

Merle's Journey: A Search for Wholeness in Paule Marshall's The Chosen Place, the Timeless People.

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Abstract: *African American women, have silenced and kept ignorant by the dominant culture. It is the human need to create and maintain a true self in a social context. However, such an endeavor becomes an ordeal for those who are doubly oppressed, for those who are muted and mutilated physically and psychologically through the diabolic crossfire of caste / race, sex and colonialism. This paper focuses on, an African American Woman, throughout her journey of life, seeking wholeness in terms of family, society and community level.*

I. Introduction

Black women in America today are no more the midnight caged birds, but radiant ebony phoenixes singing joyfully and triumphantly the song of their true self. African American women both in life and literature, seem to have transcended the geometric oppression of race, gender and class announcing the spectacle of radiant Black female self in an unprecedented manner. The funk of Black female self is not the result of some eruption or sudden cracking of the earth, rather it is an evolutionary spiral moving from victimization to authentic consciousness, from DuBoisian veils to a blissful vision, from suspendedness to total liberation.

The double whammy of blatant white racism and black male sexism hurled black women headlong into the dismal abyss of geometric oppression and finally shaped their personality. If the dominant racist group condemned them through abusive ideology, then black men by virtue of their phallic superiority, held black women as their scapegoats and victimizing them in every conceivable way, damaged their feminine psyche, and prevented it from reconciling with its essence.

The creative outpouring of Marshall indicated the coming of age of black women's literary tradition. Paule Marshall emerges on the horizon of the African American women's novelistic tradition. With Marshall begins the second wave feminism. Marshall's women speak to their own self and try to articulate that self with a greater force. Femininity for them is but an idiom of expression, a sort of added enriching adventure and discipline, giving subtler overtones to life, making it more beauty and interesting. Seeking explorations into the psychic universe and finding happy release of self-consciousness is their major preoccupation.

Marshall, is basically a black woman writer committed primarily to black womanhood. It is this commitment that inspired her to introduce a startlingly new iconography to black women's literary tradition. She is the first black woman novelist who announced in a voice, so heroic, so articulate that the black women in America was no more a "de mule uh de world" (Hurston 1978:29) carrying the burden everybody heaped on her back but a radiant female hero who would cast off from her imposed psyche the Thanatotic, self-loathing conditions and march straight into the world of Eros- a state of self-assured paradiso from where she would proclaim to the world that they are now the creators of a new world where "We build our own temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how and we stand on the top of mountain, free within ourselves" (Hughes 1926a:694).

Paule Marshall is emphasizing the value of fusing the personal, the cultural and the political into a whole, someone who is thinking about cultural revolution in terms of psychological implications, someone who is concerned with the meaning of the terrors imposed on black women's psyche by the colonizing imperialism and finally someone who is stressing black artist's commitment to the task of remaining faithful to her personal vision, and freeing their minds from psychological bondages through the most truthful portrayal of the black self.

Women in Paule Marshall's works confront the world courageously, as self-reliant individuals. They possess the inner strength, the strong sense of perception, the courage to fight the cruelty of real life and desire to swim in the lakes of dreams and hopes. Marshall's women, break considerably from their predecessors because they are neither middle-class, bourgeois, romantic, near-white pariahs alienated from their cultural cords, nor victims hopelessly drawn into the "quagmire of sexism" and the 'quicksand' of circumstantial forces, nor the exquisite butterflies trapped in evil honey, nor the mute midnight birds prepared to be choked through insufferable silence either. Marshall's women are highly complex beings with all the human ambivalences. Seeking explorations into the psychic dilemmas, oppressions, trials, triumph, rejections and idiosyncrasies from

the insider's point of view, Marshall examines the innate humanity of her characters who embody in them the qualities that make them neither the queens of the universe nor the helpless actors enacting their own tragedy.

Merle Kinbona in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* is Marshall's woman, who is self-seeker, and perennial rebel who demolish the societal definitions with a great strength and power and also place herself on the pedestal of humanity thus far denied to black women in America. Merle, the enigmatic figure, is the breath and bone of Bournehills people, an embodiment, and a guardian of the whole community. She is the one who poses a major threat to the white power structure. She is the soul tortured and torturing, the persons whose business is to talk, to reveal, to confess and to explore the dualities of her life. Merle, is not only a representative of black people in America but even a Third World Revolutionary. She, therefore, not only contend with her own culture, history, rituals and communal mores but also engage herself in the struggle against the heavily impinging power of neocolonialism.

Merle is a person with a fractured psyche and struggling hard to fuse the fragmented pieces of her personality into one whole. From her very first appearance on the first page to her last words, she is real; she is alive; a complex, rounded character. She talks, talks endlessly, she cries, screams, smiles, drinks, carries, nay drags everyone and everything along with her in her headlong race forward. But what is really nearest to her heart is Bournehills and its people. "She somehow is Bournehills", remarks Allen Fuso, one of the characters in the novel. She is a symbol, or even more, an archetype. When it rains, the island's roads are impassable, and when the local law firm is conspires to sell Bournehills to property developers, hellbent on jettisoning the island into the modern swing of things, Merle acquires the measure of the multinationals. She blasts against exploitation, she poses a major threat to the white American colonists and their power structure. It is this force that frustrates the plans of the colonial lords from America. She is intensely committed to Bournehills. Her loyalties are to "the Little Fella", the ingenious poor, and she encourages them to rise up against the conditions of their lives, primarily to resist the courtesies of the dollar by ensuring economic autonomy. Merle is a catalyst of change for herself and her black community and for the oppressed people but an agent of destruction for the colonizer and the oppressor. She carnivalizes the island life, brings resurrection for herself and Saul, the Jewish scientist but drives Harriet Amaron, the brain behind the WASP organization, to death through suicide.

Merle's early life in England was not so good to be described, her stay in England made Merle enter into a Lesbian relationship with a rich woman in London. The Lesbian relationship is nothing but mere white corruption of which she is a victim; any complicity on her part had nothing to do with choice, but was rather a result of ignorance, determined exploitation by the rich white woman and youthful confusion. The unspeakableness of her lesbian pact is what stands at the core of her personal chaos. Ketu, a "beautiful black man" from Uganda studying at Leeds University, her husband is informed about the lesbian affair of Merle with the English woman. Ketu got angry and took his daughter and left the place to Kampala without even informing her. Her encounter with the West destroyed her marriage and hurled Merle into the dismal abyss of mental gloom and alienation. Even after many years, the past trauma still remains fresh. Merle returned to Bournehills to heal.

Merle now sets herself to the task of self-healing. She now realizes that the future holds a promise of renewal of her ties to Africa, and a healing of the wounds of separation from Ketu, her husband and her daughter. Ritualistically, she takes off the dangling earrings, symbols of externally imposed values and trappings for over a decade. Merle's act of removing the earring is equally a gesture of liberation, a reminder to the whole Western world that she would no more be seduced, stripped and abandoned, that she will "guard against Greeks bearing gifts"(CP TP:327) and will no more allow her Troy, the sacred domain of her authentic self, to fall. Future life holds a promise of hope, love and commitment to something that will vitalize her inner universe. Merle has enough of her racial self but the yearnings of her female self still remains unfulfilled. The healing of the self will, she hopes, come through acceptance of the bond of motherhood. Merle must come to terms with herself not only racially but as a woman as well. She thinks, must attain unity and wholeness by fusing the public self with the private self, by unifying the black self with the feminine self. Merle's restructuring or reconstruction of the composite self begins with an assertion of her femininity. Merle feels an assurance with a hope that her daughter would certainly want to see "what her mother looks like, what kind of person she is she might even be happy to see me"(CP TP: 465).

Merle, knowing her power as a woman, she is prepared to confront Ketu and her daughter. With a newly gained confidence and strength, she imagines, and rightly so, that such a confrontation will not necessarily lead to cataclysm of their relationships. Merle's discovery of her self-worth leaves in her strong nerve to make choices and decisions that she has avoided for years. Search for her child, regardless of the outcome, will help to restore control in her life. The notion of freedom for Merle consists not only in embracing her intimate ones in Africa but her real past. The collective African past from which black women's blissful innocence was ripped. Merle is now psychically free to commit herself to that past. Then Merle has gained that freedom at ontological level. Her commitment and responsibility to her past is a clear testimony.

Merle's determination to return to Africa reflects Marshall's own belief that shaping a truthful identity whether it be for oneself or for all black people collectively, requires a psychological and spiritual return back over history. Such a journey into one's past means not some romanticized nostalgia but a will to examine and use one's own history creatively. The vision that Merle determines to return to Africa is the metaphoric journey back that she proceeds to contextualize herself. History is used as a scaffold upon which she reconstruct her future life. Rehistoricizing herself, she discovers her particular relationships to her past contents and rename herself in light of the discovery. She is able to comprehend the full possibilities of black feminine potentialities which she could not experience either in England or on Bourne Island. Merle's understanding is that such a search may not provide her with instant answers to her feminine needs, indeed may be the source of more pain, is also a further indication of her willingness to come terms with her personal past and step toward an interactive and productive future.

Merle has decided not to take "the usual route to Africa first flying north to London via New York and then down. The reverse route serves to illustrate Marshall's artistic tracing of the black feminine experience from the New World to Africa. Symbolically, it manifests a will to seek identification with the state of consciousness that prevailed "in the beginning". Return to Africa reveals Merle's expressed intention to restore the primal innocence that was lost in the encounter with America and the West. It also means her commitment to pass on to other women the knowledge she has gained during her sojourn in the West. Her search for a coherent vision accomplished, the obstacles to her self-fulfillment gone, she will be free to take a stand, to seek an outlet to her multiple talents in the bettering of her people's lot. That the obstacles she confronted, the psychic fracturing she experienced, the soul-soaking perils she witnessed and the whole range of knowledge she gained in the West must be embodied in other woman, "the other faces" from whom she was divided by virtue of her race and class, by virtue of the most pernicious legacies of the peculiar institution of slavery. The fractured psyche becomes whole. Merle, whose "name's just Merle"(72), becomes a Kinbona, a "good kin" for all those who "awaited for" her in the black Africa Diaspora. The divided self at last seeks a remarkable unity.

Work Cited:

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- [2] *Black Feminist Fiction: A March Towards Liberation*. New Delhi: Creative Books. 1999.