IJRAR.ORG E-ISSN: 2348-1269, P-ISSN: 2349-5138

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND ANALYTICAL REVIEWS (IJRAR) | IJRAR.ORG

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Rediscovering Self and Black Identity in Paule Marshall's Praise song for the Widow

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the self and identity among Afro-American women in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow. It is a novel that emphasises the search for identity that Marshall herself experienced. Additionally, it explores the significance of identification, the issue of self and identity in her novel, and the connection between personal and societal Black identity among African-American women. Avey Johnson, 64-year-old protagonist, is an example of a black woman who is still capable of using myths, rituals, and dances to translate her own history into cultural metaphor. Avey suggests that African Americans need to connect those elements of their black ancestry that are psychologically uplifting by using historical, personal, and cultural analogies. Here, myths, dances, traditions, and rituals have preserved the remnants of African cultures.

KEYWORDS:

Identity, Woman, Black, Self, Past, Memory

INTRODUCTION:

Paule Marshall is the first black woman novelist in the canon of Black women's fiction to forge new ground and deliver truthful depictions of various Black femininity roles. Because she holds the view that self is not defined as obtaining freedom by severing relationships with others and the community, she does not confine them to the isolated Black communities. She defines self as the capacity to perceive one's continuity with the greater community within the context of family and community. She gives her characters the freedom to experience persecution while also inspiring enough drive within of them for them to be able to

overcome it. Because she feels that African-American culture and heritage is the only barrier that may shield them from all of the persecution present in the racist society of America, she does not explicitly distinguish the Afro-American community from the rest of society in her novels. Marshall does not view physical obstacles as a significant hurdle to Black women's progress towards self-actualization, but physical conflicts still remain the biggest obstacles to their succeeding in becoming a self-actualized character.

In Praisesong for the Widow, Marshall tells the story of the Afro-American widow on a Caribbean cruise. The protagonist of the novel is "Avey" Johnson, who has entirely embraced American materialism and disowned her African ancestry. She becomes uneasy while on a Caribbean trip when she starts having dreams about her relatives. Her mind is occupied by this perplexing dream. She disembarks at Genada with the intention of taking a flight home in order to get away from this emotional discomfort that she identified with the island. The locals on the island welcome her into their community and invite her to take part in their activities after she misses her trip and ends up stuck there. Avey agrees and travels with them to Carriacou, an island connected to the Middle Passage, a route used to transfer slaves from Africa to America. Avey starts to recall the legends and stories she learned as a child, and she joins the inlanders in their dance and celebration under the guidance of the elderly Lebert Joseph, who is the representation of the African God of the Crossroads. Her involvement sparks a spiritual quest, which suggests self-discovery. Before finding oneself, one must endure a severe crisis and occasionally swing between cultural, ancestors' values, roots, and economic imbalance. Avey must deal with this upheaval which at times leaves her devastated and contributes to her fractured mind. Old Lebert Joseph keeps asking Avey things like, "And what are you? Who is your country? (167) Her bewilderment is caused by both questions. These are the main issues that Marshall's novel is built on. These are the queries that trap Avey in a psychic slavery since she is unable to recognise her true position or place in the world.

AVEY'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY:

In the novel, Marshall depicts a Black widow Avey's quest to learn the answers to these concerns. The novel begins with an occurrence in which Avey begins dreaming of her past while on a luxurious trip around the Caribbean Islands. Marshall wants to guide us on a journey of self-awareness and healing through this adventure. Avey is a representation of Black women who have experienced the anguish of tyranny and enslavement. the trauma that Africans experience on a regular basis. African people's dispersed existence, the conditions under which Afro-Americans must live, and the sacrifices they have made or must

still make in order to prosper in American society. Additionally, these disorders almost always involve a break from one's emotional foundation. Avey discovers that this is a recurrence of the historical separation, which was also occurring in her personal life. In order to bear and face the difficulties, which only Marshall's heroine can withstand, it takes a strong will, patience, and sacrifice.

In Praisesong for the Widow, when one leads toward a journey of achieving one's identity, Marshall focuses on how one travels through a fissure or rupture in one's spirit, mind, and soul. Avey shifts from one identification status to another as she commits to her choices in life as she searches for her own identity. Based on the many times of crisis in her life, her responsibilities and search also fluctuate. Avey is having an identity crisis when we first meet her. She was on a cruise with her companions when she suddenly felt the need to go home, and she chooses to get off the ship in Grenada. She was aware that it had only been a few days since she and her two best friends had embarked on their fifteen-day cruise. Avey struggles between wanting to go back home and worrying about how her friend will react to her choice. In Avey's dream, her ancestral home and land were calling to her, and she was in a scary state of complete mental chaos.

ROOTS OF PAST:

Through the dream, she was able to reconnect to her roots and past. Her heart and mind were never far from the recollections of her house and roots. The truth was that she had hidden those memories in order to adapt to American culture. Her stories and memories of her great-aunt make her want to get off the ship right away. A stage called Carriacau was planned to show to Avey the cultural identity she was seeking to find but had lost, much as the mystical hand of Aunt Cuney was drawing her to her roots through her dream. Avey maintains her ties to her cultural origins, but at one point in her life she loses them in the quest of the American ideal. Her roots haunt her as she loses her identity in this place. A split personality results from such a condition of double exposure. She acts strangely by abruptly leaving the ship; she might imagine her parents' island at the dinner table. Later on though, she returns to her origins in order to recover from her ruptured psyche state.

Praisesong for the Widow tells the story of a widow's search for identity, which in the novel leads on a literal and figurative journey. It is about a journey over land and water, during which the neighbourhood and culture are crucial. The story repeatedly emphasises the value of both individual identity and group belonging. The novel also explores reaffirmation and alienation. The carriers of cultural identity and tradition are Black women. In The Fiction of Pule Marshall: Reconstructions of History, Culture, and

Gender, Dorothy Denniston posits that Marshall cautions; ...peoples of African descent to avoid false values that supplant and/or obviate spiritual needs. They must respect and revere the 'nurturing ground' from which they sprang and instil that lesson in generation to come. (127) In Praisesong for the Widow, Marshall tells the tale of the Ibos, who are members of valiant maroon communities, through oral literature. Throughout her transmission to Avey's family, Aunt Cuney narrates this tale. Avey's identity is shaped through the craft of storytelling from childhood until maturity.

STORY TELLING TECHNIQUE:

A mainstay of black mythology in the New World is Marshall's account of the legend of the Ibos walking on sea water. Marshall also discusses the legend of Africans who used magic to escape enslavement. Marshall explains to the readers the mystical abilities that the African people possessed. These brave people were able to free themselves from enslavement and walk on water. In light of this, Avey's storytelling style has a significant impact on her personal growth and sense of identity. Aunt Cuney said that Avey's purpose in life was to preserve the memory of the Ibo legends. Avey kept telling stories until she became a part of American culture. She is still alive for both herself and the entire neighbourhood. Avey has been telling stories since she was a young child. She tells stories, "The whole thing almost word for word ... Complete with the old woman's inflections ad gestures" (38). When they were newlyweds, Avey taught her storytelling skills to her husband Jay. In the summer, by way of a vacation, they used to take the bus down to Tatem. and stay in the old house her great Aunt Cuney had left her.

On their first visit. She had walked him over to the Landing and Standing by the river which the Ibos had crossed on foot on their way back home, she had told him the story. (115) Avey functions as a cultural vehicle by sharing the tale with her spouse, helping her stay connected to her heritage. It also supports the preservation of her American identity. Avey started to recall her history, which she had forgotten while living in America. Ironically, Avey's decision to leave the Bianca Pride helps her reclaim her identity because leaving her cruise ship represents her moving away from American cultural norms and closer to discovering her identity in Carriacou. By coming to terms with her damaged connection with her spouse and realising the significance of her culture in defining who she is, Avey is able to find herself again and mend her relationship with her husband. Her experiences in Carriacou motivate her to attain identity. They are the carriers of their culture, which is another significant aspect of Marshall's women that is recreated in the novels. Avey used stories, rituals, and dances as a form of narration. Her Aunt Cuney and Iba heritage have

passed down the skill of storytelling to her. Merle Kibona demonstrates her total commitment to her community, while Silla Boyce demonstrates her roots culture through her food. Marshall has led her characters on a voyage of self-discovery, one in which the women not only discovered their identities but also their sense of strength and power. They reconciled their past and their resentment within themselves.

DEVELOPMENT IN AVEY'S IDENTITY:

The chance to be by herself as a widow, having retired from her profession in her sixties, being free of the burdensome task of raising children, and the visions she harbours about the past aid Avey in her transition from materialism to maturity and an African-based identity. As Barbara T. Christian, in "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," clarified, "all of Paule Marshall's fiction demonstrates her conviction that African-based cultural and historical rituals have the power to resist centuries of loss and psychological colonization" (187). Avey's incomplete trip and choice to embark on a new adventure in order to end the previous one appear to be the result of a dream, but there may be a more complex explanation behind this rash decision. She has grown weary of Avey's estrangement from her Black culture and identity as a result of her pretentious lifestyle among White people. Avey's financial prosperity was the main obstacle to her journey toward developing her Black identity. Avey and her spouse were members of the middle-upper class. She had all of the worldly demands met by Jerome Johnson, but he was unable to meet her needs in terms of love and spirituality, according to Jay, who saw their relationship as a burden he wanted to be free of. He was slowed down in the direction he had set for himself, like a leg-iron. The beginning of Avey's physical and emotional journey toward self-definition is characterised by her first dream about her aunt Cuney. Any audience member who reads this will likely wonder whether dreaming about her father's great-aunt qualifies as a good enough excuse to cancel the cruise and return home.

Even Avey herself is reluctant to tell her friends that the dream is what made her resign since she doesn't want them to think she's crazy. In order to prepare Avey for the trip back to the past of not just Avey but the entire Black community, Marshall hypnotises her and puts her into a state resembling sleep. Avey transforms becomes a conduit for the suffering of the Black community from the era of slavery to the present while travelling through her past. The tour also introduces the revitalization of cultural inheritance as a therapeutic remedy for the community's defections. The qualifications Avey attained can be shared by any Black woman who is seeking a new self-identity because Avey's journey toward the search for her Black

identity is a normal journey. In "Embodying Cultural Memory in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," Susan Rogers describes the process and the outcome of such a journey: "Through the processes of extreme physical discomfort, illness, purging, healing, bathing, and dancing, Avey is able to make an emotional journey that restores her awareness of her cultural inheritance" (77). Avey's sense of the loss of a vital aspect of her life is attributed to two important elements, according to Rogers. Avey finds herself pondering about these distant childhood memories even though they have nothing to do with her current dream. In this dream, Cuney's body undergoes a profound alteration that invites other Black people to join her on a trip to rediscover their African identity.

AFRICAN DIASPORA:

Cuney accuses persons like Avey who deny their former Black identity of sin because all body signals imply some sort of link to the past. The entire dream seems to be a piece of a larger puzzle that Avey must put side by side in order to comprehend who she really is. Avey's broken self is similar to that of all other Black women. The Afro-American identity is not a fully Black identity because of the African Diaspora. There are many paradoxes in the fractured Black identity. Black women's lives are a series of negotiations meant to resolve the tensions between our objectification as the Other and our internalised definitions of ourselves as African-American women. The development and advancement of the process of uncovering one's genuine African self is hampered by the objectification of Afro-American women and their geographical isolation. Through her physical and emotional journey, Avey connects to the legendary past and broadens her perspective on herself, her community, and her African identity. Avey assumes her new job as a message to the younger generation and accepts her African heritage. Avatara's choice to assume her great-aunt Cuney's griot position and narrate the Ibos's story demonstrates how people can actively choose to take part in myth. Beyond comprehension is Marshall's capacity to create such a dynamic personality from a materialistic person. Minor characters are also connected to their pasts in order to create such dynamic characters; major characters are not the only ones that do this.

Marshall aims to use the characters as a sort of bridge to introduce the younger generation to the older ones. In "Paule Marshall's Women on Quest," Missy Dehn Kubitschek expounds how skilfully Marshall creates affiliations between present and past: "In Praisesong for the Widow, such correspondences characterize secondary as well as primary characters, not only Avey and her great-aunt Cuney but Lebert Joseph and his daughter Rosalie Parvay. Often the likeness is extended from the concrete present to the

mythic past" (45). The characters undergo a significant transformation as a result of this realisation of their past and return to their roots. Avey has had additional effort and problems as a result of having to submit to the dominant power due to the policy of assimilation, or perhaps a better word would be the integration policy, with a different ethnic and cultural group. Her social standing and physical state give birth to her personal struggles to conform to the oppressor's expectations. Although Avey feels cut off from her race and her African roots as a result of her blind allegiance to the western hegemony, she has access to material comforts thanks to her pursuit of personal fulfilment and independence rather than the search for a communal Afro-American identity.

REPRESENTATION OF IDENTITY:

A Black woman's path does not resemble Avey's initial trek on Bianca Pride. She has not connected her destiny to her children and her Black community, as most Afro-American women have, and she is capable of covering the costs of a sumptuous journey without getting into problems. Her path however is not one toward independence. Marshall reconstructs a new identity from the fragments of the lost identity by piecing together all the intricacies of Afro-American history. Marshall revives historical people and mythologies in addition to reconstructing Black history. Avey is wandering aimlessly down the beach when she stumbles upon Lebert Joseph's bar. Lebert is an elderly guy in his eighties who becomes Avey's guide for the remainder of her voyage. When Lebert and Avey become friends, he deciphers Avey's visions about her ancestor and husband and persuades her to go with him to the Big Drum. Lebert, a Legba figure, embodies for Avey the knowledge of the living and the ancestors while also being simultaneously human and mythical. Lebert's human and legendary characteristics serve as a reminder of her earlier recollections in addition to assisting her in her quest toward the past. Avey visits locations that are quite similar to the scenes that remind her of her early years and her youth in Tatem when travelling with Lebert. Lebert shows up as a miracle to save her and reunite her to her history and her ancestors after all the years of toiling for worldly success had destroyed her childhood memories and her connection to her African ancestry.

Lebert starts to re-inscribe these fundamental emotional textures of Avey's existence onto the now-empty slate of her memory because Avey had learned to erase them. Lebert takes on the role of griot for Avey, and the mental emptiness made way for a sufficient understanding of her forebears and her past. Avey chooses to interpret Lebert's interpretation of Avey's dreams for audiences in the present, which reflects a complicated synthesis of both past and present values. Avey learns a lot from Lebert during their journey

together. The most crucial one is a resolution to the conundrum that had consumed her thoughts for a considerable amount of time. the conundrum of letting her material existence to harm her spiritual life. Avey's body and mind are freed from uncomfortable feelings in her interactions with the dominant society as a result of her physical and emotional journey toward self-definition. Although Avey receives assistance from other people, particularly her aunt Cuney in her dreams and Lebert Joseph, in her search for self-definition, the fundamental source of change resides inside her own consciousness. Within oneself is the ability to save oneself. While other Black women may support a Black woman on her path to personal empowerment, the woman herself is ultimately responsible for defining and valuing her own worth. Avey's voyage contrasts sharply with her actual circumstance.

CONCLUSION:

Even though she is travelling in the direction of the future, her consciousness, which is still a place of freedom for her, is leading her back to the past and her early years. Although Avey appears to be getting older, she still has a younger inner self thanks to her emotional trip back to her childhood and the wiping of the tortuous and terrible years of marriage and material existence. While reading a pocketbook in the hotel before taking her excursion, Avey confesses "that her mind, like her pocketbook outside, had been emptied of the contents of the past thirty years during the night, so that she had awakened with it like a slate that had been wiped clean, a tabula rasa upon which a whole new history could be written" (151). Avey gains a new existence and opens her eyes to a new world that is a source of strength, wisdom, and resistance against oppression when a culture and history that she has known her entire life come to life. Avey's rebirth is the emergence of a new character with a new identity as a result of the resuscitation of fresh concepts and major modifications. Avey's rebirth, in Barbara Waxman's words, "went back to the earlier condition of infanthood. "Although she feels old, she soon becomes like an infant again, as the previous night's reminiscences of thirty years of her life begin cleansing and purging her in preparation for the new Avey" ("The Widow's Journey to Self and Roots: Aging and Society in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," 96-97). Marshall reiterates the value of communal belonging and maintaining a connection to one's heritage. Avey's identity crisis is transformed into a stronger black woman - a storyteller and griot - by Carriacou's purification process. Avey in Praisesong for the Widow is a cultural representative who upholds a form of Oriental identity in a Western society.

The lost identity of Blacks in the Occidental world was being reclaimed by them through oral history, rituals, and communal communities. To sum-up, within their Black communities, the female characters helped to build their own identities. These women drew on the cultural norms of their neighbourhood. In order to survive and maintain their identities in White America, they looked to the community. Marshall's characters all go on journeys where they are compelled to face their inner selves.

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