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Black Women's Journey from Fractured Psyche to Spiritual Wholeness of Paule Marshall's Novels

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ABSTRACT

The present paper tries to aim to explore the portrayal of Black Women with its history and self-empowerment in a fight against the forces that tried to silence them. The Black woman has struggled against the racial and sexual discrimination. It explores the recovery of self and claims of cultural past — the two important aspects that Marshall deals in making the reconstruction of fractured psyche. Both literature and history depict the condition of Black Woman in America. In colonized White America, her condition, both physical and psychological was extremely traumatic. She was not in her true self and was rather in a psychic bondage in the very society where she used live in. Rejected by the White society, the Black woman was a cultural wreck which left her shattered and made her to survive with a fractured psyche. Marshall uses the aspect of 'rejoining the roots', by oral story telling thus developing the images and identity so as to reconstruct their fractured psyche. The process of socialization and internalization of White imperialists and their ideas, made an impact on her mind. She became a 'zombie', a body without soul. The research is explored from the feministic perspective to explore the harsh realities of women with double marginalization in African Continent. She reconciles the Black Women's journey from fractured psyche to the spiritual wholeness with her will power and good treatment.

Keywords: Black Women, Fractured Psyche, Discrimination, Spiritual Wholeness, Struggle, Woman.

The Reconstructionist Paule Marshall is an explorer with a vibrant voice to the voiceless Black women becoming their Vanguard. In all her novels she delves deep into the psyche of her characters with an empathic understanding of their plight and trauma. She calls it the 'fractured psyche'. She takes her protagonists on to a journey towards self recovery. She is a vanguard voice for the Black women and explores how she demolished the racist and sexist image of Black woman in the white society. The Black female with a fractured psyche struggled in the society for self identity. Marshall in her novel exhibits the

movement of her protagonist from a small glimmer to a strong assertion. The centrality which she provides to her female heroine in the novel is acknowledged and celebrated by the Black community. They call her a Reconstructionist of the positivity. Thus, Marshall is the only woman writer who treats the idea of moving back and forth from New World to old post; from America to the Caribbean of Africa so as to develop the Black women's identity. We can acclaim that she is the Reconstructionist, and imbibes hope and assurance. She assures that they are not to be tortured and ignored but they have the ability to stand in whirlpool of moving world. She developed their identity strong enough and gave assurances that "we can do". It was Paule Marshall who took the responsibility of reconstructing the image of Black womanhood in a positive way to gain the consciousness in women. We must come out of the world where man only rules and women are puppet and submissive unless they exit from the garden of male phallic power and women would never get true freedom. Hence, Marshall wants Black female to reconstitute their lives with positive insight by embracing their Black cultural past. The main objective of the paper is to explore the black women's journey with double consciousness as given by DU Bois's Double Consciousness theory.

According to Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* he reveals with his theoretical tool that psycho-social divisions in American society allows a full understanding of many divisions. He focuses on the specificity of black experience that allows him challenging the injustice in national and world systems. Paule Marshall also deals it with a peculiar sensation through the eyes of others measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that seems on in amused contempt and pity. She traces the two-ness like Du Bois, an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. Thus, to gain true knowledge Marshall is of the opinion that one must enter the dark recesses of one's own consciousness. No patriarchy, no phallic power would ever give true freedom to female. True power can be obtained after risking our own life, Marshall's novels reflect Black women's journey from loss of self to the recovery of self, from fractured psyche to spiritual wholeness.

In fact Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* was a reply to those damaged and negative images that were viewed by Black woman in the society by other writers. About the protagonist Selina she writes: One of the reasons I wanted to write the story of Selina Boyce was to give an answer to the prevailing image, to say that she was not a topsy, she was not of any characters or of stereotypes. The African women who were called subhuman during slavery period were superior to the Europeans in many respects in the pre-slavery Africa. Ngugi Wa Thionga puts his view about the people of Africa in pre-slavery period in the following words: "The people (in Africa) tended their farm, and also their music, officiated in ceremonious dances, recited poetry stories around the fire side and became warriors intimidate of war" (*Homecoming*, 6). Both men and women danced in a social and spiritual significance. Marshall introduced the joyful and strong characters like Silla and Merle to remind peace and tranquility of the pre-slavery period. In her novels we find characters dancing and singing as they recalled the cultural past. The male writers projected black woman matriarchs, as the sinners and whores or emasculating a person. The role of Black woman was confined to such images by the male writer, and the reason behind it was of mates that could easily do all injustice to these Black women who silently accepted the torture. More of abuses and pain were inflicted upon her by their own men than by the Whites. The literary scene in Afro-American novelists' tradition was captured by the male writers who never bothered to present a positive image of Black woman. They not only ignored, they explicitly tried to reject the role of woman in Afro-American tradition. The reason behind this ignorance was the fear of de-masculinization.

Marshall talks about racism and sexism from a feministic perspective in her novels. The image produced by the male writers about Black woman was that of a characterless and immoral woman. The brutal treatment that she endured during slavery made her stronger than the Black males. The Black writers instead of capturing the complexities of a Black woman's life, revealing the potentials within her, produced counter stereotype characters like mulatto woman (white father). The Black woman was denied of her culture, her history, her roots, and herself because of her lack of consciousness. This absence of consciousness allowed the external forces to act upon her thought system. Marshall believes that the masters were able to create the condition of self-oblivion due to unawareness about self and culture in the Black community. The culturally alienated person in the Newland surrendered self to the will of masters. The wound inflicted by the White masters was so intense that it affected their psyche drawing them to complete submissiveness. As a Black female writer, Marshall said it is the duty of a writer to reconstruct the history Black men and women by making descent into those darkness which is still untouched. Marshall further puts her opinion that the responsibility of the Black writers is to refute the stereotypes, myths, and images. The characters Selina, Silla, Merle, Avey, Kinbona, and Ursa Beatrice are not "creatures so abused by pain" (*In Search of our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, 232). In order to know more about their achievement and how they developed their identity, we need to deal with the protagonists of each novel.

Restructuring the image of the Black woman Marshall portrayed the Black woman's life in all its complexities and broke the false image of the Black woman projected by the Whites in the society. Paule Marshall's women, like Merle Kinbona and Reena, celebrate racial victory and women's triumphs but they also acknowledge defeat, not for the purpose of reinforcing a sense of victimization but to insure that they all recognize their vulnerabilities. This recognition originates in acknowledging the source of their pain and reconciling themselves to bearing, in some measure, responsibility for it. Hence, there is no turning away from pain, error but seeing these things as part of their living, and learning a lesson from them. Paule Marshall is the first black woman novelist to actualize this sense in her narrative scope. Commenting on the novels of contemporary black women led by Paule Marshall, Nellie McKay argues that "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" (186). Marshall examines the innate humanity of the characters she portrays - characters who embody qualities that make them neither flawless heroines, nor immoral individuals or helpless victims. Silla, Merle Kinbona, Cassie are tragic and exploited women in Marshall's fictional canon but they are not victims. Marshall's women are far more resilient and versatile. It is here that her portrayal of female characters differs from that of her predecessors and contemporaries. No woman in Marshall's fiction is sexually brutalized or victimized by her own father or stepfather, or her husband.

None of Marshall's women suggest that Black life is in such disarray, that black community is so disintegrated, that they do not constitute any kind of positive force in America. At first it appears as if Selina's family is preventing her from committing to life choices. She adopts Western cultural values, as she was born in America in a form of rebellion against her Bajan culture that her mother Silla represented. She feels alienated from family, culture, and values and is in a confused and dislocated state of mind. Selina's chaotic state of mind prevents her from developing her identity and from committing herself to set values and goals. Selina is American and successful, but she is not White and not accepted in the White community. Finally, she recognizes that her Bajan background, blackness and African roots are a part of her identity.

According to James Marcia's theory of identity states Selina's identity achievement helps her to embrace her Bajan community and have better understanding of life, respect her mother Silla. Until Selina accepted the goals and values of Barbadian community, she was treated as the 'other' by her school friend Margret's mother. Thus Marshall indicates that Selina's growth and maturity came when she had experiences with her counterpart. Towards the end of the novel she embraces her Barbadian identity. Mother Silla's dedication to her goal leads to her personal upliftment.

According to Paul Wong et. al., Silla is a model minority because she achieves her goal despite the discrimination she faces as a Black, female immigrant. Silla acquires her own home. Silla kept the tenants in her brownstone. It was an extra ordinary achievement in a segregated and prejudiced America. Silla's success despite of her gender, race, and status makes a powerful woman. Marshall is such a novelist who allows her female characters to fight and rediscover their self identity. Silla has protected herself in the Occidental society. Even if Marshall's characters are somewhere near to "schizophrenic state" they struggle with people and location and thus emerge successful by remaining faithful to their own culture and adopting only those aspects of the dominant culture that are suitable for their survival, thus hybridizing.

In fact, Marshall's novels transcend the definition of Black woman that was held by the American Society. She believed that the writer, by painting an image more positive, creative and authentic, can make the Black woman accept that image. The positive image would certainly affect her psychologically, bringing change in her own attitude. In this regard Dr. Kulkarni says, All Marshall's women are ambivalent personalities torn between love and hate, acceptance and rejection, desire and denial of desire, and aspiration and defeat" (30). Each one of Marshall's women weaves her destiny from her own experiences. Marshall in her novels taught female protagonists to keep their head up and not to allow any White man to push them away like unwanted cattle. They secure their places irrespective of the obstacles that come across their way. She ensures that the protagonists like Selina, Avey Jhonson, Ursa Beatrice or Merle Kinbona, all are psychologically equipped to accept or reject, and leading their life they want to lead.

Marshall occupies a prime place as a sculptor. Indeed, she carves out a new form out of the experiences of her characters. She is the creator of feminine aesthetic ideas in her cosmos. She talks about the aesthetic of woman which is unique brought out by their experiences and their perceptions, shared by women and their group. Marshall a woman writer celebrates the feminine culture that provides centrality to her Women characters in talking about relationships between sisters, daughters, mother and other mothers (the kitchen poets). All together these characters constitute the feminine culture form the central theme of her novels. She is writer, who writes with difference as she voices their triumph, aspirations, and their struggles in her novels.

Marshall also uses Journey and History to show the movement and shift in her characters and themes. Merle in *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, gains strength and power by historicizing herself, by moving from hopelessness to some positive hope. Marshall reconstructs the idea that Merle knows her responsibility as a woman and generates it by confronting her past. Merle was physically free to commit herself to the past. Thus Marshall truthfully shapes Merle's identity by making Merle return to Africa. Such a journey not only romanticizes nostalgia but also examines and uses one's own history creatively. Merle's return to Africa is a way of restoring the primal innocence of herself that was lost during encounter with America and Merle that reconstructs her future life. Thus Merle's return is for the betterment of her people and community. Marshall awakens the minds of her protagonist Selina, Merle, Avey, and Ursa to make their position from

marginalized to center. All the female heroines are armed with new sense of consciousness. The bitterness of life, their pain, humiliation, and alienation brings transformation within them; they gain new hope, love and unity within their community. Between the two polarities of beginning and end human consciousness must be recognized, tested examined; shaped and reshaped and brought to full maturity. Marshall moves her characters through this paradigm process. Thus we are informed by Marshall that between two polarities the prime of innocence and experiences there lays the human consciousness. As a writer Marshall thinks that maturity of the human consciousness can be reached by testing, examining, shaping, and reshaping it. Marshall's stories have been praised most conspicuously for their humanism and universality and they appear to have satisfied well the prevailing aesthetic requirements of 'organic unity' and the 'companionship of the whole'. Then stories of the novel are examples of artistry and a sure knowledge of human heart, exhibiting authentic feeling for real men, women, and life. Marshall writes about sense of race and color into an enormously wide spectrum of mixed moods and human destinies. Marshall communicates general truths and emotions common to all.

Marshall's novels are locked in dialectical struggle with the notion of ethnic solidarity. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones* the protagonist rebels against a communally prescribed ethnic identity and yet comes to a kind of reconciliation with her community. Selina harshly criticizes and yet celebrates the Barbadian community; a true symbol of the inescapable hybridity. Marshall uses small descriptions to create the feeling of the culture. Silla Boyce, in *Brown Girl, Brownstone* is closely related with the Barbadian community and culture. Cooking on the weekends was a ritual for Silla and her friends. On Saturdays, "The kitchen was filled with fragrances" when Silla, made and sold Barbadian delicacies. Thus cooking Bajan foods was a way of staying connected with Barbadian culture. Marshall brings out the interconnectedness between the women through their sharing. Suggie another character from *Brown Girl, Brownstones* talks to Selina about women sexuality. Selina asks Suggie whether she would fall in love with any boy. Suggies says "Yes, Somebody, some place gen look at you twice. But you best stop looking like you spending your old days first" (*Browngirl, Brownstones*, 207). Suggie asks Selina to live life with zest. Marshall also uses small symbolic gestures to reconstruct the image of the Black women. Selina's decision to cast off her black dress that she was wearing was an act of disowning the shadows of Thanatos. She decides to wear "rainbow around her shoulders" to embrace Eros. It shows Selina's energy and her wish to emerge as a successful Black woman. Marshall reconstructs the idea of new and vitalized sense of life taking place within Selina's mind which is eighteen years old. She allows her female characters to talk and discuss with her age mate about innate human feelings. Selina talks about her sexuality for the first time when she had dullness due to menses. At first she negates the feminine autonomy considering it as bloody violence like World War II. Thus the unspeakable is spoken. Selina accepts her feminine sexuality as the only way to survive as a female.

Marshall focuses on reconnecting the fragmented cultures of Africa and Afro America and the Caribbean. Merle Kinbona, a very powerful Black woman stands against the White power representing her culture. She is a revolutionary spirit, a self-reliant person. Bournehills, in fact is a metaphor of self for Merle Kinbona. Marshall's Women are complex beings with natural qualities and tendency to fight according to the situation in which they are kept. Neither are they queens of universe nor the tragic heroines of the world. In whatever situation they were placed they know how to fight the battle and emerge successfully as a woman. Selina finally accepts her cultural identity when she experiences racism as a member of her school dance assemblies. *Praisesong for the Widow*, Marshall's third novel recounts a widow's quest for identity which culminates in a physical and metaphorical journey in the final book. Praisesong is about the journey on a

land and water, in which the community and culture play an essential role. The value of belongingness to a community and individual identity is found throughout the novel. It is also a novel about alienation and reaffirmation. The Black women are the transmitters of cultural identity and heritage.

In *Praisesong for the Widow*, Marshall uses oral literature to narrate the story of Ibos, who are the members of heroic maroon societies. This story is narrated by Aunt Cuney and is passed on to her next generation to Avey. The art of storytelling helps to shape Avey's identity from childhood to adulthood. Marshall's narration of the tale of Ibos walking on sea water is a touchstone of black folklore in the New World. Like in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Marshall also describes about the myth of Africans who escaped slavery through supernatural powers. Therefore Marshall reveals to the readers the mystical powers that the people of Africa had; they were brave souls who could liberate themselves and escape from slavery by walking on water. Accordingly Avey's story telling technique plays an important role in her self-development and in the rediscovery of her identity. Aunt Cuney believed that Avey was born with a mission to keep the memory of the Ibo stories. Avey continues to storytelling till she adopted American culture. She is alive for herself and for the whole community. From her childhood Avey is familiar with the role of storytelling. She tells stories, "The whole thing almost word for word.... Complete with the old woman's inflections ad gestures" (*Praisesong for the Widow*, 38).

Marshall reaffirms the importance of collective community and staying connected to one's roots. Avey's cleansing process in Carriacou transforms Avey's identity crisis to more stronger black woman – a storyteller, a griot. Similarly Marshall helps to reconstruct the identity of the protagonists Ursa in *Daughters*, her fourth novel. It is a novel that describes Ursa Beatrice who frees herself from the chain of paternal bondage to attain an independent identity. *Daughters* are in continuation to Marshall's short stories *The Valley Between*. Marshall gives the left out task to the protagonist Ursa. She connects herself with her historical past. Marshall never allows her woman to get victimized completely. They lose the ground temporarily and return with gained strength and knowledge in making the remarkable recovery. According to Daryl Pinckney: "Paule Marshall does not let the black women in her fiction lose, while they lose friend, lovers, husbands, homes, or jobs, they always find themselves" (*A Review of Brown Girl, Brownstones*, 26). Ursa emerges as a successful Black woman after much trauma in her personal life. After the abortion, she was mentally unstable. Past memories of her childhood filled her vacuumed mind. The most vivid of them was her mother Estella lifting her up to touch the toes of statues of Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe, the revolutionary heroes of Triunion. Marshall exhibits that the Black men and women are much closer to the past history; they extract knowledge from their history, their past. Both Ursa and her mother Estella gain their mental strength by reviving their past memories. Ursa was convinced that if women want the freedom, they shouldn't be submissive to the phallic imperialism. Rather, to attain her own identity she should break the psychological barriers of relationship which do not motivate progressive growth and give freedom. It is this freedom to act that allows Ursa to usurp her father's political power. Ursa, finally, was ready to choose her own path. Ursa's mother Estilla plans to help her daughter Ursa as an autonomous female.

The female characters Selina, Merle, Silla, Ursa, and Avey, shaped their own identity within their Black community. These women drew on their cultural values from their community. The 'community' was used as a reference for survival and maintenance of their identities in White America. Cooking, which was a weekend ritual helped the women to meet and discuss their experiences and remain connected with each other and their roots while remaining under the overpowering impact of the occidental society. Thus

Marshall has rewritten the image of Oriental women in their domestic roles maintaining the cultural practices of their community. Whether it is Silla Boyce or Avey Johnson, they are aware of their own heritage and the importance of staying together within the community. They speak their cultural language – Creole and celebrate their festival eating Barbadian food as it nurtures the spirit of the community people. The relationship between the characters and community are directly proportional to each others. Marshall puts it for the protagonist of *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, Merle Kinbona “some larger figure in whose person was summed up by Bournehills and its people.” (260). Merle Kinbona is involved with the community, people, space and surroundings that are inseparable from anything happening within the community. Similarly, Silla Boyce in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and her Bajan friends speak Bajan Creole when they meet on Saturdays. They discuss and share their present and past experiences, sentiments, instructions, and admonitions, “Dear – heart, the pudding and sauce smell too sweet! How?” (*Browngirl, Brownstones*, 67). The one way in which Iris praises Silla’s baking, mentioning the pleasing aroma of her delicacies; Silla becomes sentimental. Most of the characters speak Bajan Creole language, except Selina who is on her journey for self recovery. The sense of intimacy is seen when Silla shows her concern for Virgie who is pregnant. She asks Virgie to “get home safe, soul. Send one of the children when your time comes upon you” (41). The characters Avey, Silla, and Merle portray self but are actually collective. When they grow, the community grows. However, in *Brown Girl, Brownstone* Marshall emphasizes the formation of Barbadian association with the motto. “It is not the depths from which we come but the heights to which we ascend (220)”. Marshall uses words Depths, Heights, and Ascend to reconstruct the idea of movement towards success when they were in the hostile environment of White Sea. Marshall’s female are human beings with natural tendency of weakness, powerlessness, but at the sometime they have strengths they are assertive and independent struggle with people and location. The female characters are not brutalized or raped by male members in her novel.

Marshall’s women are the genuine human beings with weaknesses, vulnerabilities and strengths. They always feel human instead of like some old mule”. Silla Boyce has no ‘outlet for her blues’. She turns her pain inward instead of releasing it outward. Merle Kinbona is a person with a fractured psyche and struggling hard to fuse the fragmented pieces of her personality into one whole. Ursa Beatrice in *Daughters* lies crouching in the fold of darkness that her father has imposed on her existence. She is not able to cut away the subtle seduction and domination that has long characterized her relationship with her father, Primus Mackenzie. Avey Johnson is a person who suffers emotional constipation and is hopelessly in search of some meaning in her culturally lost life. Each one of these Marshall’s women is spinning out their destinies from their own beings. Another important characteristic of Marshall’s woman that is reconstructed in the novels is they are the transmitters of their culture. Avey is a narrator who uses myths, rituals, and dances. She has inherited the art of storytelling from Aunt Cuney and Iba ancestry. Silla Boyce expounds her root culture through her cooking and Merle Kibona with her complete involvement with her community. Marshall has taken her characters through the journey; a journey of self discovery wherein the women found, not only their identity but also their sense of power and strength. They made peace with their history and peace with their inner anger.

Marshall’s all major characters Silla, Selina, Avery, Merle Kibona travel; they take a journey during which they are forced to confront their inner self. The experience that they undergo forces them to break the image that have been carrying due to the long period of oppression during which their subjugated position. It made them believe what the others said to them about them. The external journey of moving

back to the homeland and reconnecting with the past is quite similar to the shift that her protagonists make. They come to terms with their real identity and accept it, without trying to suppress it with a forged hyphenated one. Marshall takes up the role of a 'Vanguard' leading the New Black women out of the White Community and gives them a voice that is neither just a protest nor an imitation of the White community, or men. Marshall is the first black woman novelist in Black women's novelistic tradition to go beyond the established shorelines and offer realistic representations of different models of Black womanhood. She attempts a serious capture of network like sentiments, motivations, and misfortunes that are a part of human behavior. By presenting black women as social, political and cultural actors, she captures the diversities and complexities of their experiences and informs that her women are not victims. Paule Marshall is an *avant garde* Black woman novelist who has sculpted these new molds of female characters in relation to the culture and community they live in. She occupies a pioneering position not only as a sculptor of complex characters and a transmitter of Afrocentric culture, but also as a creator of feminine aesthetic which consists of ideas produced by women that clarify a stand point of and for women. As a Reconstructionist and revisionist Marshall has an insight for feminine aesthetic. Marshall think women have a perception to embrace their group women; their own experience allows them to do self-evaluation. Their aesthetic sense helps to break the patriarchal pattern and hegemonic dominance.

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