

# Subverting the Hegemonic Ideology and Redefining the Identity of Paule Marshall's Heroines

ALDER SENIOR GRANT  
Escuela de Lenguas Modernas  
Universidad de Costa Rica

## Abstract

The following article examines Paule Marshall's strategies in achieving her goal of subverting the hegemonic ideology of patriarchy. It also emphasizes the importance of mythic time as opposed to linear time in her works, while retracing the journey of her African American female protagonists back to their roots. Marshall also takes heed to the powerful and appealing voice of the Ancestors in order to achieve selfhood based on a renewed identity.

**Key words:** Paule Marshall, myth and identity, subversion, patriarchy, black women

## Resumen

El siguiente artículo examina las estrategias de Paule Marshall para la obtención de su objetivo de subvertir la ideología hegemónica del patriarcado. Enfatiza igualmente la importancia del mito en sus obras y traza el recorrido de las protagonistas femeninas afroamericanas hacia sus raíces. Marshall también escucha la poderosa y convincente voz de los Ancestros, con el fin de lograr el ser basado en una identidad renovada.

**Palabras claves:** Paule Marshall, mito e identidad, subversión, patriarcado, mujeres negras

## Introduction

The main goal of this analysis is to prove that Marshall's heroines—and especially Avey Johnson in *Praisesong for the Widow*—evolve within a mythic reality by undertaking a physical and spiritual journey that is essential for black women's search and construction of their own identity. This journey is encouraged by the Ancestors who support Avey during her sacred mission to the Caribbean basin, considered as the connecting geographical link

between Africa and America for the retracing of the African heritage present in black communities throughout the Americas. The Caribbean basin will also be viewed as the inspiring source that permits Marshall's different heroines to overcome their continuous state of subjugation caused by the conflicts that stem from their alienated existence in a white society, dominated by patriarchal values.

This analysis will also demonstrate that Marshall's various writings testify to a constant battle for the subversion of the established order that will one day allow black women to throw off the old garment of "otherness" and to be clad in the robe of "oneness."

When women decided to take on the responsibility of (re)constructing their own identities, the female experience was multiplied, permitting African-American women to become a part of this awakening, with a significant contribution to the process. African-American women joined their voices to those of their white sisters in an effort to deconstruct patriarchal values. It has been a slow but steady pace towards recognition not only in the United States but also in many other parts of the world. Alice Walker, through her novel *The Color Purple*, and especially through the film by Steven Spielberg, gained some fame, while Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize for literature began stirring some consciousness among different literary circles of the existence of valuable African-American women writers. Walker and Morrison are just two of today's talented black women writers that have gained respect for their stylistic mastery and the relevance of their themes.

In his introduction to Paule Marshall's *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*, Darwin T. Turner declares that:

Unlike some writers who compel readers to believe their improbable situations and characters; unlike some writers who enchant white readers with the metaphoric quality of African-American speech—unlike those writers—Paule Marshall seems to write about Blacks we might have seen living in our neighborhoods, living the kinds of lives we live, speaking a language that we recognize as real, rather than literary. (xiv)

Turner thus gives credit to Marshall by praising her ability as a writer capable of transmitting the everyday experiences of black characters that can be easily recognized not only in the United States, but also in other parts of the world inhabited by the peoples of African descent.

### **Marshall's Subversion of the Hegemonic Ideology**

In her article "From Symbol to Sign," Julia Kristeva refers to the symbol as a dualistic, hierarchical and hierarchizing sign with a programmed and finished ending, as opposed to semiotics, which is a multiple system with an open structure and an arbitrary ending (70-71). In this sense, a symbolic character is the one that is subject to the law and order depending on bipolarity: good/evil, beautiful/ugly, black/white, etc. Paradoxical as it might sound, the semiotic character

is subversive but also an upholder of law and order. In her introduction to *The Kristeva Reader*, Toril Moi explains this paradox as follows:

Semiotic theory is therefore always already caught up in a paradox, an aporia which is the same as that of the speaking subject: both find themselves in a position which is at once subversive of and dependent on the law. The Kristevan subject is a subject-in-process (sujet en procès), but a subject nevertheless. (13)

In this male-oriented world, the ruling elite has obtained and retained power through an effective ideological discourse. A symbolic point of view has permitted the hegemonic class to classify individuals into two distinct groups: the voiced one who has dominion over the voiceless other for as long as humankind can remember. This is why the flexibility of the semiotic system is blocked by the rigidity of an established symbolic structure. In *The Kristeva Reader*, Kristeva's article "From Symbol to Sign," explains the preeminence of symbolic order for the perpetuation of law and order:

The symbol's function, in its vertical dimension (universal-markings), is thus one of restriction. In its horizontal dimension (the articulation of signifying units in relation to one another) the function of the symbol is one of escaping the paradox; one might say that the symbol is horizontally anti-paradoxical: within its "logic" two opposing units are exclusive. (Moi, 65)

The ruling ideology's purpose is to prevent the status quo from suffering any radical transformation that might undermine the patriarchal hierarchy operating within the sphere of the symbol.

Marshall's heroines—subjects in process—fit into a semiotic pattern since they are not a perfect, finished product, but a "productivity" with contradictions and gaps as essential components of their personality. On one hand, Marshall deliberately constructs female characters of surprising strength, in an effort to subvert the symbolic codes of society, while on the other, even when her heroines do stumble and many times fall, they keep fighting for their rights, making use of their silence as an effective discursive weapon.

Within a patriarchal perspective, women in general have usually been polarized as angelic or demonic, canceling out the reality of women of flesh and blood. Male-oriented literature forces the few female protagonists of literary history into a pre-established mold that responds to a selfish, distorted perception. Women, therefore, whether black or white, are rarely considered as autonomous individuals but rather as subordinate, insignificant beings whose identities are defined by males. Marshall reacts against this situation through her different female protagonists: her heroines do not passively accept a limited, constructed, dual position; they are neither saints nor demons, but modern black women who are capable of making their own choices. Selina in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Ursa in *Daughters*, Avey in *Praisesong for the Widow*, Merle in *The Chosen*

*Place: The Timeless People*, and Reena in *Reena and Other Stories*, in different moments of their lives, all act on their own behalf with independent criteria, instead of reacting as male-constructed stereotypes. These five protagonists embody the black women's heroic efforts in breaking with the traditional chains imposed by patriarchal norms. In their quest for a dignified identity, these black women—classified as voiceless by patriarchy—never give up in their continuous re-construction of positive meanings for black female selfhood.

### **The Importance of Myth and Dream in Marshall's Works**

Through her main characters' traits, attitudes and behavior, Marshall manifests not only her discomfort with the dominant patriarchal ideology but also a firm intention to transgress imposed boundaries by bestowing a dignified identity on all black women.

Redefining an identity that has been distorted for centuries is impossible to achieve within the codes of a society in which males claim authorship and ownership of the meaning attributed to terms such as reality, truth, beauty, and goodness. This is precisely why Marshall's sole chance of success relies on her utilization of myths as a means of disrupting Western norms. Myth can therefore be seen as the disruption of linear history that will permit the rewriting of a given identity through the manipulation of different texts. Myth enables a character to go back and forth in time and space, and at the same time to communicate with the "living-dead" or Ancestors. Although there is a strong tendency today in our post-modern world which regards myth as simple superstition or nonsense stemming from primitive people's beliefs, it can be seen as a force that revitalizes human souls by pushing them onward. Even today, the importance of myth is unquestionable. It injects a vitality that can lift downtrodden souls in their continuous search for an identity. Looking back helps infuse the necessary energy to be steadfast in going onward.

What is really important is that that myth is still a significant force today since it covers all human domains and functions in a practical and positive manner in the (re)construction of identity. Even though myth can comprise a wide range of human activity, three fundamental mythic issues will be developed in this analysis, all of which lead to the re-articulation of black women's identity: time, the role of the Ancestors, and the journey back to the roots.

In Paule Marshall's fiction, the Ancestors are constantly honored. These "living-dead" are spirits that neither time nor space can hinder from accomplishing their most important mission which is the transmission of a cultural heritage to the different generations. Denniston emphasizes the importance of myth, time, the journey and the Ancestors in Marshall's works:

Through the oral tradition, Africans look back to their origins and, like peoples of all civilizations, they make use of various myths to explain such things as the existence of God and other deities, the creation, et cetera. The

immediate and remembered past, which goes back several generations, affirms that the rhythms of life remain continuous and intact. Marshall incorporates this idea in *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* and in *Praisesong for the Widow*. She later reconfigures time in *Daughters*. (xviii)

These are essential considerations for the analysis of Marshall's black heroines, who give the final leap towards the re-conquering of dignified identities.

For the purpose of this analysis, the most relevant novel is *Praisesong for the Widow* since it posits the significance of myth, the role of the Ancestors, and the primacy of the heroine's journey in search of her long-lost identity. In this sense, Avey Johnson is certainly the most "real and complete" of Marshall's female characters since she accomplishes the entire cycle that mythic heroes undergo before the re-encounter with the self. Selina's plans to travel to Barbados, Ursa's trips to and from Triunion and Merle and Reena's intended journey to Africa—even though not lacking significance—cannot be compared to Avey's experience and her fulfillment at the end of her journey. Following the model of a journey, *Praisesong for the Widow* is divided into four books: "Runagate," "Sleeper's Wake," "Lavé-tête," and "The Beg Pardon." Book I, "Runagate," as the title suggests, describes Avey's attempt to run away from her mission at the entry gate leading to the encounter with the world of the past. In Book II, Avey awakens from her lethargy and retreats into her past life during which she was married to Jerome Johnson and became the mother of three daughters. The reader is then able to perceive two distinct phases: during the first epoch, amidst economic difficulties, Avey enjoyed a much more authentic life, while the second phase, which brought along social and economic betterment, constituted a negation of her African roots. Book III, "Lavé-tête" (indoctrination in French Creole), constitutes Avey's initiation rite, and finally Book IV, "The Beg Pardon," is dedicated to her conversion, baptism, and confirmation as a priestess who has achieved wholeness and is fit for the sacred mission of transmitting her wisdom to the future generation. Needless to say, Avey's transfiguration would not have been possible had it not been for the evocative power of dream.

Humankind has always tried to draw meaning from dreams, which are an essential element for explaining myths. A great number of definitions are provided by professionals of the psyche such as Freud and Jung, among many others. Aside from the "logical" explanations given by theorists, there are other strong beliefs in the power of the unconscious state of mind. Each period of human civilization has had its own way of interpreting life's phenomena. Dreaming has always helped to reveal the inner world, a world where the unconscious predominates over the conscious state of mind. In Judeo-Christian tradition, for instance, the future is revealed through dreams. The major prophets in the Old Testament held most of their communications with Jehovah God while asleep. In the New Testament, the Archangel Gabriel announced Jesus' birth to his mother, Mary, through a dream, while the Book of Revelation is based on John's dream on the Greek island of Patmos. In African tradition, dreaming has also

been fundamental for the construction of a coherent cosmogony. This is what explains the importance that Marshall gives to dreaming in *Praisesong for the Widow*; according to Denniston, it stems from her double background as a United States citizen with an African-Caribbean heritage:

There is no question that Marshall's West Indian background is a major component of her cultural identity. Yet there is an obvious and unavoidable identification with things Western. As she struggles to place these opposites in a comfortable balance, we see an inner struggle to retain the values of her Caribbean heritage. (95)

Dreaming is therefore a key issue in the novel, which opens with the main character stricken by the remembrance of a dream upon awakening, a vision of her Great Grand Aunt Cuney urging her to go on a mission:

The old woman, who had really been her father's great aunt, was somebody Avey Johnson couldn't remember ever having dreamed of before. She had scarcely thought of her in years. Yet there she had been in her sleep, standing awaiting for her on the road that led to the Landing. A hand raised, her face hidden beneath her wide-brimmed field hat, she was motioning for her to come on the walk that had been a ritual with them during the Augusts she had spent as a girl on Tatem Island, just across from Beaufort, on the South Carolina Tidewater. (*PFW*, 31-32)

Aunt Cuney's appearance in the dream functions as a catalyst for bringing Avey's two worlds into sharp conflict. The sense of confrontation and of uneasiness intensifies later whenever she recalls this dream along with several flashbacks of her married life: "The following morning—which had been yesterday and her last full day aboard the *Bianca Pride*, although she hadn't known it then—the odd discomfort was still there" (*PSW*, 52). In the course of her dramatic approach to selfhood, Avey will be haunted by her aunt's ghost until she finally gives in to the powerful force of the unconscious. The world of this middle-aged widow is completely confused, which leads her to question her passive way of living in accordance with the model of Anglo-Saxon patriarchal values. Haunted by this dream that affects her and stirs an uneasy feeling deep inside, there are only two roads left for Avey Johnson to follow: either she willingly accepts the call, or she stubbornly refuses in the beginning, to finally surrender to the appealing voice of the Ancestors.

### **Mythic Time Versus Linear Time**

The purpose of this section is to show the importance of the exploration of the past in African-American women's lives as a means for the construction of their future. In Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* the utilization of myth is

the key to unlocking the past. It is a mythic past seen as a golden age of strength (The Ibo Landing) that can be recovered through the power of evocation.

The old saying “Waves always come back to the shore” is popular, especially among people living on islands. This saying is closely related to the theme of roots: as the waves come back in search of the mother land, so human beings are constantly going back to their source in order to regain the strength that will guide them forward.

A linear concept of historical time supposes a fixed chronology for all events. Nothing can be changed since the linear historical axis is immutable. Whatever lies in the past cannot be repeated or ever made present. The traditional time of history is linear, consisting of time as departure, progression, and arrival. The magic of mythic time is opposed to this conception: the past can be transposed to the present which becomes a-temporal and escapes from the rules of all logic. Denniston emphasizes the importance of what she considers as “Marshall’s manipulation of time”:

Unity is further achieved through Marshall’s manipulation of time, which, quite essentially, is expressed from an African perspective. Although not as evident in her early short works, Marshall turns to this African cultural concept in her longer fiction. As a vehicle of measurement, time for many African peoples moves not in a linear fashion but in a cyclic continuum. As opposed to “change and progress,” it involves “recurrence and duration.” (xviii)

There is a conviction that the past is always present, and that past and present make up a future that is necessarily cumulative. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell explains the functioning of this mythic time, which he calls “the universal round,” as follows:

As the consciousness of the individual rests on a sea of night into which it descends in slumber and out of which it mysteriously wakes, so, in the imagery of myth, the universe is precipitated out of, and reposes upon, a timelessness back into which it again dissolves. And as the mental and physical health of the individual depends on an orderly flow of vital forces into the field of waking day from the unconscious dark, so again in myth, the continuance of the cosmic order is assured only by a controlled flow of power from the source. The gods are symbolic personifications of the laws governing this flow. The gods come into existence with the dawn of the world and dissolve with the twilight. They are not eternal in the sense that the night is eternal. Only from the shorter span of human existence does the round of a cosmogonic eon seem to endure. The cosmogonic cycle is normally represented as repeating itself, world without end. (261)

According to Campbell, it can be concluded that this mythic time has no respect whatsoever for chronology or linear time or history, since it takes into account

aspects such as repetition, simultaneity, and recurrence. This mythic time is a dynamic one that rocks back and forth, mingling past and present and making them both a present continuous. Life is in this sense more than a linear progression of events in African tradition: that is why it adheres to synchronic or cyclical time, which means that life is also a series of cycles with nature moving from season to season always returning to the starting point and compelling human beings to pass through various stages again and again. Denniston explains that;

Such a synchronic view of time might suggest the abolition of history as Westerners ordinarily understand it, but it does not negate a sense of history. The orientation is simply different. Time from an African perspective must be experienced in order for it to become reality, and experience suggests the past and the present. (xviii)

This synchronic time includes not just activities of the living physical world, but also those of the world of the immortals, the spirits of dead ancestors considered as ever living. The sharing of these beliefs and practices are of great significance among the different communities of African descent.

Marshall faces a dualism both of modes of thought and of modes of existence. Her mind has been molded by the principles of Western philosophers, yet there is a fundamental attachment on her part to a traditional African way of life. Torn between these two realities, the narrative of Paule Marshall is a fiction unreeling in two times: Western diachronicity and traditional African synchronicity. This is evident in all her major works.

In *Brown Girl Brownstones*, Book I introduces the major characters and their conflictive lives. The protagonist Selina is ten years old. In Book II, several months have passed and Selina learns, through her friend Beryl, the details of passing from childhood into puberty. Book III juxtaposes the conflicts between Selina's parents to those of World War II. The Allies triumph over Germany, while Silla—whom Selina calls Hitler—overcomes Deighton. Book IV is the description of Selina's growth into womanhood. She is eighteen years old, going to college, has a part-time job, and is emotionally involved with Clive Springer. Selina's life-story is in this sense a sum of events following a linear historical time. However, her attachment to the past of the homeland in Barbados—through the vision of her idyllic father—is opposed to her mother's faith in the American Dream of based on diachronic time.

In *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, Marshall continues to be faithful to her strategy of combining synchronic with diachronic time. There is a constant overlapping of past and present that emphasizes the continuum of past injustices in the present time of Bournehill. The conflicts of the past are ever present. Through the technique of flashbacks, Marshall retraces Merle's life-story: her birth and childhood in her native island, the difficult years in England, the return to Bourne Island. It has been eight years since Merle came back to her native island and she is forty years old. This constant return to the past mixed with her present as an activist defending the "timeless people's" revolt against

exploitation makes time cyclical, since it is a repetition of the same struggles to which they have been frequently confronted. Diachronicity in the novel covers several months, ending with Harriet's suicide, Saul's return to the States, and Merle's voyage to Uganda. Synchronicity permits the reconstruction of the past while highlighting the present and preparing the future.

Marshall makes use of Western diachronic time in *Reena*, when she develops the primary story in a long night. It is the story of Reena and Paule's encounter during an evening wake in remembrance of Reena's Aunt Vi. This story seems to end the following morning when the two women separate. However, according to Denniston, Aunt Vi's death is to be seen as a "perpetual duration":

With the juxtaposition of specific cultural rituals that mark the actual beginnings and endings of life, the author seems to be moving toward an exploration of the cyclical nature of time as perceived by traditional African societies. Contrary to the notion of death as the termination of life, it becomes for this small West Indian community a celebration of the continuity of life. (83)

The second story, recounting Reena's experiences, is reconstructed through the technique of flashbacks, making use of African synchronic time. It is a period of several years, showing Reena's growth from childhood into maturity. Significantly, at the break of dawn, the cycle of nature and time is renewed in the second story with Reena's determination to go in search of her roots in Africa.

Marshall's novel *Daughters* begins, in Book I, with Ursa's long absence of four years from her native island of Triunion and her present conflicts in America. In Book II, the reader goes back into the past by learning about Ursa's parents' marriage, their life in Triunion, and the rearing of their daughter until she leaves for the States. This period of time covers more than twenty years. Book III represents a going back and forth in time and space with references to the American mainland and Triunion. The events that affect the social and political environment take place during a lapse of time of several months. In Book IV, Ursa finally goes back to the island for a few days' sojourn. She witnesses her father's political downfall and decides to return "home" to the United States. In *Daughters*, time seems to take on a very slow pace, since Western diachronicity is constantly blocked by African synchronicity.

In *Praisesong for the Widow* the perception of time, that is, how time is measured, viewed and lived, provides a gauge by which one can measure Marshall and her main characters according to traditional African culture and Western standards of living. There is a clear juxtaposition between mythic and chronological time in the novel. The reader is able to follow a linear sequence that corresponds to the main character's life story. The first book opens with Avey being aboard the "Bianca Pride" after having left Martinique, passing by the Colombian isle of San Andrés and approaching Grenada. This is when Avey makes the important decision to return to the United States because of her dream with Aunt Cuney, and she does so on the very following morning. The second book

is a retrospective look at Avey's married life. It is the looking back at the early years of financial difficulties and of social instability back in Halsey Street; it also recalls the family way of living (they enjoyed outings, listening to music, and dancing).

Moving to North White Plains meant social and economic betterment, but also the loss of Avey's authenticity through the negation of her roots. The two periods covered three decades that ended with the death of Jerome. The third book is a coming back to the present, with the narration of Avey's encounter with the pilgrimage to Carriacou and her staying overnight at a hotel in Grenada. The following day she goes for a walk on the beach, where she meets Joseph, who persuades her to go on the excursion, which she does that same day. During these events, there are constant flashbacks of important events of her childhood and adult life. The fourth book narrates her accidental journey to Carriacou, her stay at Rosalie's house, and her participation the following night in the "Big Drum" ceremony. The following day she takes leave of her friends and flies to Grenada, from where she will be leaving for the United States.

In chronological time it is about forty-eight hours from her "malaise" in book one to the departure in book four. The last part of book four, in which Avey flies to Grenada, is narrated in the future, an undefined future that permits the reader to learn of Avey's important projects for her renewed life. In *Praisesong for the Widow*, Avey stands at the center of this cycle and struggles to find fulfillment in synchronic time, since diachronic time cannot provide a solution for her metaphysical quest.

Marshall's different uses of time in her narrative can be seen as a rejection of linear temporality. The novel is constructed upon a juxtaposition of two diametrically opposed visions of time. Aunt Cuney's world and the Ibo Landing exist in a para-historical continuum transcending the written historical sequence. Aunt Cuney's return is a strategy to provide continuity to the Ibo's legend and to help reconstruct the world of the past and ensure its survival. She represents the past ever intruding in the present until Avey accepts this role and projects it to the future with the help of Joseph, who is also invested with mythic powers over time. Marshall's narrative act is a reproduction of this cyclical mythic time that helps her to transpose the supra-natural being from the past to the present.

Marshall demonstrates in this particular novel that the cyclical time of myth, considered as round and recurring as a perpetual return to one's origins, cannot be limited by Western thought. Hers is a subjective temporal apprehension where time is a present progressive that leans on the past, which it grows into the future and swells as it advances. In other words, in Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, the past is presented as the sum of the narrative modifications and transformations of present awareness, a sum which never decreases, which perpetually increases. As a conclusion to the time theme, Denniston asserts that:

In Marshall's fiction, time moves in a circular fashion to reinforce the structure and content of her art. It becomes, in other words, a functional

device for reviewing the lives of her characters to help clarify their present dilemmas. Simultaneously, it reveals the cultural perspective that most of her characters of African descent bring to their varied environments. Most dramatically in *Praisesong for the Widow*, the artist symbolically manipulates historical and fictional time to re-create the universe in African ontological terms. In *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* and *Daughters*, she also manipulates time to establish recurrent historical and social patterns. (xiv)

Thus, this magic circle portrays infinity by going to the future in the identity quest that began with the mythic origins, the overcoming of present ambiguities and the manipulation of the past on behalf of self-recovery. The African-American women's future depends on a re-evaluation of their past and a return to the values and traditions that they can inherit from the Ancestors after they undertake the journey-quest in search of their roots. Marshall is successful in breaking with the linear logic of time and in so doing her novel becomes a significant practice, establishing intertextuality and dialogism with other texts that preceded hers.

### **The Journey Back to the Roots**

The journey or voyage is one of the oldest and most frequently used patterns for symbolic statement. Human life is seen as an odyssey, a pilgrim's progress in a strange land (physical) or through the byways of one's own heart of darkness (psychological). Though by no means limited to existential or contemporary literature, this metaphor is a favorite of modern writers presenting what they take to be the human condition. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell asserts "the perilous journey was a labor not of attainment but of re-attainment, not of discovery but rediscovery" (39). The journey is important for the re-establishment of solid ties with African tradition through the black community. In this sense, the journey constitutes an archetypal symbol of self-knowledge; it is a means to achieve peace of mind through a symbolic reunion with the self, a journey within to self-awareness. In Marshall's fiction the journey as an archetypal symbol is mostly meant to bring relief through a symbolic re-encounter with the self and with the motherland from which the individual has been exiled (Africa, the Caribbean). Two central metaphors are used to depict black women's condition and their efforts to change it: the island (Barbados, Grenada, Triunion, Bourne Island, Martinique, San Andrés), and the journey or voyage. The image of the island represents by its very nature isolation. Islands are also reminiscent of the first trip into slavery; they were the "middle passage" on the way from freedom to domination and, according to Mary Helen Washington, they also constitute an important geographical reference in the struggle to reverse and to retrace the voyage in order to restore black women to their original state of worth and dignity:

Collect all of Marshall's characters—Selina Boyce, Merle Kibona, Miss Thompson, Reena, Vernell Johnson—and their journeys form a kind of reverse Middle Passage, taking them, and us, from the United States to the West Indies, to Africa, and back to the States again. These women, whose lives and traditions were forever changed by the Middle Passage, emerge under the pen of Paule Marshall as central figures in that history, determined to order the meaning of their past and to find in their spiritual strivings the means to construct a future. (324)

Marshall's female protagonists and their relationships with the journey theme show a diversity of attitudes. In *Daughters*, Ursa often travels from the United States to her native island of Triunion during her adult stage of life. However, she will likely never return for good. Merle, in *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, takes an unfortunate trip to England, returns to her native island, and finally travels to Africa in search of her lost child, but especially of more profound meaning in her life. She does not intend to adopt Africa as her home since she plans on returning to her island. As for Reena, she also will be going to Africa to reaffirm her identity before returning to the United States. Selina, who has grown up in Brooklyn, will go to the Caribbean on a journey of self-quest, but like Ursa, she will probably establish her home in the United States. In two of the cases—Ursa and Selina—there are allusions that create a strong connection between the heroines, the Caribbean, and the American mainland; the other two heroines—Merle and Reena—extend the links towards the motherland, Africa. In all cases, the journey is an attempt to recreate the traditions of the ancestral homeland, the mythical Africa or its transposition through the West Indies.

In *Praisesong for the Widow*, the journey is also the ultimate means for achieving wholeness. It begins for Avey with her separation from her alienated past. This first phase marks a break with the world in which she has evolved during her married life. Her physical journey takes on the pattern of ancient heroes' trips: first, there is the call when she is summoned in a dream by her mythical ancestor, great aunt Cuney. Avey then refuses to take heed to this call just as other heroes did before her (i.e., Achilles, Moses, Jonah).

The second phase of Avey's journey is one of tribulations; when confronted with a metaphysical dilemma, she questions her present situation and decides to escape her destiny—the one that has been foretold by her aunt Cuney—and go into hiding. Like Jonah, she finds herself in the whale's belly (the hotel room in Grenada), a metaphor that conveys the idea of rebirth through the image of the world as a womb. Nonetheless, this belly of the whale is but a temporary refuge in Avey's attempt to flee from her responsibility of confronting her past life on the American mainland with its prejudices and alienating values.

In the third and final phase of the journey, Avey is actually forced into acceptance by a tricky helper, Joseph Liebert, who accompanies her through the boat ride across the channel separating Grenada from Carriacou. Joseph's intervention is essential in Avey's pilgrimage. This sort of supra-natural help is also explained by Campbell: "For those who have not refused the call, the first encounter

of the hero-journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man),” (69). Campbell also asserts that “not infrequently, the supernatural helper is masculine in form” (72). During the boat ride, Avey’s sufferings are emphasized by Marshall’s use of disgusting, nauseating images related to bodily functions such as vomiting and defecating. Denniston thinks that this agony is necessary since “Avey must undergo a rite of passage that includes confession, cleansing, and confirmation” (137). This situation leads Avey into a state of complete shame and humiliation from which she will recover upon her arrival at Carriacou.

Avey’s journey to the island of Carriacou is not only a physical one but also a psychological one. It is the journey of an alienated subject in search of identity. She hopes to heal the division, the fracture in herself, through the return to an ancestral homeland. The spiritual journey of self-realization is, however, the major concern in the novel, which requires an Orphic journey of reaffirmation back to the African roots in search of liberation from her trauma of non-identity. Avey’s initiation, baptism and rebirth are symbolic of a movement away from white patriarchal control and advancing towards renewal and change. And once again, Marshall makes use of biblical intertextuality in order to introduce the central “three in one” myth of the novel: the repossession of the past, the maintenance of spiritual connections in the present, and finally the redemption of the self in the future.

### **The Appealing Voice of the Ancestors**

A dominant theme in Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* is the African-American woman’s attempt to regain her wholeness through obedience and respect to the powerful and appealing voice of the Ancestors. In this struggle against the annihilation of her identity, first as a woman and next as a black subject, the life of Avey Johnson, can be divided into four parts: the reader follows Avey through the third and fourth stages of her life, while the two previous periods are conveyed by flashbacks that are important for the completion of her portrayal.

The question that needs to be answered is: what is the relationship between the protagonist, a modern middle-aged woman living in the United States, and the Ancestors? Avey Johnson has become blind and deaf to her past; she has actually been forced by circumstances into trying to erase all trace of authenticity from her life. In order to regain the magic that had disappeared from her life it was necessary that the Ancestors’ voice come to her rescue. Aunt Cuney not only represents the African tradition of honor and respect, she also embodies the story-teller, a figure deeply entrenched in African tradition. In Judeo-Christian culture the patriarch figure, fundamental to the establishment and perception of male dominance, was meant to function as the leader guiding God’s people towards the Promised Land, as in the case of Abraham. After Abraham, the first grand patriarch, many others followed, while the possibility of women in the role of matriarchs was quite scarce. African tradition was quite similar to Western

customs concerning male leadership. However, Senghor sustains that matriarchy has been an essential issue since women, aside from their roles of mothers—thereby assuring the perpetuation of humankind—are also in charge of passing on the traditions of their people from generation to generation:

La femme occupe en Afrique noire, la première place; y occupait la première place, car l'influence arabo-berbère, puis européenne, l'influence des civilisations nomades n'a cessé d'amoindrir son rôle... La femme, parce que "permanente" de la famille et donneuse de vie, a été promue en source de force vitale et gardienne de la maison, c'est-à-dire du passé et garante de l'avenir classique. [Woman holds the first place in Black Africa; she has occupied this first place before the arrival of the Arabic-Berber's influence, followed by the European's and by that of the Nomad civilizations that have not ceased to diminish her role. Woman, being "permanent" of the family and giver of life, has been promoted to source of vital force and home keeper, that it to say, the keeper of the past and the guarantor of a classical future.] (*Liberté 1*, 143)

This matriarch figure functions as the vital center of her family. She takes hold of the chain that communicates the past with the present and the future and is responsible to the transmission of the legacy that she has inherited. This giver of life is essential for the transmission of cultural values, which is why Aunt Cuney represents the African matriarch, transplanted into the United States and other parts of the Americas.

The mythological prototype of the African ancestors is based on the honoring of the immediate as well as the remote ancestor. Marshall's use of Aunt Cuney is in complete accord with this principle. Moreover, she subverts Anglo-Saxon symbolic codes by attributing this role to a woman, reinforcing Senghor's thesis of women as central characters. Aunt Cuney is a spirit who is able to communicate with Avey by means of a dream. However, strangely enough, the wrestling that takes place during this dream affects Avey not only spiritually, as is expected; she also feels as if it had left some physical marks:

She was still vaguely troubled by the dream. It was the strangest thing but that morning her body had felt as sore when she awoke as if she had actually been fighting; and all during the day, in the dim rear of her mind, she had sensed her great-aunt still struggling to haul her off up the road. Even now her left wrist retained something of the pressure of the old woman's iron grip. (*PFW*, 47)

This episode establishes a Biblical intertextuality with the Old Testament, in the Book of Genesis, when Jacob fought with an Angel one entire night, and as the Angel did not prevail, Jacob obtained a blessing. In the same manner, it seemed as if there was a draw between Avey and her Grand Aunt Cuney, but Avey was also to be blessed with the knowledge of her "self" just a few days later.

The power of the Ancestors' voice is evident right from the very beginning. Avey's finding of her roots at the end is made possible mainly because her Great Aunt Cuney fulfills the task of a griot by rehearsing for Avey during her childhood the story of the "mythical" arrival or what was denominated as the "Ibos' Landing" in Tatem, her hometown, many years before. In African tradition, griots are the chosen ones who inherit, through oral transmission, the sacred histories of their people. The story that her Great Aunt Cuney told her several times was about the arrival of the Ibos (men, women and children) on American soil. Although they were all bound in chains, after they got off the ship, they foresaw the cruel destiny awaiting them, so they just turned around and walked across the water back to their homeland in Africa. At the age of ten, Avey was bold enough to ask her aunt how could such a thing like walking on water be possible; her aunt then asked her if Christ had drowned when he did so (*PFW* 37-40). Deniston explains the importance of this mythic event as follows:

By making reference to biblical scripture and by using the oral storytelling form, Marshall allows us to overhear the sacred, unwritten history of the Ibo people. She also deftly establishes the central myth of the novel as well as its dominant motif: the human capacity to be physically in one place and mentally (spiritually) in another. Avey in one sense, enacts this very concept, for as the novel begins she is aboard a luxury cruise liner significantly named *The Bianca* (white) *Pride* en route to the Caribbean. Her mind, however, is elsewhere. (128)

Avey, being very young, was able to tread the "sacred ground" where the event took place and was quite familiar with the story even if she did not fully understand it. Another important act that her memory registered during her childhood was the "Ring Shout" ceremony. This ceremony took place in Tatem's church when elderly people formed a circle, while singing, slapping their knees, thighs and chest. Even though their heels rose rhythmically, they were not allowed to cross their feet in a dance step. Aunt Cuney was caught "dancing"; at first, she denied it, and later argued that it had been the spirit who forced her just as David who had danced before the Arc of the Lord (33-34). Avey recalls these magical events several years later when she actively participates in the "Beg Pardon" ceremony, which will be further developed in this section. This period of her life taught her respect, obedience, and the importance of the Ancestors' voice in black culture. In *Praisesong for the Widow*, Marshall's description of the Ring Shout represents not only a syncretism of various African rituals and beliefs, but it also incorporates Christian beliefs and practices as a fundamental element in the total milieu.

Nevertheless, the magic of this encounter was a brief one. Avey had to grow up, get married, and face the fact that she and all blacks in American society are marginalized from the dominant culture. African-Americans are all spiritual and cultural orphans in that they are cut off from their past and its tradition. Having been uprooted from their native Africa, many have even been

bastardized by miscegenation, like Thomasina Moore who “had the color to have qualified: black that was the near-white of a blached almond or the best ivory” (*PFW* 19). Historically, many blacks have been the offspring of white American fathers and black African mothers through rape—a common practice during slavery and even long after—adding to the uncertain existence of these descendants.

Paule Marshall is concerned with this split within African-American women, this gap between their reality and their search for identity in a white-dominated world. During her second stage of life, Avey is married to Jay and living in Halsey Street, where in the midst of their poverty, they are able to maintain a hint of authenticity by means of their music, dance, and good humor. Alas! All of this gradually vanishes when the hardships caused by the struggle of everyday life, along with Avey’s “incomprehension,” force Jay to metamorphose into Jerome Johnson, and in an act of desperate and pitiful survival, they both become renegades by speaking of other African-Americans as if they were a different set of people. In this sense they renounce their identity and become whites in black skin, especially after moving to North Plain Hills, where Jerome succeeds in “having his name printed in large gold letters on their house” (121).

Jay’s attitude was no doubt influenced by the white power structures that have been and are still detrimental to the African-American community: Jay wears a mask in this attempt to excel and to survive in a white world. However, the price he paid was the destruction of his own blackness and the craving for materialistic standards of living. The ruling white ideology was so convincing that Jerome grew to despise his own people and preferred to cling to alien values. Years later, in her hotel room, Avey is to remember bitterly how Jay and she wasted their lives and she looks back with uncontrolled anger. Under such circumstances, Jerome’s death is not at all surprising. Their three daughters had by then become independent and this would permit Avey to go on her pleasurable cruises with her friends, on the last of which she is led back to her roots, to a total reconciliation with the Ancestors who had long been forgotten.

The event that triggers the action in her third stage of life is the dream she has while being aboard the “*Bianca Pride*.” As when she was a child in Tatem, her Great Aunt appears to her in a vision. This Ancestor pleads and threatens her: “Come, won’t you come” (143). This call is significant since it means the imposing of a sacred task upon her. Scared to death, Avey struggles against this call, and is even disrespectful. She next tries to escape from this burden and walks out unexpectedly on her friends, leaving them in a state of disappointment and perplexity. Her flight to Grenada resembles biblical Jonah’s attempt to flee from the voice of Jehovah and his ending up in a whale’s belly, where he repented in his captivity and finally went to accomplish the mission he had previously refused to carry out. Elisha also fled from the face of God and hid in the mountains, but finally yielded to the voice of his God by undertaking the mission that was assigned to him. In the same manner, after wandering from

the hotel to the beach, Avey finds refuge in a symbolic whale's belly: Joseph's rum shop. This old man is shocked to learn that Avey does not know to which African nation she belongs when she affirms that she is from New York. Moreover, without even knowing why, she finds herself telling him of her dream and he in turn speaks about the "Old Parents" and the "Big Drum" ceremony (which will be explained on the following pages). He then convinces her to go on the pilgrimage to the holy land in the island of Carriacou. The yearly excursion that she had witnessed the day before without understanding is explained by Joseph: it was a family meeting, a "fête," but most of all, it was done so that the islanders could go and pay their respect to the Ancestors by remembering them and not provoking their wrath. In this manner she finds herself, the following day, aboard the "Emmanuel C" in what was to be an unforgettable trip towards the recovering of her identity.

Owing to the fact of Marshall's double cultural background, it is also important to examine from this perspective her double fictional universe. Aunt Cuney, the Ancestor, and Liebert Joseph, the High Priest, are part of her African traditions, yet they are not the only representatives of her religious beliefs. Marshall was born and raised in a Barbadian community of Brooklyn where going to a Christian church was the norm. Slavery had imposed this religion on African descendants not only in the United States but also in all the other latitudes of the Western Hemisphere. Nevertheless, ancient traditions brought from the Motherland continued to be part of their culture.

Rites and seasonal festivals are important components in Christian worshiping (i.e.) Easter, Christmas, etc.) and in myth. Joseph Campbell interprets this fact as a vital phenomenon for individuals who need these types of expressions so as to expand themselves and become part of a larger circle which is the community or the society. In *The Hero of a Thousand Faces*, Campbell confirms the idea that participating in rites and seasonal festivals allows individuals to fulfill their desire of belonging to a collectivity:

Rites or initiation and installation, then, teach the lesson of the essential oneness of the individual and the group; seasonal festivals open a larger horizon. As the individual is an organ of society, so is the tribe or city—so is humanity entire—only a phase of the mighty organism of the cosmos. (384)

Reinforcing the above, Campbell also states that:

It has been customary to describe the seasonal festivals of so-called native peoples as efforts to control nature. This is a mis-representation. There is much of the will to control in every act of man, and particularly in those magical ceremonies that are thought to bring rain clouds, cure sickness, or stay the flood; nevertheless the dominant theme motive in all truly religious (as opposed to black-magical) ceremonial is that of submission to the inevitables of destiny – and in the seasonal festivals this motive is particularly apparent. (384)

Submission to an avoidable destiny is depicted in *Praisesong for the Widow* through the alternation of Christian prayers with the summoning of the Ancestors as part of the African ritual. The combination of these two apparently opposing beliefs constitutes a means of defining humankind as the center of a universe of mythic relationships. This combination also permits Marshall to guide the reader to a magical world that is more real than the visible one.

Myth permits Marshall to retrace African heritage, while she employs the technique of flashback as the key to the understanding of Christian beliefs: The pastor preaches an Easter sermon on the topic of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. The stone that was rolled away from the tomb, permitting Jesus to walk out and to come back from death to life, is the essential metaphor of the obstacles impeding black people from achieving wholeness:

“. . . We need to understand this Easter Sunday that the same power which rolled aside the stone and led Jesus from the darkness and death of the tomb into the light of the resurrection morning can also if we call upon it roll away the stones sealing up our spirits, our souls from the light of redemption.

“Oh. . .? There ain't nothing sealing up you spirit, you say? No stone over the door to your soul? Ha!” (PSW 200)

The pastor wants his congregation to understand that black people are blocked by the stones of selfishness, hypocrisy, lying, cheating, stealing, jealousy, envy, hate, and self-righteousness, and he urges them to be free by asking God to roll away all these stones:

“But there's a way beloved to remove those great boulders from the temple of your life. Lemme tell you about it. It's simple. Simplest thing in the world. You just got to do like Jesus in His final hour on the cross. Remember how He cried out at the end, ‘Oh God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’—called on the Lord to deliver Him from the pain. And God headed. Three days later He threw open the sepulchre and set His Son free from death for all time. Jesus called and God acted. It was simple as that. And that's all you have to do beloved. When you find yourself buried behind a dark stone of sin just call on the Lord. Ask Him to lose His mighty power in your behalf and roll away that old stone so that the bright light of your soul—your soul light—can shine forth.”(PSW, 201-202)

Power is certainly the key word in this sermon. Powerless people fall easily into different sins that make them vulnerable to the stones that continually block their path towards recognition and self-achievement.

The Christian ritual in the temple with a pastor as leader of his congregation prepares the way for the introduction of the African ritual, the Big Drum ceremony that takes place in Joseph's yard on the island of Carriacou. Liebert Joseph is a mythic prophet who is totally convinced that respect for the Ancestors

is a cardinal principle, in complete accord with African ethical and religious beliefs. In this setting, Joseph is the one who officiates the “Beg Pardon” in honor of the Ancestors. Next, there are the drums that rarely cease to sound along with the singing of old women. Rhythm is and has always been of utmost importance in tradition African culture, where song, dance, and music transmit the heart beat of life. Denniston supports this same idea:

Certainly, the African influence can be readily discerned in black music where syncopation, repetition, and improvisation are common features. African survivals are also apparent in black religions (Christian and tribal), in dance patterns, and perhaps even in mannerisms. (xiv)

This explains the dancing that is executed while the different African nations are introduced and saluted, and the representative of each one pays respect to the Old Parents or Ancestors. The following stage corresponds to the Creole dances, where everyone can participate, thus passing from the individual to the collective. Following in the ritual, there is the sprinkling of “Jack iron” (local rum) over the earth, similar to the sprinkling by Catholics of holy water. Denniston affirms that Marshall shows syncretism in her fiction as part of a cultural phenomenon affecting black people of the diaspora:

Marshall allows us to glimpse this cultural phenomenon through the rites and rituals she describes in her fiction, as well as through symbolic presentations of the Calypso tradition, the Ring Shout, and mysterious tales of obeah. Importantly, however, such rites are almost invariably intermingled with traditional Christian imagery, in part to reflect syncretism with the dominant religion wherever peoples of African descent have landed. In fact, Marshall plays upon the interchange of deities by portraying characters who, while adopting Western religion, remain faithful to indigenous beliefs and suffer no disintegration of personality. (xix)

The ritual next proceeds with the invocation of Ogun Feraille, an African God, lord of fire and iron, father of technology and patron of smiths, warriors and hunters, who represents the supreme deity, linking them with the motherland Africa and her ancestral traditions.

During the different phases of this ritual, Avey sees Joseph everywhere at once, as if the magical powers of the gods had been all handed down to him through his walking stick, which resembles a wand. He is a mixture of human and divine, capable of metamorphosing; sometimes, Avey thinks of him as an ageless person, next he appears much older than his age (about ninety), and then all of a sudden he seems to be an individual who has an extraordinary vitality, rid of his many years. He is even capable of taking on female appearance and empowerment in order to execute a dance!

Finally, the long-awaited moment arrives for Avey’s confirmation and consecration as a prophetess. She first dances; next, honor and respect are paid to

her by Joseph, by his daughter Rosalie, and by the rest of the people. This ceremony is meant to express all of the elements of the essential metaphor in the ritual of rebirth that connects the core of Christianity to the core of the African rituals of the "Big Drum."

This particular connection of Christianity with African beliefs can also be seen in the importance of the number three, detected especially in the New Testament. Two of the most important metaphors concerning the number three are the dogma of the Holy Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Ghost), a dogma that is inextricably bound to identity (three identities in one and one in three), and Jesus' death and resurrection on the third day. Jesus foretold his death and resurrection through the metaphor of the destruction and reconstruction of the Jewish temple in three days. The Scribes and Pharisees gave a literal interpretation to what Jesus said and mocked him saying that it had taken years to construct this temple, how then could Jesus pretend not only to destroy it but to build it in the lapse of three days? Christ however had equated his body to that of a temple. His detractors certainly did not understand this metaphor, which pointed to the death of the old self as a condition for a rebirth. Two other important uses of the number three can be mentioned: Jesus' transfiguration, along with Moses' and Elias', and Peter's triple denial of Christ. Marshall perpetuates this tradition and generously makes use of this particular number in her fiction. In *Praisesong for the Widow*, three women, Avey, Clarice and Thomasina travel to the Caribbean; Avey and Jay had three daughters: Sis, Annawilda and Marion; Avey decides to abandon the "Bianca Pride" on the third day following her nightmarish dream; during her trip, Avey utilizes three different means of transportation: ship, taxi and plane; Joseph, Rosaline and Milda watch over Avey's tormented sleep on her first night on the island of Carriacou; Avey, Rosalie and Milda climb the hill together in order to attend the Big Drum Ceremony; three drums are being played during the ritual; and finally this trip is Avey's third and most important one to the Caribbean. The evidence of a Christian pattern in Marshall's novel, represented by the frequent use of the number three, is unquestionable, suggesting the death of a self that lacks identity and the subsequent birth of a new being with an identity. It is a metaphor whose creation rests on a familiarity with two cultural systems, representing an act of creative syncretism by Paule Marshall.

Avey's transfiguration has taken place and she is now ready to accomplish her sacred mission as a griot and as a prophetess of her race, since she has been finally re-inserted into the Black community by recovering her awareness as part of the Black World. She will be henceforth able to tell stories about the "Ibos' Landing." By selling her house in North Plains and going back to the house in Tatem, she breaks totally with her alienated past and moves on to transcendence.

In *Praisesong for the Widow*, the power of the Ancestors' voice which comes all the way from Africa through the Caribbean Basin is undeniable. Although Marshall does not stress on this theme in her other works, there are references to mythic ancestors such as Cuffee Ned in *The Chosen Place, the*

*Timeless People* and Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe in *Daughters*, whose legend nourished black people's pride. This presence of the Ancestors moving from Africa to the Caribbean islands, North, Central and South America confirms the theory of Senghor, Césaire and Damas, who preached about the universal values of Blacks, who share a common destiny, no matter in what part of the world they are to be found.

### The Achievement of Selfhood

In the introduction to *The Fiction of Paule Marshall: Reconstructions of History, Culture, and Gender*, Denniston quotes Stuart Hall, who defines his concept of identity as follows:

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being externally fixed in some essentialist past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture, and power. Far from being grounded in mere "recovery" of the past, which is waiting to be found and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (xiv)

Stuart Hall believes that to be in possession of an identity is a priority for all human beings. He also thinks that the construction of an identity is a process which cannot be only externally fixed, since the inner perception must be taken into account in order to achieve transcendence.

For many centuries, black women have been victimized by a world designed and devised by men. This situation called for open defiance with the emergence of a new definition of African-American women, a modern vision with the awareness that their psyche cannot be separated and reduced into entities of good or evil, physical or spiritual. Rather it is a compound of all, as good and valuable as that attributed to men.

In Marshall's fiction black women became more and more aware of the multiplicity of their choices, taking responsibility for those made as they transcend the female tradition. In *Praisesong for the Widow*, Marshall presents a prolonged, sustained symbolic statement, a journey culminating in the heroine's arrival at Carriacou Island, the mythic source. It is after this experience of endurance that she renews the strength and hope in her African roots. The hollowness of life as experienced in the United States makes the memory of the Caribbean a preciously vivid one. The journey back to the roots is viewed as the means through which the heroine has finally recovered an identity. Yet it is not just the culmination and successful conclusion of the struggle of black women, but also will further serve to disseminate the myths based on their ancestral beliefs, and can be considered in this sense as a subversion of the established historical discourse.

Moreover, it has become customary for historians and other social scientists to divide Caribbean people on the basis of the various European colonizing ethnic groups (Dutch, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish), but no corresponding division is made on the basis of the various ethnic groups of the African people, or of the native American Indians, for instance. The naming ceremony of the Big Drum, narrated in great detail, presents an elaborate African ritual that has the appearance of anthropological authenticity infused with a strong sense of black dignity. The naming of the nations, as a statement of belonging, is important since African descendants have been generally viewed as a people devoid of any cultural heritage, a people who have not inherited any history worthy of being recorded. In this sense, the theme of a quest for identity is consistent with the novel's basic purpose, since namelessness is equated to lack of identity in any given society.

In the introduction to *The Fiction of Paule Marshall*, Denniston argues that the identity that Marshall desires for her characters is a positive and dynamic one. Denniston also believes that Marshall's quest for an identity, through her heroines, is a campaign to establish firmly the self-value of African-American and all black women, their contribution first to the community, and finally to humanity in general:

However, as an artist, she prepares her readers for a reevaluation of the African presence in the Western hemisphere. Most importantly, she offers a discursive model for change and possibility. As her artistic vision expands to include all peoples, Marshall develops a sensibility that is faithful to her African heritage. She figures a cosmogonical wholeness by valuing cultural difference even as she celebrates the triumph of the human spirit (xxii).

However, this change that can be made possible because of Marshall's discursive model still constitutes a transcendental challenge in confronting the ruling ideology and its barriers. This means the rejection of the "one's" authority and the proclamation of the "other's" rights to achieve independence by becoming "somebody" within society.

It is clear that opportunities are not the same for all black women. These differences, to be detected even among black women living in the same community, do not permit the homogenization of the black female experience, and certainly not the fixing of a common date for the achievement of their goals. Notwithstanding, Marshall has confidence in a process that will help black women to re-appropriate their identity through the knowledge of the self. This process began with the awareness of Marshall's heroines of their need to take control of their future and to make their own choices, whether right or wrong. One of these choices is Avey Johnson's decision to take on her priesthood and to share her rich cultural heritage not only with the present but also with the forthcoming generation. Thus her life will become a productive, fruitful one.

In this recovery of the self, Marshall gives an enriching portrayal of her black heroines, one of fullness and authority. She has made visible black women's

progress towards autonomy and self-esteem, a self-esteem that is intimately bound up with their understanding of the need to make the very act of survival a statement of re-affirmation of their identity, which also means the unfolding of the complex heritage of black female experience.

## Conclusion

The absence of a positive and personal identity has, for a long time, robbed African-American women and other black women living in the Western Hemisphere of the benefit of being appreciated as part of a given community. In this sense, the attribution of a dignified identity is the mark of belonging and of social acknowledgment. In the twentieth century, African-American women have constituted an important force in the literature of the United States. They have finally, on their own terms, been given the recognition so long denied to their sisters. They have helped in the construction of an identity for black women by writing from the perspective of being black and women. Their discourse reflects humankind's original search for authenticity including ethnic, gender, mythic, social, religious and political considerations. The discovery of a marginalized individual's roots is essential for his/her liberation from distorted forms of discourse and from the humiliation of being a pariah. This search is an effort to destroy all sorts of barriers in order to re-construct the her/his-story, story that has either been ignored, deformed or misinterpreted.

Marshall's contribution to this crusade has been important. In the introduction to Marshall's *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*, Darwin T. Turner points out what he considers are her major virtues:

Without militant proclamation or fiery denunciation, Marshall has infused her works with blackness and feminism. She draws her subjects, symbols, traditions, rituals, and language from Black culture throughout the world; and she focuses on—or at least emphasizes—Black women growing in strength as they develop consciousness of themselves. (xiv-xv)

Black women writers such as Marshall believe in walking across the sea (like the Ibo people) in search of their memories, while adjusting their present situation to meet a future where they will be able to sing not his-story but also her story. These African-American women writers share a common task: to re-create the past in order to understand the present, and finally to construct a future in which they can know and express themselves.

This analysis has demonstrated that the reconstruction of the experiences of black women is central to the works of Paule Marshall since she establishes a model to be followed by all black women in search of (re)gaining wholeness, which will lead them towards social betterment.

A writer like Paule Marshall, who is committed with black people's cause in general, and especially with black women's struggle, has the task of spreading

the good tidings concerning black women's possibilities to all those who are eager to be part of this movement. The message must nonetheless be a coherent and distinct one. Marshall's fiction reinforces her viewpoints, leading the way towards the goal that she has previously established: the dignifying of black women. Marshall depicts her characters from within instead of just presenting them from the outside as mere symbols or stereotypes. In this manner she conveys the turbulent world of black women trying to control their lives and to construct a new identity. Marshall does not hide her intention to praise black women; she feels that it is definitely time that black female heroines be celebrated in a world where they have never ceased to struggle for transcendence. Furthermore, Marshall's dual heritage permits her to honor her ancestral traditions while claiming and expanding a dignified, renewed black female identity.

This modern priestess, who has inherited her role from the African griots, with a self-imposed task of retransmitting their ancestral legacy, has surely accomplished her goals because her writings are fully concerned with the battle against alienation and with the possibility of finding ways to counteract or transcend the painful loss of identity experimented by most black women. In her role as narrator and griot, she centers her fiction around black women who still lack recognition, even within African-American communities. In her novels, self-esteem and self-worth are restored to black women through the revalorization of a heritage that they all share in different latitudes of the world: survival, self-sufficiency and independence, which are of the utmost importance for the construction of the renewed self.

Life is a constant journey towards an uncertain future. Like priestess Marshall, black female griots must re-create a mythic past to transform the future into a more positive event. The structure of Marshall's different novels—and of *Praisesong for the Widow* in particular—reproduces the cyclical pattern of life, of nature which continually renews itself: Avey's life is a mirror image and a continuation of the life of her Grand Aunt Cuney. The past that she captures in the present is catapulted towards the future through her firm decision to share her past with others. For Avey Johnson, things did not work out as smoothly as expected: she had to follow a tortuous passage through gender and ethnic awareness, leading to the reintegration of an identity achieved through the knowledge of her African roots. The going back to the past deconstructs not only linear temporality, but also the chronological progression of setting and characters, liberated from the bondage of time and of space; these characters are thus able to focus their energy on making a mythic journey that will mean the recovery of a dignified identity and a promising future.

The journey-quest is also important for the other protagonists of Marshall's fiction. Selina's decision to travel to the Caribbean is a proof that hers is an unfinished story. She needs to keep building on the foundations of her identity; just as the brownstones that are laid one by one, she also must gradually achieve wholeness by combining her West-Indian heritage with her American background. Reena is the perfect example of those who have had to face their responsibilities as black women, wives and mothers within social and political

frames such as gender and ethnicity. She has been able to overcome the daily conflicts and to survive in a hostile environment and has gained strength in this process that leads to self-acceptance and recognition by others. As for Merle, her wounds have left some scars that continually remind her of her past and present situation in male-controlled society. However, her trip to Africa reveals her strong determination to continue the battle for a change; a transformation stemming from within, with a vision of hope in a future of possibilities for all, including black women.

The tableau of Marshall most salient heroines is completed with Ursa, who has been able to progress towards wholeness, not only because of her experience in the United States, but also because as a daughter—so attached to her parents and native island—she has made an effort towards autonomy that will permit her to be responsible for her choices. She is definitely redefining herself in accordance with one of Marshall's central interests, that is, newly defined roles for modern black women. All five protagonists' lives are reinvested with worth because they have decided to travel in search of their future of limitless possibilities.

Marshall's works are very meaningful to black people, and especially to the new generation of black women who are constantly struggling to legitimate a dignified space for themselves within patriarchal society. There has been an important contribution by critics and scholars to her narrative; nevertheless, there are other important issues that hold rich potential for future collaboration. The scope of information can be widened or deepened with complementary studies concerning class awareness, language use, and the importance of family and community structures in Paule Marshall's fiction.

Finally, Marshall in her own artistic vocation can be defined as a writer of multiple experiences, with a full knowledge of the different aspects that intervene in the shaping and construction of an identity. Hers is a somewhat biographical exploration into identity, comprising gender and ethnicity. Marshall fully understands the past and the present and is firmly committed to ensuring the future by being profoundly engaged in the articulation of black womanhood in an anti-hegemonic discourse. Her artistic excellence is achieved because it is constructed as a solid pyramid.

For an African-American artist like Paule Marshall, writing entails being aware of the most important points within the context of power, powerlessness, and empowerment. She has been able to recreate the myths that recover black women's lost voice and history. It is important for Marshall and her heroines to claim power in order to have rights to a dignified space within society. Through her novels and short stories, Marshall makes it clear that she looks back to a past of rich traditions in order to strengthen the future of black women, while breaking with a past of submission and of oppression by the ruling ideology. John McCluskey, Jr., who shares this opinion in his essay "And Called Every Generation Blessed: Theme, Setting, and Ritual in the Works of Paule Marshall," concludes: "There is little doubt that Paule Marshall will continue to explore the interplay of individual and collective history in a narrative mode which is both supple

and often demanding. In its quiet way, her eloquence and truth will help bring on the new order" (333). Moving from "otherness" to "oneness" is being gradually accomplished by black women in this unfinished process; in the meantime, the space is left open for the questioning of an established, unjust hierarchy and the possibility of constant re-creation by themselves of their own identities.

### Bibliography

- Andrews, William L., ed. *The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader*. NY: Oxford UP, 1996.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "Race." *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1990. 274-287.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1973.
- Denniston, Dorothy Hamer. *The Fiction of Paule Marshall: Reconstructions of History, Culture, and Gender*. Knoxville: Tennessee UP, 1995.
- Jehlen, Myra. "Gender." *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1990. 263-273.
- Kristeva, Julia. "From Symbol to Sign." *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. NY: Columbia UP, 1986. 62-73.
- Marshall, Paule. *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. NY: The Feminist Press, 1981.
- . *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. NY: Harcourt, 1969.
- . *Daughters*. NY: MacMillan, 1991.
- . *Praisesong for the Widow*. NY: Penguin, 1983.
- . *Reena and Other Stories*. NY: The Feminist Press, 1983.
- . *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*. Washington D.C.: Howard UP 1988.
- McCluskey, John, Jr. "And Called Every Generation Blessed: Theme, Setting, and Ritual in the Works of Paule Marshall." *Black Women Writers*. Ed. Mari Evans. NY: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1984. 316-336.
- Sandiford, Keith. "Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*: The Reluctant Heiress or Whose Life is it Anyway?" *Black American Literary Forum*. Vol. 20, N°4 (winter 1986), 371-92.
- Senghor, Léopold Sédar. *Liberté 1*. Paris: PUF, 1966.
- Sollors, Werner. "Who is Ethnic?" *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Eds. Bill Ashcroft et al. London: British Library, 1995. 219-222.
- The Holy Bible, King James version, set forth in 1611, Old and New Testaments. American Bible Society. New York.
- Turner, Darwin T. Introduction. *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*. By Paule Marshall. NY: Washington D.C.: Howard UP, 1988. xi-xxviii.
- Washington, Mary Helen. Afterword. *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. By Paule Marshall. NY: The Feminist Press, 1981. 311-324.