



RE-ESTABLISHING BLACK COMMUNITY'S CULTURAL IDENTITIES THROUGH DIASPORIC ETHNICITY IN *BROWN GIRL, BROWNSTONES*

Sutapa Pal¹ and Dr. C.S. Robinson²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

²Assistant Professor, L.N. Govt. College, Ponneri, Tamil Nadu.

ABSTRACT

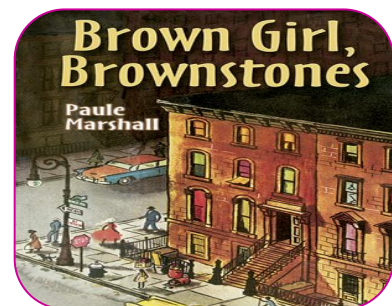
Colonialism has destroyed the economic, political and social autonomy of African men and women. Both sexes were exploited under the capitalistic and racist system which denied honour and respect given to celebrate their indigenous environments. It is African woman that Marshall propagates in her fiction. Marshall depicts how through the constituents of feminine strength individuality and communal empowerment, black women are empowered to ward off the marginalisation of social, political and economic situation in which they find themselves. The imposed standards of myth regarding assimilation and patriarchy surrounding black women by Anglo American society have prevented them from enjoying beauty, feminism and psychological well being, it also negates them from enjoying motherhood. She also talks about how black women forges ahead resisting the enforcement of limitations imposed upon them by white women. Through Marshall's work, she shows that black women transcend the barriers through the courage gained from their heritage and flexibility of their worlds. Through their dual consciousness, they discover new horizons. Marshall fuses western images and structures in her novels to designate the fact that she is the product of both the Old world and the New. However she prioritizes her identity as a woman of African descent in Western hemisphere. Through her characters who are multi-ethnic, she figures the cosmological wholeness by valuing cultural difference as a celebration of triumph of human spirit.

KEYWORDS: Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Black Community, Cultural Identity, Diasporic Ethnicity.

INTRODUCTION

Paul Marshall reclaims African culture for black diasporan people. In propagating this, she neither compromises her African-American identity nor her African-Caribbean ethnicity, but rather brings back to their original source in traditional African culture. In all her novels the protagonist finds "hidden continuities" between people of African descent. Due to dispersal and displacement of African people, cultural identities could not remain static. "Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation" (Hall 225).

These cultural components have a continuing influence on the black societies persistent in the world today. Marshall vividly describes these cultural elements in her fiction. Black music is a common feature in her novels. Her characters enjoy dual religion (Christian and tribal) and their narrative ability was her source of inspiration. Barbadian Women's life is integral to African cultural tradition and how they interpret the world. Marshall writes of how her parents talked in anti-logical terms: "nothing no matter how beautiful was ever described as simply beautiful. It was always 'beautiful-ugly': the beautiful-ugly dress,



the beautiful-ugly house, the beautiful-ugly car” (8-9). This dualism forms the core of African thought and this paradox is a means of achieving equilibrium.

Africans made religion essential facet of daily living. Religion is not institutionalized as a separate life but traditional African life requires moral involvement with the entire community. This notion of serving the entire community depends on the notion of extended family. Entire community included the concept of ancestors and hence the individual's commitment to shared beliefs and practices. Mbiti writes “To be human is to belong to the whole community and to do so involve participating in beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, and festivals of that community.” (3). Marshall describes the cultural practises through the rites and rituals present in her fiction. The symbolic presentation of the Calypso tradition, the Ring shout and mysterious tales of obeah intermingled with religious imagery wherever people of African descent have landed. Characters in Marshall's fiction remain faithful to their own indigenous beliefs while adapting western religion. It is important to note the role of women in traditional African societies. The continuation of cyclic time is physically ensured by the African Woman. When a child is born, there is a linking genealogical line in the extension of the existing community. Mbiti retorts “a child cannot be exclusively of ‘my child’ but only ‘our child’” (3). Polygamy is practiced in many African traditional societies which instigates that the burden of rearing children do not fall on a single women. Parenting becomes communal process maintaining autonomy in economic, social and political spheres.

Marshall's first novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* chronicles African-Caribbean culture thriving in a hostile environment of Western Mores and beliefs. It is a fiction about development of individual identity which goes hand in hand with development of collective community. Marshall embarks on her artistic journey to depict the black women in fiction as “a product of America, but one whose story is equally tied and bound to be the West Indies as it is to its source-Africa” (DeVeaux 98). *Brown Girl, Brownstones* narrows the cultural values reflecting author's personal issues of connecting her identity to its original source. Marshall admits that when she was a child, she denied West Indian heritage: “I went through torture as a girl growing up in Brooklyn with West Indian accents, the kids used to laugh at us. It was dreadful. So I went through a whole period of rejecting that part of myself” (DeVeaux 124). The displacement becomes indispensable for the people of Bajan American community in Brooklyn. These immigrants work day and night and tolerating every racial humiliation, they have money to purchase a property. America is symbolised with wealth and opportunity and Brooklyn becomes a haven for these pioneering black immigrants to escape poverty and exploitation.

Marshall develops how a first-generation African-American girl interprets the world of her immigrant parents. One peculiar feature of West Indian Community was language in which contradictions make up a whole such as ‘beautiful-ugly’ and ‘poor-great’. Sometimes the characters speak ‘double adjectives’ as the sun is ‘hot-hot’ or Silla's father describes Barbados as “poor-poor but sweet enough”. The language of the women prioritize West-Indian cultural mores and beliefs. The character Florrie tells the story off a wedding “back home.” Selina is ten years old as the novel begins. Selina's elder sister Ina grows gracefully into adolescence but Selina faces all sorts of economic and political turmoils. She is drawn to her father as both of them had imaginative bent of mind and often called as ‘Deighton's child’. On the other hand Selina's mother Silla is ready to forgo pleasure for economic security for her family in America where ‘at least one has a chance’. Deighton symbolises ‘Barbados’ whereas Silla is synonymous with ‘American Dream’.

The issue of the land that Deighton is inherited looms in the background. He plans to return to Barbados and build an enormous majestic house while Silla insists him that he sell the land and use the money to purchase a distinct clear demarcation between Barbados and New York. Selina understands this cultural conflict as her parents deviates against each other in their responses to America. Silla is confident of her new life in America and she represents all the Bajan women in Brooklyn. Selina always refers to Silla as the mother instead of “my” mother. *Brown Girl, Brownstones* also describes the difficulties of perpetuating individual identity within a mixed cultural humanity Marshall's heroines are independent, strong and assertive women who establishes a great active force in creating a foothold in an alien land. Black women become representation of collective black struggle for survival. Silla comes to America to keep from dying

and the exploitation in plantation at Barbadoes continues in different from to which she refers as 'hell'. "She became the collective voice of all the Bajan women the vehicle through which their former suffering found utterance" (BGBS 45).

Both "American Dream" and the "Dream of the Return" as signified by Silla and Deighton respectively bring forth the developing controversy between humanism and materialism. Empowerment of the individual is essential through the support of the collective body which is in the form of an 'Association of immigrants'. The Association is a self-help organization promoting cultural and economic growth to its members. The self-help organization in turn gives the communal support too its immigrants. Communal support is projected in the form of a Calypso dance which signifies entertainment and social support. The dancers form a tight circle of centrifugal force holding the participants together. Eugenia Collier observes. "In this scene Selina sees herself first as an integral part of the community, revealing in a new sense of wholeness, then imprisoned by that same community...She has experienced two poles of belonging: the community as completion of the individual self, the community as control" (302). Deighton is excommunicated from the circle which shown that entire community condemns him. On finding that Whites were unwilling to come to equal terms with Blacks, West Indian leader Marcus Garvey founded Universal Negro Improvement Association who advocated "return to Africa" to establish independent black civilization. The determination and growth of West Indian Community is depicted in the banner of the association which says "It is not the depths from which we come but the heights to which we ascend" (BGBS 221).

Marshall depicts the black immigrants belief in American myth of assimilation and success despite racial discrimination imposed on them. As a reward for hard work, black women and men strive collectively to enforce their resistance to the hostility and resentment of white citizens of America. The concept of African Diaspora was complete when a speaker of the association proposes to change the word Barbadian to Negro in the banner. The issue of changing name proves that the immigrants understand the effects of American stereotypes. The changing of the name of the Association from Barbadian to Negro reveals that the Barbadian community is culturally segregated from the African-American community. The discrimination of colour surmounts economic and social advancement. Cultural differentiations do not exist in America. Deighton's citizenship is not questioned in the novel. Silla tries to emulate middle class 'American' women and in doing so destroys her and Deighton's dream.

Selina's own personal growth becomes evident when she becomes eighteen years of age and associates Barbados with the memories which her father Deighton had left her. Through living memory time becomes a progression and not a regression. Selina's solo performance of the dance "Birth-to-Death Cycle" brings several characters in the novel in the forefront that she interacts to depict the various stages of development. In a powerful scene following the performance Selina is forced to confront the insidious effects of racism. She is invited along with the white members of Modern Dance Club where unable to bear humiliation she collapses in the entrance of a vacant store. She sees the White Woman's imposed image on her reflected self in the window "which had long hated her for her blackness and thus begrudged her each small success like the one tonight" (BGBS 289) Selina understands that along with the fierce struggle of her own humanity, she should also battle her white illusions. After her dance performance, Selina questions her lover, Clive "what am I to do, curl up and die because I'm coloured? Do nothing, try nothing because of it?" (BGBS 252) Clive clearly understands the representation of black race in the white world and his agreement fortifies the text of African-Americans. Clive no longer tries to fight racism but Selina shows extra-ordinary courage in acknowledging that she wanted to live her life in her own way. She decides to take a "journey" to the Caribbean to understand her heritage.

The novel comes to a close on the evening of the presentation of the scholarship where Selina in announced as the winner. Selina confesses to her mother Silla that she wants to be her own self accepting challenge of defining herself in her own terms within a black cultural matrix. As a continuation of her search, she has decided to take a journey to the Caribbean as she wants to explore other black cultures in different parts of the world to include all people of the African Diaspora.

WORKS CITED

1. Marshall, Paule. *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. New York: Random House, 1959.
2. Collier, Eugenia. "The closing of the Circle: Movement from Division to wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction". *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)*. New York: Anchor Press, 1983.
3. De Vaux, Alexis, "Paule Marshall: In Celebration of Our Triumph". *Essence*. 6.2:1979.
4. Holloway, Karla. *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992.
5. Marshall, Paule. "From the Poets in the kitchen". *Reena and Other Short Stories*. New York: Feminist Press, 1983.
6. Mbiti, John. S. *African Religion and Philosophies*. New York: Anchor Books, 1970.