, 1987. Print.
- Talmor, Sascha. Merle Of Bournehills. Durhan University Jounal, 1987. Print.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search Of Our Mother's Gardens Womanist Prose*. New York. Harvast Books, 1983. Print.
- Washington, Mary Helen. Afterword In Marshall, 1981. Print.



S. Moorthi

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Dept. of English and Foreign Languages , Alagappa University, Karaikudi.