

QUEST FOR DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN PAULE MARSHALL'S BROWN GIRL, BROWNSTONES

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Abstract

The Culture of a nation plays a significant role in shaping the personality of the every ethnic group. Caribbean culture is a term that explains the artistic, musical, literary, culinary, political and social elements that are representative of the Caribbean people all over the world. This paper deals with black women's quest for diasporic, identity & cultural roots, in Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. It is also attempted to analyse the longing for a deserving place in society and a meaningful purpose in life. Quest for identity is a recurring theme in literature. There is no age when any sensitive soul has not been troubled by questions about the meaning of their very own existence and their relation to this world. Marshall's work depicts the emotional growth and newly found independence of black women who have rediscovered and accepted their heritage.

Keywords: Culture, Quest, Barbadian community, Brooklyn, Brownstones, Caribbean Island.

The Culture of a nation plays a significant role in shaping the personality of every ethnic group, even their creative personalities were shaped by their behaviors, desires and passions of the society. Also, it includes one's traditional values, customs, religious faith, spiritual beliefs, etc. Caribbean culture is a term that explains the artistic, musical, literary, culinary, political and social elements that are representative of the Caribbean people all over the world. This culture was especially influenced many continents as well. Even it is a collection of settlers from various countries; these island countries were shaped by unique traditions, cuisines, and customs. Paule Marshall, an immigrant herself lays bare her strong believe in and longing for her cultural roots in her literary endeavors. Paule Marshall was born in Brooklyn, New York. Her parents were the emigrants from Barbados. Barbados is an island country in the West Indies, in the Caribbean region of the America. Unlike other contemporaries, she avoids responding to the torments caused by unfriendly whites. Marshall has beautifully portrayed her Negro culture through her writings. Through her writings one can understand the legacy of her rich black culture.

This paper deals with black women's quest for diasporic identity & cultural roots, in Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. It is also attempted to analyse the longing for a deserving place in society and a meaningful purpose in life in her novel. Though she is known as an American author, her fictional mirrors reflected her "Bajan or Barbadian" background. Her novels were long neglected in scholarly literary circles, Marshall is now considered as an important writer in contemporary black literature. Her works depict the emotional growth and newly found independence of black women who have rediscovered and accepted their heritage. Some critics

found that her work, on the whole depicts the individual's search for a secure identity in an unknown or foreign world. Marshall's family moved to New York City from their Native land in 1920s. It was an era of Great Depression. At home, Paule learned from the "Kitchen Poets" the women folks gathered around her mother's kitchen table and then discusses their folk poetry in the rhythmic lyricism of their West Indian homeland. During 1960s, she started writing her debut novel "Brown Girl, Brownstones", published in 1953, and is considered a first in many respects in the development of the African American novel. This novel thoughtfully and accurately portrays the interior life of a young African American female protagonist and the complexities of mother-daughter relationship. "Brown Girl, Brownstones" is a Bildungsroman, which means Coming-of-age novel. "Brown Girl, Brownstones" is her first semi-autobiographical novel gives a Panoramic view of the multifarious aspects of black experience through a collage of black men and women characters in the Depression era America. The story is about Brooklyn-born Selina Boyce, the daughter of Barbadian immigrants Silla and Deighton and this story covers almost six years of Selina's adolescence. Selina's ambitious mother, Silla, wants most of all to save enough money to purchase the brownstone in which they are rented in Brooklyn. Deighton, Selina's father is a charming spend-thrift who simply wants to return to his homeland. When Deighton unexpectedly bought some land in Barbados and he plans to return there and build a home in his native island. Meanwhile Silla was planning to sell the inherited land and wanted to own a house in Brooklyn.

This novel also deals with Cross- Cultural conflict between two different groups of people of African descent. The feel and flavor of the West Indies is beautifully expressed through the language of Protagonist. Some of the major themes in her works concern the identity crisis, the race problem, the importance of tradition for the black American. Marshall in her writings blends judiciously the best of the past tradition with the innovations of recent years.

Quest for identity is a recurring theme in literature. There is no age when any sensitive soul has not been troubled by questions about the meaning of their very own existence and their relation to this world. This kind of identity crisis aroused right after the colonization and as well as by slave trade in the African continent. Natives started to adopt the colonizers culture and to all kind of materialistic lifestyle. It is well depicted in the writings of Marshall. Selina was lost in a new cultural environment, sometimes even she felt jealous of her mother Silla. Selina is deeply affected by this marital conflict but "emerges from itself – assured, in spite of her scars", wrote Susan Mc Henry in Ms. Magazine. Selina eventually leaves Brooklyn to attend college, then she realizes her need to become acquainted with her parents' homeland. She is now firmly resolves to go to Barbados.

Selina is occupied with the turmoil-rich hybrid space where the warring ideals of binary cultures in perpetual tension. Here, more importantly Selina's parents Deighton and Silla symbolizes the call of these opposing cultures, whereby Deighton indulges in a nostalgic looking-back at and a potent desire to return to his homeland, while Silla vicariously chases the American Dream of success. Through Deighton and Silla, Marshall explores the varied emotions that 'home' evokes in the minds and the thoughts of the immigrants. While Deighton

seeks to reconnect with his estranged homeland “Barbados is poor, but sweet enough. That’s why I going back” (8).

Firstly, her West Indian background (Barbadian Parentage) enables Marshall to invest her North American materials with a Caribbean perspective, and in the process she invokes that Pan-African sensibility which has become so important in contemporary definitions of Black identity. Secondly, her treatment of the Black women links her ethnic themes with the current feminist revolt. Finally, the ethnic and sexual themes are integrated with the novelist’s interest in the subject of power. This interest is the logical outcome of her preoccupation with groups – women and blacks whose role have been defined by powerlessness. Her treatment of this subject is complex and innovative because she analyses power not only as the political goal of ethnic and feminist movements, but also as social and psychological phenomena which simultaneously affect racial and sexual roles, shape cultural traditions, and mould the individual psyche.

Paule Marshall excels in her character portrayals, but one must confess that she is partial to her women. They receive more careful attention, but that too is for a certain end, for she believes that the Negro woman has been neglected in literature (56). Most of her women characters like Selina, Avey, Merle Kinbona are complex in nature but with the hidden strength. The mother in “Brown Girl, Brownstones”, is depicted sympathetically despite her harshness, it is because the writer sees her as a product of her environment. If she is ruthless, it is understandable, if not excusable.

In her attempt to battle with the old stereotype of the strong mother portraiture, Miss Marshall becomes unduly harsh with all mothers. Silla destroys her man and alienates her children. Marshall’s depictions of the quest change dramatically from novel to novel. Deborah Schneider locates the reason for these changes in the climate of the times during which the novels were written. Especially, this novel indicates its 50’s origin, for example, through its accent on art and individualism, Selina’s distaste for community action, and her unconsciousness of the effect of sex roles on her parent’s lives. The forces which motivate and affect the questers naturally differ because of their ages. A typical adolescent, Selina must discover both her identity and her community. The key experiences and significant influences differ for each quest not simply because of the questers’ unique temperaments but because the sums of their past experiences vary so widely. Thus, the adolescent Selina’s parents figure prominently in her development. In order to become an adult, Selina must battle with and become reconciled to her mother, because at eighteen she has had time for only a few independent actions, Selina must come to terms with only one of her own deeds, and the novel focuses on her potential. Selina’s quest in this novel symbolizes the need for this hour. So, every individual should confront their legacy in order to understand their oneself and strength as a whole community. Though every quester wants a place within a community as opposed to a privately defined role, each must journey outward from that community. This novel ends with the beginnings of the journey, Selina’s embarking for the Caribbean. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Selina casts one of her two silver bracelets into the graveyard of her neighborhood and keeps the other on her

wrist, her actions resembles like that she wants both the culture which includes Barbadian and Brooklyn.

Selina initially has jealousy over her mother's fluency and then she later develops herself with the help of association in Brooklyn. She got influenced towards the Bajan dialect from her mother Silla, whenever she speaks with her community people around the Brownstones. In creating the shape of Selina's journey into womanhood, Marshall takes into account the forces that affect any young girl like her surrounding, developments, parents and how it connects with one's culture. Through the very first novel and through itself Marshall well depicted her cultural and language insecurities. Thus, through this paper one can understand why the culture is more important than any other things, because it affects the language, and customs and the quest inflicts the protagonist to go back to her homeland.

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