

## **Cultural Legacies as Antidote: A Study of Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones***

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*The culture of a nation or race plays an important role in molding the personality of the individuals. The sensitive souls, like that of the writers, imbibe every bit their culture, and let their creative personalities shaped by the mores and manners, dreams and desires, and the pains and passions of their society. Paule Marshall, a Black American novelist, is one among the many such souls who got formatted by the glorious chronicles of the wonderful Negro Culture.*

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Paule Marshall's fictional realm consciously responds to the finer sensibilities of her rich Negro legacy, and cautiously avoids reacting to the racial torture mindlessly inflicted on the blacks by the unfriendly white community.

Marshall's "artistic vision evolves in a clear progression as she moves, through her creations, from an American to an African-American/African-Caribbean and, finally, a Pan-African sensibility. Indeed, the chronological order of her publications suggests an underlying design to follow the 'middle passage' in reverse. That is, she examines the experience of blacks not in transit from Africa to the New World, but from the New World toward Africa. . . . Throughout her fiction, Marshall is preoccupied with black cultural history, and she insists that African peoples take a 'journey back' through time to understand the political, social, and economic structures upon which contemporary societies are based."

Writers, especially the ones having their roots in the African soil, normally endeavor to give an emotional vent to their long- pent- up feelings. The insults and the seemingly endless inhuman acts atrociously inflicted on the helpless poor migrant –settlers are usually the highlighted themes of the creative outlets of these Afro-American authors. Exposing the atrocities and expressing the agonies caused by the whims and villainy exploitations of the 'racially superior' whites remain the prime occupation of black literature. While many other writers seriously bent upon giving vent to their pent up emotions, there are a few who sought to create a healthy awareness, amongst their black community, of the rich healing legacy of the glorious black culture. They tried through their fictions to dispel the sullen fear of being a Black by instilling an invigorating confidence in the minds of those who otherwise feel that they are "in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes." Black is not a sin; it has a unique identity and the identity, which is preserved in the cultural past, can illumine to cast away any gloom. Hence, a few black American novelists do initiate a 'journey back' to the glorious past in search of the treasured legacy of the rich illuminating cultural identity.

Legacy is, more or less, what we remember about a person or a country. What an individual or a country does today might, in the future, be regarded as being important enough to be thought of as a memorable legacy. It is very much a similar concept as inheritance and heritage, and is something that we inherit from the past generations and pass on what we inherit to our future generations. Usually *heritage* refers to the material and economical inheritance, while *legacy* refers to the immaterial and cultural inheritance. Writers, who are mostly the product of the society, do inherit a lot from their cultural past and make an effective use of the same in their own novel ways to the betterment of their society.

This legacy of language and culture forms the very matrix of Marshall's major works of fiction. As Barbara Christian observed in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Marshall's novels "present a black woman's search for personhood within the context of a specific black community rather than in reaction to a hostile society. As such, they acknowledge the existence of a rich black culture." The present paper focuses on Paule Marshall's purposeful "journey back" to her cultural roots in Barbados through her semi-autobiographical novel viz. *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. In her novels, the legacy and glory of the past is seen as a graceful force which alone can safely shape the ways and means of the present Negro generation towards a better tomorrow. Though known as an American author, her fictional mirrors reflect her Bajan (Barbadian) background and give powerful expressions to the twin themes of 'the need to confront the past' and 'the need to change the present'. Angela Harrington Rice, in her thesis on the "African Presence in the novels of Paule Marshall" rightly observes that:

"The purposeful presence of the rich inheritance of African culture in Paule Marshall's novels is evidenced in the use of language, ritual, myth, and history. She reconnects the African world by memorably illustrating in her works how African culture functions in African-American communities and to a greater extent in African-Caribbean communities. Her work symbolizes the need to reclaim African ideals as a prerequisite to achieving wholeness and as a vehicle for empowerment."

Even before Paule Marshall's introduction to the world of African-American literature, the sounds, the smells, the sights, the entire encompassing culture of the West Indies were very much a part of her future training as a world-renowned novelist, especially through the daily gatherings of her mother and her female West Indian friends around the table in the basement of her Brooklyn Brownstone house. For these immigrants from Barbados, language was a therapy for the tribulations they endured as invisible citizens of a new land-invisible because they are black, they are female, and they are from a foreign land.

Paule Marshall has lovingly termed her mother and her neighbor friends as 'kitchen poets'. According to her, they are the very foundation for all the beauty and skill with which she employs the often colorful and reverent language of the "Bajan" (Barbadian) community in her novels. Their metaphoric, often ironic language inspired her attempts to find a narrative voice and seek a literary career. Marshall combines artful story-telling with the lyrical idiom of her West Indian heritage, crafting dynamic stories about how descendents of the African Diaspora find different ways to understand their culture identities. In her autobiographical essay, "*From the poets in the kitchen*," she describes the aesthetic roots of her fiction:

“The group of women around the table long ago they taught me my first lessons in the narrative art. They trained my ear. They set a standard of excellence. This is why the best of my work must be attributed to them; it stands as a testimony to the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me in the word shop of the kitchen.”

Marshall was 30 years old when she finished writing *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. She had been attending Hunter College, married her first husband, Kenneth Marshall, and was a journalist for *Our World*, a small black periodical. She wrote the book during the evenings when she returned home from work. Marshall considered writing her first novel her “most exhilarating writing experience,” according to Collier, and understood her as now “having to be a writer of fiction.” The setting of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* is Chauncey Street, a place which was once occupied by Upper Class Americans but is presently occupied by Barbadian immigrants. The introduction to the setting of the novel takes the reader directly to the issues of migration, both physical and cultural, present at the heart of the text. The reference of America and Barbados alongside, the associations thereof, significantly underlines the internal conflict with West Indian and American identities; also underlined is the agony of dislocation and double consciousness, and a pervading “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (DuBois<sup>2</sup>) that young Selina feels in the very beginning of the novel. She does painfully feel the palpable presence of the previous white occupants of the brownstone. The story of Selina sets the stage for Marshall’s preoccupation with the “journey back.” The “Bajan” community in the Brooklyn of Selina reminds the readers of Marshall’s own childhood among immigrants, who work hard often cleaning houses, scrimping and saving their money to “buy house” as a way to become fully adjusted to their adopted country. But the roots of the culture they create and perpetuate in the United States are firmly rooted in the Caribbean rituals and traditions that they left behind.

Language is the very salient feature of any race or any culture. This distinctive identity called language has the magical power of a rare sort of healing touch. When away from home, it not only brings and binds people together but also dispels the painful alien agonies. In her famous essay already cited above, Paule Marshall emphasizes the essential role that “talk” played in these gatherings of immigrant women. The language of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* is exquisitely rendered. The feel and flavor of the West Indies is beautifully expressed through the language of Selina’s parents, especially her mother, Silla. Words like “c” (dear), “lady-folks,” and “wunna” (you) are sprinkled liberally and lovingly throughout the text. It is testimony to Paule Marshall’s power as a writer to have been able to evoke such

genuinely oral magic on paper. Thus the talk of the Bajan women serves as one of the concrete social practices. The sense of “Bajanness” can still be maintained within the large city like New York. Within the shared space of the kitchen, the Barbadian women are free to express their sounds and accents. Florrie, Silla’s friend, in her conversation with other friends said solemnly “Talkyuh talk, Silla! Be – Jees, in this white- man world you got to take yuh mouth and make a gun” (Brown, 56). Their cultural practices linger long in the minds of all the characters in the novel. Marshall describes this with Selina’s appearance:

“Slowly she raised her arm thin and dark in the sun- haze, circled by two heavy silver bangles which had come from “home” and which every Barbadian-American girl wore from birth. Glaring down, she shook her fist, and the bangles sounded her defiance with a thin clangor.” (3)

Like this they have many cultural practices within the immigrant community. For example, culinary practices represent another site wherein Bajan identity is reproduced; Silla prepares various Barbadian delicacies like “black pudding”, “Souse”, “Coconut or sweetbread” which she sells to the Caribbean community and earn her income. In fact, it is through such practices that a Caribbean identity and the cultural heritage pass on to a second, third, and beyond Un- born generation.

The Caribbean identity that is produced through the cultural practices followed within the female centered space of Silla’s kitchen is not a static, a historical identity. This Caribbean diasporic identity is also characterized by a profound ambivalence toward the Caribbean itself. Barbados is simultaneously the object of the immigrant’s nostalgic longing, a locus for memory and reminiscences of “home” Barbados is recalled as a place “Poor- Poor but sweet enough” (Brown, 8).

Selena’s parents represent two opposite responses to life in the new world. Her mother, Silla, is industrious, works hard in the Barbadian Association of her community, and yearns to own the brownstone that is the ultimate fulfillment of her dreams for herself and her family. In contrast, Selina’s father, Deighton, dreams of the tropical paradise of his youth. He stands outside the tightly-knit family and community group and is eventually alienated forever. Selina’s personality and identity were shaped by other feminine forces. One such force was Miss Thompson, a hairdresser from the South, who educated her about love, sacrifice, and the history of African people in America. Selina also experienced her first love affair and confronted American racism at the home of one of her white high school friends. Towards the end of the novel, she understands what Collier believed to be one of the novel’s most important messages: “She is one with all the Black people of her world.” (Collier 1984:295)

With this understanding, she can now leave her community and begin her travels, which will bring self knowledge of another kind. Collier remarked that the novel's final scene, which depicts Selina wandering through her neighborhood for the last time, allows the young woman to sense "physically the presence of all the people whose selves were a part of the creation of her. She leaves something of herself behind and takes something of the place forever with her." (Marshall 1959:309).

A gem of a novel which explored the intersections of race, culture and class, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* has been academically rediscovered by scholars in African-American, Caribbean, and feminist criticisms. Instead of highlighting the painful reality of black's life in an alien land, Paule Marshall initiated a journey back to the homeland where they can bask in the glory of the rich legacy of their culture. Indeed, the knowledge of the home and the past is the powerful antidote to all the ailments caused by present madly driven by the heavily drifting materialism.

#### **References**

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