



## PAULE MARSHALL: A CONJURING DAUGHTER OF BLACK CULTURE

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African American women writers emerge from a particular historical context, a context when examined from the perspective of the dominant American culture can be described as oppressive. One's culture and tradition imparts a true identity to a person, wherever a person is. Establishing this true identity and maintaining it, is easy in one's native land but articulating it in another land is difficult. This was the challenges faced boldly by African American women. They were suffering at the hand of the whites for two reasons, the primary being that they were black and secondary that they were females. Gender inequality and race made them undergo a number of atrocities which became unbearable in the early twentieth century. This led to the emergence of black women writers who compiled a type of literature which helped the black woman to uplift and reconstruct her identity.

African American women, have silenced and kept ignorant by the dominant culture. It is the human need to create and maintain a true self in a social context. However, such an endeavor becomes an ordeal for those who are doubly oppressed, for those who are muted and mutilated physically and psychically through the diabolic crossfire of caste / race, sex and colonialism.

Black women in America today are no more the midnight caged birds, but radiant ebony phoenixes singing joyfully and triumphantly the song of their true self. African American women both in life and literature, seem to have transcended the geometric oppression of race, gender and class announcing the spectacle of radiant Black female self in an unprecedented manner. The funk of Black female self is not the result of some eruption or sudden cracking of the earth, rather it is an evolutionary spiral moving from victimization to authentic consciousness, from DuBoisian veils to a blissful vision, from suspendedness to total liberation.

Many writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker have familiarized with the harsh conditions imposed on Africans and particularly African women, who had been portrayed as victims of 'double jeopardy' of racism and sexism. Their tents embody the atrocities inflicted upon African women, but one of the African American women writer stands apart from the que of the aforesaid writers and she is Paule Marshall.

Paule Marshall emerges on the horizon of the African American women's novelistic tradition. With Marshall begins the second wave feminism. Marshall's women speak to their own self and try to articulate that self with a greater force. Femininity for them is but an idiom of expression, a sort of added enriching adventure and discipline, giving subtler overtones to life, making it more beauty and interesting. Seeking explorations into the psychic universe and finding happy release of self-consciousness is their major preoccupation.

Marshall, is basically a black woman writer committed primarily to black womanhood. It is this commitment that inspired her to introduce a startlingly new iconography to black women's literary tradition. She is the first black woman novelist who announced in a voice, so heroic, so articulate that the black women in America was no more a "de mule uh de world" (Hurston 1978:29) carrying the burden everybody heaped on her back but a radiant female hero who would cast off from her imposed psyche the Thanatotic, self-loathing conditions and march straight into the world of Eros- a state of self-assured paradiso from where she would proclaim to the world that they are now the creators of a new world where "We build our own temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how and we stand on the top of mountain, free within ourselves" (Hughes 1926a:694).

Paule Marshall is emphasizing the value of fusing the personal, the cultural and the political into a whole, someone who is thinking about cultural revolution in terms of psychological implications, someone who is concerned with the meaning of the terrors imposed on black women's psyche by the colonizing imperialism and finally someone who is stressing black artist's commitment to the task of remaining faithful to her personal vision, and freeing their minds from psychological bondages through the most truthful portrayal of the black self.

The marginality of American blacks provides them with a heightened self-consciousness. Like the other minorities they want to present their plans, affirm their values and define relations with the world. The black women's literary tradition reveals the transfigured values that they nurtured and cultivated in order to survive the often dehumanizing conditions of their lives and to challenge their disfigured images. Marshall, identifies the passing on of the historical and cultural heritage of people of



African descent as a major artistic goal. Marshall uses fiction, both as creative expression and as political tool, to discuss important issues involved in cross-cultural encounters.

Marshall's uniqueness as a contemporary black female artist stems from her ability to write from three levels of awareness of those who were black and Caribbean and American. Her cultural identity as both African American and African Caribbean allows her to understand how the two cultures alternately diverge and coalesce. She is aware that both cultures reflect a distinct reality that has no direct equivalent in the Anglo-American way of life. To reconcile this three-part existence in her fiction, Marshall compromises neither her African American nor her African Caribbean identity. Rather, she brings both back to their original source in traditional African culture.

Paule Marshall was one of the pioneers in this field. All the female characters in her novels have not been portrayed as victims of 'double jeopardy' but as powerful women fighting for the re-establishment of their identity in America. The trajectories of the African American writings at the turn of the twenty-first century and particularly of Paule Marshall's special and unique way of presenting the lived experiences of her people. The social commitment of Black writers is a continuing tradition. However, the new phase that one would discern is the appropriation of emerging writing styles and philosophies of post-colonial countries that increases the depth of their portrayals and complexities. Paule Marshall, through her literary work, gives an account of the struggle of African women to raise themselves out of the depths of depression and self-hatred to the height of self-acceptance and self-love. Marshall through her work makes three crucial interventions in the American immigrant genre:

- She exposes the myth of America as the promised land by accentuating how completely intertwined is the process of becoming American and becoming white.
- She identifies homeownership as one strategy Barbadian immigrants deploy to mediate the racial hostility of America.
- She rewrites the 'happy ending' expected of immigrant narratives.

Paule Marshall, a pioneer writer, was born in Brooklyn in 1929, to immigrant parents from Barbados, and raised in a close-knit West-Indian community. As a child of Caribbean immigrants, Marshall noticed the absence of black voices in the country, realized the consistent neglect or distortion of culture, felt like an assault on her sense of self and began writing fiction. She showed interest in the history of blacks living in the Caribbean. She began writing when she was just ten and credits her mother and the other women of New York City's Barbadian community as being the first poets with whom she came into contact. Listening to the women of the neighbourhood, talking around the kitchen table was a major influence in her writing.

Marshall's concern in her writings is to take the readers through a journey of self-recognition and healing. Marshall articulates the scattering of the African people as a trauma—a trauma that is constantly repeated anew in the lives of her lost children. The life of the modern world and the conditions under which African Americans have to live, the sacrifices they must make to succeed on the terms of American society, invariably mean a severing from their cultural roots. Marshall asserts that it is the black community which is the agent and arch bearer of this culture and it is specific culture that provides strength, nourishment and sustenance back to community, making each one inseparable to each other. Marshall therefore stresses the importance of culture and community as context for understanding society's definition of black man and woman as a prerequisite for comprehending those distant contours of the black self. Marshall portrays her characters in this framework.

Paule Marshall is ostensibly concerned with the issue of reclamation of self. In exploring the potential embodied in self-reclamation, she moves from a focus on an individual's growth to ever-expanding implications of community, culminating in an affirmation of an overriding collective identity. Marshall's literary odyssey from *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) to *Memoir* (2006) reveals that she moves from a special individual defining her identity as a part of an apart from her community to a more common place protagonist discovering identity or making self-discovery by becoming enveloped in a more transcendent community and culture. Thus, Marshall expands her theme from an emphasis on individual self to a broad statement concerning the self in Black diaspora. Sandra Govan (1983:148) calls, "ripple principle", a series of concentric circles developing outward spirally from "individualistic to collective ethos" (Baker 1990:16) from microcosmic to macrocosmic patterns bearing architectural propensities.

Paule Marshall, novelist and short story writer, is a prominent and innovative voice in contemporary American Literature. She is a champion of the individual's search for identity. She has been praised for exploring the psychological trials and concerns of African-American women. Through her experiences as an American of Barbadian heritage as well as her knowledge of African mythology and rituals, she embodies the cultural dichotomy that provides the major tensions in her



work. Her writings primarily deal with African American and feminist issues. She is one among those writers who present positive images of Africa and the diaspora. The relationship between the individuals development of a healthy self and the black community is a paramount concern in Marshall's work. Marshall has authored five critically acclaimed novels over the year, beginning with *Brown Girl, Brown stones*(1959) ;*The Chosen Place Timeless Place*(1969) ; *Praisesong for the Widow*(1983); *Daughters*(1991) ; *The Fisher King*(2000); which proves Marshall as a shining example of the truth of the old adage. She has also published two collections of short stories *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*(1961) and *Reena and other stories*(1986). And autobiography *Memoir*(2009). Marshall has thought at Yale, Columbia, Cornell and Oxford Universities and currently holds a distinguished position of New York University's Graduate Creative Writing Program. Marshall's major works point towards a truth of the most profound significance in the reclamation of a people, and her technique conveys this truth with stunning impact. The truth is both simple and obvious yet it is the key to freeing the colonized mind, from several long years of believing the colonizer and discovering finally the essential collective black self. Marshall's works reveal a progression from the divided individual self to the self made whole through merging with the community. Her concept of community is ever broadening, moving from the Barbadian community, in Brooklyn in the first novel, to ultimately , the entire African world past, present and future in the last novel.

Marshall's major concern is with the recovery of self and reclamation of cultural past through positive outlook wisdom. Marshall's writings are notoriously grounded in history for it is history that wrested black African from the edenic heights of Mother Africa and hurled them headlong into the dismal abyss of American slavery. It is this history full of events that dehumanized them, denuded them to self and finally transformed them into self-oblivious creatures by rupturing their psyche profusely. For Marshall the self is certainly the first nation and it is the black feminine self and the black collective history and cultural past that Paule Marshall wants to make recovery and reclamation in her fictional canon.

Marshall's work depicts the emotional growth and newly found independence of black women who have discovered and accepted their heritage. In general, her works depicts the individual's search for identity in an uncertain world. The validation of forms within the work is a part of lifelong process in Marshall's writing which led Edward Brathwaite to celebrate her, as many as fifteen years ago, as a novelist of the "African reconnection"(Wall1989;196-197)). The meaning of Africa in this context is vital for Marshall for whom reconnecting the scattered peoples , on shared foundation of their African heritage, has been a continuing theme.

Marshall's concern in her writings is to take the readers through a journey of self-recognition and healing. Marshall articulates the scattering of the African people as a trauma- a trauma that is constantly repeated a new in the lives of her lost children. The life of the modern world and the conditions under which African Americans have to live, the sacrifices they must to succeed on the terms of American society invariably mean a severing from their cultural roots.

Marshall explores the contrast between her West Indian heritage – a heritage of slavery and colonial exploitation, and her Brooklyn background which confronts the issue of identity and assimilation that face Caribbean American families. Marshall thinks that one of the major concerns for black women writers should be how, she can give the negative distorted facts, create a personality which would be positive and assist them to erect a new society, a new nation. She feels that nothing will really change , until the black people learn to see themselves in positive terms. She believes that reclamation and reconstruction of black psyche will not really be possible until the dragon of self-hatred, self-denial and self-doubt is expelled from people's psychic universe.

*Brown Girl, Brown Stones* (1959) is a classic and first novel of Marshall. Marshall's revisiting of her old neighbourhood of Bedford-stuyvesant, in central Brooklyn is the setting of her first novel *Brown Girl, Brown Stones*(1959). This is a Marshall's pioneering novel, challenges the partial vision of American immigration, by documenting the experience of black immigrants from Barbados, in Brooklyn from the interwar years through the 1940's. Accordingly the brownstone is an icon of success in American society for Marshall's immigrants. This novel is Marshall's wavier between the idyllic immigrant myth of American Promised Land and the grim realism of American racism. Marshall tells of a young immigrant girl, Selina, whose parents are caught in the conflict between ethnic autonomy and assimilation. The community to which Selina belongs tries to adjust to its new American setting losing its own integrity.

Marshall's second novel, *The Chosen Place Timeless Place* (1969), explores the means through which an individual comes to identify a group. This is a symbolic novel, about a inhabitants of a small underdeveloped Caribbean island and their refusal to accept modernization. The culture in its depth and timelessness becomes the major characters within the space of a culture. This is Marshall's most political novel, it has been praised for examining the problems faced by many third world countries



in their struggle to establish a national identity. Merle Kinbona is Marshall's woman, who is self-seeker, and perennial rebel who demolish the societal definitions with a great strength and power and also place herself on the pedestal of humanity thus far denied to black women in America. Merle, the enigmatic figure, is the breath and bone of Bournehills people, an embodiment, and a guardian of the whole community. She is the one who poses a major threat to the white power structure. She is the soul tortured and torturing, the persons whose business is to talk, to reveal, to confess and to explore the dualities of her life. Merle, is not only a representative of black people in America but even a Third World Revolutionary. She, therefore, not only contends with her own culture, history, rituals and communal mores but also engage herself in the struggle against the heavily impinging power of neocolonialism.

*Praisesong for the Widow (1983)* is the story of an unhappy affluent American woman who experiences spiritual rebirth while she spent her vacations in the West Indies. The novel examines the negative consequences of acculturation. Marshall's concern is to take the readers through a journey of self- recognition and healing. Marshall articulates the scattering of the African people as a trauma- a trauma that is constantly repeated a new in the lines of her lost children. The life of the modern world and the conditions under which African American have to live, the sacrifices they must make to succeed on the terms of American society, invariably mean, a serving from their cultural roots. Avey Johnson learns to her cost, this is tantamount to a repetition in her private life, of that original historical separation. Her participation prompts a spiritual journey that retraces the events suffered by blacks during the middle passage.

*Daughters (1991)*, written from a female perspective examines how relationship, between men and women affect the formation of the self. The novel promotes feminist forms of activism and revolutionary solutions that support rather than impede the progress of poor and lower-class people on the island of Triunion. The novel shows how women can affirm for one another a collective vision of empowerment through a keen determination to empower the quality of their lives. The novel focuses on Ursa, a protagonist, a West Indian native living in New York city. Ursa Mackenzie is a black woman caught between two cultures - the USA and the Caribbean, with compassion and honesty, Paule Marshall shows how the past always intrudes on the present. For Ursa, this means accepting that her life in the United States is bound by events that took place a long time ago in another wing of the black Diaspora.

Marshall's novella's and short stories also emphasize the marginalized individuals attempt to establish identity. The collection *Soul Clap Hands and Sing (1961)*, which takes its fills from William Butler Yeat's poem "Sailing to Byzantium" is composed of four novellas. Marshall incisively explores the search for self-knowledge, acceptance and spiritual rebirth from a male perspectives.

*Reena and other stories (1986)*, republished as *Merle*. A novella and other stories. Marshall's focus returns to women engaged in relationships that require them to compromise their personal histories, belief and desire. Barbara T Christian(1990) had written, "At the heart of (Marshall's) work is the love of people, their speech, gestures and thought which she expresses in her skillful and often tender characterization."

Marshall's *The Fisher King (2000)*, is really a retelling of the medieval tale of a wounded King and an Arthurian Knight. The wounded King, who is imprisoned in his castle, waiting for a Knight to come and heal and protect him. Marshall's story is about a grandson's ability to heal and protect the grandfather who died in a Paris subway. As in the previous novels among them *Brown Girl, Brown Stones*, , *The Chosen Place Timeless Place*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, the wound that needs to be sewn up, has to do with divisions among Africans in the diaspora and their ambivalent relationship to their own culture. Marshall dips in and out of the lives of characters who encounter important historical events in her works.

In *Triangular Road*, Paule Marshall tells the story of her years as a fledgling young writer in the 1960s. A memoir of self-discovery, it also offers an affectionate tribute to the inimitable Langston Hughes, who entered Marshall's life during a crucial phase and introduced her to the world of European letters during a whirlwind tour of the continent funded by the State Department. In the course of her journeys to Europe, Barbados, and eventually Africa, Marshall comes to comprehend the historical enormity of the African diaspora, an understanding that fortifies her sense of purpose as a writer. In this unflinchingly honest memoir, Paule Marshall offers an indelible portrait of a young black woman coming of age as a novelist in a literary world dominated by white men.

Marshall underlines the necessity for ethnic community to rediscover and reconstruct and celebrate its past for it is culturally and historically healing and nurturing. Marshall believes that, "oppressed people cannot overcome their oppression and take control of their lives until they have a clear and truthful picture of all that has gone before, until they begin to use their history



creatively. The knowledge of one's culture, one's history serves as an ideological underpinning for the political, social and economic battle must wage. It is the base upon which they build" (Kulkarni 1993:283).

Thus, Marshall's fiction informs one that there exists a whole tradition of black cultural heritage which must be celebrated. It is this heritage that serves as an antidote to American's slavery, neocolonialism, materialism and other forces that dehistoricised black people. Marshall's fiction portrays the human imperative of moving forward in chronological time, while simultaneously moving backward in psychic or spiritual time. The novelist moves from a focus on an individual's growth, to ever expanding implications of community and nationhood, culminating in an affirmation of an overriding collective identity. Ultimately, Marshall's theme fully blossoms in illustrating a transcendent spiritual community of all blacks, past, present, and future, both colonized in white America and at home in Africa.

#### **Work Cited**

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