

EMERGENCE OF BLACK WOMAN IN PAULE MARSHALL'S BROWNGIRL, BROWNSTONES

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Abstract: Literature is always a mirror of the society. Black literature is the reflection of black people and their consequent search for an authentic self to move across the oppressive tracks of racism, sexism and classism. Black women's literature deals with the multifarious ways in which women have been muted and kept ignorant by the dominant culture. It is not about 'the survival of the fittest' but it is about their 'mere' survival. Paule Marshall's first novel *Browngirl, Brownstones* was published in 1959. Marshall's positioning of her characters within the context of their culture led critics to see her first novel, as a pivotal work in Afro-American women's literature during twentieth-century. *Browngirl, Brownstones* emphasizes how the black community and its customs affect the process of the black woman's exploration of self. She highlights the dilemma of black women of West Indian origin as an African-American. Her novel established her as a relentless analyst of character within the context of a specific culture. As a first generation American of West Indian descent, she lived and dramatically experienced the merging and conflict of two distinct cultures within the same psyche. This novel formed a bridge between the novels of earlier writers, such as Zora Neale Hurston's- *Their eyes were watching God*, and writers who emerged in the seventies, such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. *Brown Girl, Brownstones* is a milestone in African American fiction not only because it goes against stereotype in its portrayal of African-Americans but also because for the first time since Claude McKay, another West Indian immigrant writer, a connection had been made in literature between African American people and their West Indian counterparts. The language of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* is exquisitely rendered. The feel and flavor of the West Indies is beautifully expressed through the language and the characters. It is one of the most optimistic texts in Afro-American literature and can be considered as a beacon of hope.

Keywords: Black woman, Classism, Emergence Oppression, Racism, Sexism.

Introduction: Paule Mashall is a renowned Afro-American woman novelist of the 1950s. She is a black woman writer of Barbadian origin. Her parents immigrated to New York from Barbados in the early twenties. Marshall was reared in a close-knit 'Bajan' community in Brooklyn where she attended grammar school and graduated from high school in 1949. She entered Brooklyn College where she studied sociology in preparation for a career in social work. However, an illness caused her to withdraw from the college. During the interim a friend suggested to her to write. She did, and she liked it. When she returned to college, Marshall changed her major to English literature.

As a student at Hunter College, she began writing her autobiographical first novel *Browngirl, Brownstones*. Marshall lacked role models in terms of black women writers and she had not heard black woman's voice until she discovered Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maude Martha* (1953). Paule Marshall is one of the major contemporary black woman novelists whose concern is to define the black women's experiences and their self as she understands them. *Brown girl, Brownstones* has received good reviews but failed to sell. Like Gwendolyn Brook's novella, *Maud Martha*, it was ahead of its time. Barbara Christian comments on what has so often happened – and continues to happen – to the works of America's best black women writers: Marshall's subject matter, the development of

a browngirl into a woman within the rituals and mores of a black cultural context, had yet to be seen as important It was being used as a book for juveniles, just as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* would be, despite their complex language and psychology" (Barbara Christian, 1985: 107).

Browngirl, Brownstones emphasis is on the black woman as mother and daughter. Marshall wrote the novel not primarily for publication but as a process of understanding, critiquing and celebrating her personal history. Her novel presents a black woman's search for selfhood, within the black community rather than in reaction to hostile white society. It was her effort to fill the void that existed in black American literature.

The story of the novel *Browngirl, Brownstones* was placed in a black Caribbean neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, in 1939. Much of the story mirrors Ms. Marshall's own upbringing. Thousands of Barbadians, from 1900 to 1940, went to America to escape poverty and lack of opportunity in British colony. They worked incessantly to become a part of the American Dream and to "buy house". In this novel, though, the immigrant experience is thrice heightened in that these newcomers are black, subject to the racism of this society as well as to America's hesitation to accept anything "alien" into its body. Also, these black immigrants cannot even easily merge into the Afro-American social fabric; for they themselves are not

sure they can be or want to be a part of that tradition. In addition to the feudalism European immigrants were fleeing from, West Indians also had to contend with Racism and Colonialism in their own land. But black people were the majority culture in West Indies, the land seemed to be theirs and their cultural habits seemed to be predominant. Oppressed at home by colonial feudalism, racism and starvation, they fled to America, the land of plenty but realized that they were minorities in the U.S.A. As the novel teaches us, West Indians are black, but they are not confused with black Americans. Marshall gives a detailed description of Barbadian culture. To be Barbadian and to own a Brownstone is to possess status and security – to have arrived in ‘this mahn’s land’. They want, they think, they do: the ‘they’ in this novel is the Barbadian community. They are the embodiment of the community’s will to overcome all obstacles, to create a protective barrier between community and the hostile world.

The novel revolves around the Boyce household, with Selina Boyce as the keen-eyed daughter of Silla and Deighton Boyce, first generation immigrants to America. Silla is the most powerful character in the novel. Her relentless determination for money and property destroys her family ties. Mary Helen Washington observes that Silla’s life is a paradigm of the Barbadian community.

Marshall begins her novel with an imagistic description of its setting, in her case, the line of brownstones on the street. Marshall’s brownstones are not a hostile environment; they embody the community’s means of survival and defense. “In the somnolent July afternoon the unbroken line of brownstone houses down the long Brooklyn Street resembled an army massed at attention” (1959: 7). Within the context of a determined immigrant community, the conflict between Silla and Deighton Boyce takes on cultural dimensions – dimensions that help to explain some of the causes for their individual war without diminishing the specificity of their particular personalities.

Marshall highlights the dilemma of black women of West Indian origin as an African-American. The West Indians and Barbadians are late-comers in the U.S.A. their problems are not similar to that of the African-American. *Browngirl, Brownstones* is concerned with the life of a girl growing up in Brooklyn, the daughter of black immigrants from the Caribbean Island of Barbados. The “Brown Stone” refers to the milieu in which the central character lives. The novel also traces the girl’s growth through the usual stress of growing up and the tensions of being part of the Barbadian community in New York (Eugenia Collier: 1984: 295). The novel is divided into four books: “A Long Day and a Long Night”, “Pastorale”, “The War” and “Selina”; the titles indicate moods as well as time sequence.

Book-I “A Long Day and a Long Night” introduces Selina and her family; Book-II “Pastorale” describes Selina on the verge of adolescence; Book-III “The War” covers the time span of World War II; Book-IV ‘Selina’ concludes the novel with an account of Selina’s attempts to come to terms with her father’s death and her mother’s life in continued quest of house ownership. This is the plot of the novel, a substantial Bildungsroman as it experience, the development of a young naïve girl into an unfinished but complex woman.

Marshall begins her design of inter-relatedness in the first scene of the novel, for “A Long Day and a Long Night” starts not with the movement of the plot, but with the description of the brownstone houses. The girl-woman Selina immediately becomes the novel’s point of view. Symbolically, she first introduces the readers to her brownstone. Pretending to be an elegant lady, like the previous inhabitants of the brownstones, she takes on a tour of her house. Introduction to Silla and Deighton, then, is in terms of Selina’s assessment of their youthful images, an assessment that alerts the reader immediately to the conflict between them that will be the focus of much of this novel. Deighton’s conversation with Selina indicates the war that will erupt in the family.

Marshall gives a detailed gender description taking Deighton and Silla as her examples. Deighton sees himself as an individual while he characterizes Silla as one among many. As a result, Selina’s mental picture of her mother’s and hence her father’s past cannot stand by itself. Throughout much of the novel, Selina associates Deighton with the Sun -- with freedom and warmth, while her mother is, for her, the epitome of winter--cold, unrelenting and restrictive. The only aim in her mother’s life is to buy a Brownstone in her life. The contrasting forms of the wintry Silla and sunny Deighton may at first seem to be reminiscent of the stereotypical images of the domineering black matriarch and the irresponsible black father. Much of this novel is a tender reconstruction of how the young mother with the shy beauty assumes the characteristic of the wintry Silla and how the dapper Deighton becomes a man well-hidden behind his sunny laughter underscoring the microcosm of the family as it relates to the larger Barbadian culture and the even larger world. This initial scene is followed by a potpourri of introductions to the folk who rent rooms in the Boyce brownstone – folk who are representatives of the outer world.

Silla’s assessment of Deighton begins the scene in which they have their first conversation in the novel. Appropriately, their exchange is a heated quarrel about the land. The topic is a crucial development of the plot in the novel. As a man, Deighton is dapper, dressed for his Saturday night stroll down the avenue. As a woman, Silla is working in the kitchen, her

hands smeared with dough. And her only dream is to own a house. They stand there in their apparent disguises, the man needing mobility for his outlet, and the woman needing stability for survival.

Silla takes all of her resentment of Deighton's good fortune to her particular group, the community of Barbadian woman who gather around her kitchen table. United in their common sex, background and goals their taunts strengthen her desire to own a house. Like their African ancestors, they constitute a female society that protects and supports its members. Marshall keeps the victimization of black men in focus throughout the novel as she paints the details of racism and poverty in the Bajan community. Appropriately this section is headed by an old proverb: "of all things upon the earth that bleed and grow, a herb most bruised is woman" (28).

Silla and Deighton are two contrasting forces in Selina's life each adding to her self-discovery. Silla is strong, fearless and like the Brownstones she idolizes, 'formidable'. Selina is torn between respect and awe for her mother and sympathy and affection for her father. She understands the truths of the family: Silla works hard to buy a brownstone: Deighton tires one get-rich scheme after another. Silla plans for the future; Deighton dresses in silk shirts and promenades down Futton Street to the apartment of his concubine. Deighton wishes for the old days when they were lovers in the sun parlor and could see the sky with its low stars from the bed.

Over the years, there is a change in Silla's character. She used to be soft. Her softness, she believes has been betrayed. Many scenes in Book-III illuminate these seemingly opposite qualities: her toughness and her softness and how they are related to each other. Such a scene occurs when Selina, leaves home and goes to meet her mother at work in an attempt to stop her from selling the land. Selina must leave the cocoon of her Barbadian world and venture out into the snow-covered, hostile white world in which her mother works. To do such a deed, Selina must believe that her mother is strong -- strong enough to defeat her father, so strong in fact that drastic action is needed. What Selina discovers as she looks at her mother work is that Silla is even stronger than she thought. Appropriately, Silla is making shells for the war. "Watching her, Selina felt the grudging affection seep under her amazement" (85).

Silla is shocked that Selina has come through the dark streets to meet her. But she is touched by her daughter's concern. Selina has come, however, not to see her mother, but to plead for her father. Yet as she watches her mother gaze at the store windows with their beautiful clothes and their promise of gracious living, she remembers the shy, soft mother in the photograph who had been promised everything and had received, it seemed, so little. Not surprisingly,

when Silla discovers that Selina has come to plead for her father rather than to meet her, her toughness immediately reappears: "Love! Give me a dollar in my hand any day!" She cried in a voice that was too loud to be convincing" (89). Deighton does not see the old country as a place of death. True, he might be able to make more money in America, but he feels he will have to give some essential part of himself. Through Marshall's careful characterization of Deighton's personality, we come to see that behind the dapper, carefree manner is the form of a man both afraid and angry -- afraid that he is not what he wants to be and angry that so many obstacles stand in his way. His solution is to be proud, too proud to desire the mundane. But perhaps even more than Silla, he covets status, prestige, money and some acknowledgement of his manhood. The fear and anger in him erupts, particularly when he must confront the white world. After studying an accounting course for two years, he goes to look for a job. Silla asks him:

"Which places you going?" (70)

"The Three places offering the best salary" (70).

With a look both cruel and pitying she said, "you don't want no job" and turned to the children. "Instead of him going to some small office where he might have a chance--no, he got to play like he's white" (71)

"Silla, lemme tell you something", he interrupted, his smile gone and annoyance darkening his face.

"I ain't been studying this course off and on for here two years to take no small job. That the trouble with Wunna colored people" (70-71).

It seems that Silla has accepted the way of the white world, while Deighton is insistent on receiving his due, on being a man. There is a love-hate relationship between Deighton and Silla. In analyzing the complexity of her two antagonists as they struggle to retain some resemblance of themselves as man and woman and still manage to survive as a unit, Marshall does not let us forget that Selina their young daughter, is trying to discover herself as a woman. The second book "Pastorale" distills the mad sweetness of pre-pubescent Selina as she struggles into womanhood, looking back and peering forward at the same time, bewildered and elated by the changes that are taking place in her body. As her body develops, so does Selina's consciousness about who she might become and what specifically she wants to become. So the war between her parents is not only their war. As an observer she is also a participant, for her parents' struggles affect her own developing consciousness. Marshall underlines the concept of woman and man that is crucial to the struggle between Silla and Deighton as part of their community.

Racial hatred is picturized very well in Marshall's fiction. She presents the historical overview of the position of black women as workers. Each morning they

take the train to Flatbush and Sheeps head Bay to scrub floors. When white children laugh at their Blackness and call them “niggers”, the Barbadian women sucked their teeth, dismissing them. (14) Bajan women board the train to flatbush. Bajan women cook the meals, rear the children and work like men in factories. Marshall gives a detailed description of Miss Thomson as a black woman who works like an ass. She writes with admiration of Miss Thomson’s warm flowing of love and compassion, of the eyes shrouded with profound sadness. She listens to Selina with great patience. When Selina is confronted with the racism of the white woman, she remembers Mrs. Thompson’s resistance to racial humiliation. In no small way does her racial pride help to shape Selina’s racial consciousness. Marshall compares Silla’s strength to the pistons of large and formidable machines. Silla Boyce is the “collective voice of the entire Bajan woman. It is a voice of sadness, but never resignation; of pain but never despair, of struggle, but never defeat.”

Book-III “The War” covers the time span of World War II. Though none of the characters is involved in the fighting, the principal war referred to, is the one which begins in earnest between Selina’s parents. Deighton Boyce refuses to sell a piece of his inherited property in Barbados in order to buy the Brownstone house in Brooklyn. However, by means of forgery and a carefully hatched plan, Silla manages to sell the land without informing her husband, but when the money is sent to New York, he spends it all on clothes and gifts instead of a down payment. Shortly afterwards, Deighton goes out of work because of some accident. He also becomes a member of a sect called “father peace” a religious movement which encourages believers to sever all family ties. Deighton leaves his family in favour of the Sect’s affairs. His wife is so outraged that she reports him to the police as an illegal immigrant and he is deported. Shortly before his ship docks in Barbados, Deighton goes overboard and is drowned.

The war between Silla and Deighton ends. But it is a war in which there are no spoils, no victors. Both have tormented each other. Although the war might be over for Deighton, Silla must now confront Selina as her next opponent, an opponent who has witnessed her act of betrayal, an opponent as strong-willed as she. For her development of her own self-consciousness, Selina chooses to be a rebel like her father against the restrictions, her mother and the Barbadian community represent. “The War” ends with a climactic battle between Silla and Selina.

In Book-IV appropriately called “Selina”, the focus of the novel shifts from the parents to the daughter, for Selina begins choosing her own space. Though in the initial stage, Selina was not able to understand her mother, she develops an understanding for her pri-

mary goals in life gradually. Not only this, she comes to terms with her own self as a black female of Barbadian origin. As Geta J. Leseur writes, “the foundations of Selina’s oncoming search for self are firmly established in the first few pages of the novel and Marshall invests Selina with natural qualities of survival”. In contrast to the meek defeatist, complacent, acquiescent Ina, Selina, although younger than her sister, takes a passionately active role in her relationship with life, in terms of the intensity of her feelings and desires, her self-assertiveness, her iron will, her defiance and pride. Unlike Ina’s smooth journey through adolescence, for Selina, a tumultuous passage lies in store which will arm her for the harshness of life outside the family. Selina, to understand herself must come to terms with herself racially, as well as a woman.

Selina as a Barbadian, black and female, must understand her relationship to her mother’s past and to the mother’s and society’s traditional expectations from her as a black woman. As O’Neale has rightly pointed out, “in seeking self discovery, the heroine must struggle with issues of not only race, skin, color and sex, but of procreation, black feminine images inherited from mothers, and often despicable expectations for black women preordained by society” (1982: 26).

Selina sees herself as her father’s daughter; she resists not only her mother’s attempt to possess her but the Barbadian community’s as well. She takes her father’s place as the individual who stands outside the community. As a foil for Selina’s resistance, her sister Ina will take her to rightful place within the Barbadian-American world, but Selina does not want to be cut out of the same piece of cloth as everyone else. Selina’s affair with Clive Davis becomes the fulcrum through which she begins to shape her own contours. Through the space she creates with him she begins to clarify her understanding of her mother and her father, her own definition of herself as a woman as well as her relationship with the tribe. Marshall uses their relationship in the same way that she uses the struggle over the land in the first three books as a means of structuring the characters within their cultural context without diminishing personality distinctions.

From Selina and Clive’s first meeting, Marshall sets up the ingredients of their relationship, ingredients that will give cohesiveness to this section. From the beginning, Selina is the active one, the one who must rebel, must experience, must experiment, and Clive is the knowing observer and teacher rather than an intense participant. All of Selina’s anger, confusion and vitality are compressed into this first meeting so it seems that Selina was destined to discover someone like Clive.

Selina realizes that although she did not want to be cut out of the same cloth as every Barbadian, she will be seen by the white world not as Selina but as a

blurred black figure with an accent. Selina's rude realization is connected in the novel, to her plans to defeat her own community to save Clive and herself. Angered by the white woman's insensitivity, she flees to Clive for solace, only to find that his mother wants him to pick her up. Desperately, Selina tries to force Clive to break away from his maternal dependence, but he cannot do it.

Having experienced the racism of the outer world, having suffered from the hopelessness of a man much like her father, and having respectfully changed her community, Selina is able to face her mother as a complex human being and is able to give the aging Silla her due: Silla's pained eyes searched the adamant face, and after a long time a wistfulness softened her mouth. It was as if she somehow glimpsed on Selina the girl she had once been. For that moment as the softness pervaded her and her hands lay open like a girl's on her lap, she became the girl who had stood, alone and innocent, at the ship's rail, watching the city rise glittering with promise from the Sea (252).
family for their unconditional love and support.

Selina's life becomes very full and fulfilling. In Marshall's words, "She was happy that for the first time she was living at a pitch and for a purpose She visualized her mind as a faceted crystal. Each facet was a sample aspect of her, each one suited to a different role.

Through dancing, Selina had found a satisfying outlet for her creativity and means for self-expression. Thus, Selina learns about her own self as a female, Barbadian and black. She, rather than internalizing the ideology of the oppressor, actively refutes it through the knowledge of her identity, her rejection of white acceptance, and by coming to terms with her mother and her people, both of whom are incorporated in her. Thus, Selina has come to a deep realization of her personal and collective self and thus has progressed from a fragmented individual to a well aware integrated human.

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