

## THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL FACTORS IN PAULE MARSHALL'S BROWNGIRL BROWNSTONES

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### Abstract

This article 'The influence of cultural factors' in Paule Marshall's **BrownGirl Brownstones** seeks to analyse Marshall's creation of women characters deeply influenced by West Indian language and culture. The narrative style and the discussion of her themes prove Marshall as a diasporic as well as a feminist writer. The aim of this article is to explore Marshall's focus on women as the soul of the entire family retaining the culture and heritage of their native identity. Through her short stories and novels Marshall makes a good communication among her diasporic communities. Her women characters portrayed in this novel fulfill their dreams, desire and passions of their society. This article exposes a critical analysis of Marshall's women as the dominating souls of her novel **BrownGirl Brownstones** who bear a strong African heritage in spite of their settlement in an alien land. They share a common cultural identity with similar diasporic communities and remain unaffected by the culture to which they have been exposed.

**Key Words:** Legacy of language, African heritage, Cultural identity, Dreams, Diasporic conflicts.

Diaspora refers to the group of people who are scattered from their homeland and settled in alien countries and spread their cultures wherever they go across the world. It also refers to their individual experience of nostalgia and longing for their homeland. Paule Gilroy in his book **The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness mentions**, views on Diaspora as “a valuable idea because it is an alternative to the metaphysics of ‘race’, nation and bonded culture coded into body” (328). He emphasizes upon the significance of contingency, indeterminacy and conflicts that are involved in the discourse on Diaspora. Gilroy has portrayed the most sustained theoretical defence of the idea of Diaspora. He rebuilds the past of the West through the efforts of the black intellectuals like Du Bois and Richard Wright.

Paule Marshall is a renowned writer expressing a prominent and innovative voice in modern-day American literature. She is considered as a passionate champion of the individual’s search for personal identity. Many critics have praised Paule Marshall as one of the finest authors to explore the psychological trials and concerns of black American women. Drawing upon her experiences as an African-American woman of Barbadian heritage, she embodies the cultural dichotomy that provides the major tension in her work. Although her writing deals primarily with black and feminist issues, critics note that the power and importance of Marshall’s work transcends colour and sexual barriers and speaks to all individuals.

Paule Marshall displays her multifaceted skills of West Indian Americans with excellently created fictional characters since 1950 with an expanded complexity and meaning. Her novels form a unique contribution to Afro-American literature because they capture in a lyrical and a powerful language a culturally distinct and expansive world of the Africans in America. According to Paule Marshall, her work just as she claims, “stands as testimony to the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me in the word shop of the kitchen”. (12) by the women in her immigrant community.

**Brown Girl Brownstones** is a milestone in African American Fiction because not only does it go against the stereotypical portrayal of African Americans but also for making a connection between African American people and their West Indian counterparts. There is an accurate depiction of language which plays a vital role in expressing the similarities and differences between the two cultures.

Paule Marshall in her several essays and interviews had mentioned on her childhood reluctance to acknowledge her West Indian heritage and spoke of the discrimination she felt growing up in Brooklyn's Stuyvesant Heights. Marshall was profoundly influenced by the conversations she overheard between her mother and other women from their community. The powerful words of her mother and her neighbourhood women wielded with their words, their sharp character analyses, and the poetic rhythms of their Barbadian dialect instilled in Marshall a desire to capture some of their magic on paper. She records this in an interview with Alexis De Veux in **Essence**:

Perhaps the most important influence in my becoming a writer is due to those fantastic women, my mother and her friends, who would gather every afternoon after work-they did day's work-and talk... In that kitchen I was in the presence of art of a very high order because those women, in their talk, knew what literature was all about. (1363)

Marshall uses the phrase 'legacy of language and culture' which forms the background of her major works of fiction. In her autobiographical essay, '**From the poets in the kitchen**', Marshall elaborates on the aesthetic roots of her fiction and states how she developed her excellence in the legacy of language:

The group of women around the table long ago; they taught me my first lessons in the narrative art ....they trained my ear. They set a standard of excellence. This is why the

best of my work must be attributed to them; it stands as a testimony to the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me in the word shop of the kitchen.

(4)

Marshall's first novel **Brown Girl Brownstones** portrays the story of the coming age. It depicts womanhood through the protagonist Selina Boyce, a young black girl's search for identity. The character is similar to that of the author of this book as a daughter of Barbadian immigrant. She writes about the displaced Barbadian community that tackles the situations, still maintaining their cultural identity while attempting to succeed in America. *Brown Girl Brownstones* sets the stage for Marshall's preoccupation with the journey back. The novel is set in the Brooklyn Bajun community of Marshall's own childhood. The story is based on Brooklyn-born Selina, the daughter of Barbadian immigrants Silla and Deighton. Selina's ambitious mother, Silla, wants most of all to save enough money to purchase the family's rented brownstone. Whereas father Deighton is a charming spendthrift who simply wants to return to his homeland. When Deighton unexpectedly inherits some island land, he plans to return there and build a home. Silla meanwhile schemes to sell his inheritance and fulfill her own dream. Due to this, Selina is caught between the conflicting attitudes of her parents. Susan McHenry mentioned in **Ms. Magazine** that Selina is intensely affected by material conflict but "emerges from it self-assured, in spite of her scars" (1364). Selina eventually leaves Brooklyn to attend college, later, realizing her need to become acquainted with her parent's homeland, she resolves to go to Barbados.

In **Brown Girl Brownstones**, Marshall preserves the tradition, folk culture, and language as part of her community. This novel is also a tribute to the women in her household and community who taught her the power of the word. Marshall's mother and her neighbourhood women gathered around the kitchen table and had a discussion on the issues of their own community rituals. Because of this

attitude, even the ordinary cleaning women practiced language as an oral art. Marshall introduces many women characters in this novel. Each of the characters is shaped in a different way according to their situation and every woman character proves the legacy of heritage through her actions in this novel. Silla, is portrayed as the mother of Selina and Miss Thompson as a mentor of Selina in this novel. Marshall portrays these characters as African slave mothers. The word mother connects Silla with her heritage. Here, Marshall represents not only the mother of Selina but the mother of everyone who has suffered in the hands of racism and survived. In this regard Mary Helen Washington mentions in her work, **I sign My Mother's Name in Mothering the Mind**, on Afro-American slave mother as:

There is enough evidence to suggest that the image of the Afro-American slave mother is one of the sources for the characterization of Silla Boyce. Everything about Silla's portrait suggests the slave mother- her standing on the corner waiting for suburban housewives to offer her a day's work; the emphasis on her body as an instrument she uses to protect her children; her working out all day and then returning home to make Barbadian delicacies for her family; her manlike strength.(315)

Marshall created Silla as the most powerful character: "... head strong, and armed with the powerful cadences of her oral tradition; she knows that to make it in this "White man world you got to take yah mouth and make a gun" (**Marshall 70**). Sitting around her kitchen table, she admonishes, praises, advises and gives instructions to family and friends alike. Discussing the problems regarding God to the causes of World War II and the allegiance of Barbadians to England, Selina's words slash the air which Marshall mentioned as "You think because they do call Barbados "Little England" that you are somebody? What the king know bout you-or care?"(**Marshall 69-70**). In this novel, Marshall brings out Selina's perceptiveness on the organized religion: "The rum shop and the church join together to keep we pacify in ignorance" (**Marshall 70**).

Silla's insight of the injustices done to her people that derives her, but in her relentless determination for money and property, she destroys her family. She horrifies her daughter Ina into humbleness, and secretly sells her husband's land in Barbados to buy a brownstone. When he absorbs this, his fragile pride crumbles and he eventually commits suicide. Paule Marshall closely observes the complex questions of assimilation, materialism and how black people can endure without loss. She throws all of these questions in the character of Silla. Mary Helen Washington observes the character of Silla in her work **afterword, Brown Girl, Brownstones, by Paule Marshall** as:

Silla's life is a paradigm of the Barbadian community. She is the touchstone, for she proclaims aloud the chaotic trouble deep in the core of the community. Her endurance, her age, her devotion to the dollar and property, her determination to survive in 'this man country' is theirs. Her lights and shadows are theirs. (315)

Selina raises up in the hub of this, absorbing culture and confusions. As she stands for the past of the abused and ignored black woman, and even she stands as its new optimism. She is the bearer of the culture, yet the one who questions the means by which one survives while keeping that culture alive. And she, unlike her mother, has choices. No matter what choices Selina makes, she will represent her culture, as well as her own selfhood. That is why **Brown Girl Brownstone** is considered as a novel of hope. It is also one of the most optimistic texts in afro- American literature. The novel projects the oppressed people as the powerful ones with a conscious political choice and not as victims.

As a child, Marshall herself had denied her West Indian heritage. The protagonist, Selina in "Brown Girl Brownstones", reflects Marshall's attitude and she had "long hated her (self) for her blackness" (**BrownGirl 89**). The language that Marshall uses reflects her West Indian culture. Denniston points out her expression of West Indian Culture and her projection of women as oral translator of that culture:

Her central point, however, concerns the sense of alienation and displacement which minority people experience. She suggests the need for reconciling cultural conflict through self-empowerment, which becomes possible with responsible involvement with others.

**(Denniston, 54)**

In **Brown Girl, Brownstones**, Selina experiences her first love affair and confronts American racism at the home of one of her white high school friends. At the novel's conclusion, she understands what Collier believes to be one of the novel's most important messages: "She is one with all the Black people of her world" (295).

Marshall portrays Selina and her mother Silla's character in a similar way. Silla falls in love with her husband Deighton, a dreamer who does not work to achieve his dreams; on the other hand, Selina falls in love with Clive, her lover who is like someone unable to fulfill his dreams because he is tied to his mother. When Selina needs Clive most, he abandons her, much as Deighton has abandoned Silla in the struggle to survive in America. Marshall depicts Clive as a catalyst in assisting her to realize that she and her mother Silla share a common strength and the ability to survive. This situation makes Selina to understand the reality of life and she leaves her relationship with him and starts to understand her mother's pain. Towards the end, Selina realizes the fact that white culture is merely a dream for her. Hence, she understood the importance of her native culture, she changes her appearance and character and begins her journey towards her West Indian roots. Marshall describes this with Selina's appearance:

She wanted, suddenly, to leave something with them. But she had nothing... Then she remembered the two silver bangles she had always worn. She pushed up her coat sleeve and stretched one until it passed over her wrist, and, without turning, hurled it high over her

shoulder. The bangle rose behind her, a bit of silver against the moon, then curved swiftly downward and stuck a stone. (**BrownGirl 310**)

Marshall's **Brown Girl, Brownstones** explores the intersections of race, class, and culture through the character of Selina as a pioneer on the way for developments within the community which are implicitly inevitable.

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