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The portrayal of the black woman in the works of Paule Marshall

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ABSTRACT

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THE PORTRAYAL OF THE BLACK WOMAN IN
THE WORKS OF PAULE MARSHALL

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Paule Marshall has charged that the portrayal of the black woman in literature has been limited to stereotypes and fantasy figures, and that the writers of fiction have not presented the black woman as a complex and credible character. In her challenge to black writers to create such complex characters, Paule Marshall cites her own works as exemplary models of how the black woman should be portrayed. A careful examination of the black woman as a character in Paule Marshall's Brown Girl, Brownstones, Soul Clap Hands and Sing and The Chosen Place, The Timeless People demonstrates that Paule Marshall provides in her fiction realistic representations of the black woman.

In these works the black woman appears in a variety of plots, settings and conflicts which depicts the many dimensions of black womanhood. Paule Marshall captures the strengths and weaknesses of women struggling for survival, surmounting obstacles to realize goals, and searching for identity. Through a combination of diversified characterizations, Paule Marshall projects positive images of the black woman.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.................................................................................. 1

CHAPTER
   I. BROWN GIRL, BROWNSTONES.................................................. 10
   II. SOUL CLAP HANDS AND SING................................................. 25
   III. THE CHOSEN PLACE, THE TIMELESS PEOPLE......................... 40
   IV. CONCLUSION............................................................................ 55
   V. BIBLIOGRAPHY.......................................................................... 60
INTRODUCTION

The black woman throughout the history of her presence in America has occupied a subordinate and inferior position socially, economically and politically. In spite of this, she has been an enduring force which socialized young black children to feign acceptance of discrimination, segregation and second-class citizenship, while at the same time inculcating in them a sense of racial pride and an inner burning desire for freedom, justice and equality.

"No one can dispute the fact that the black woman left an indelible imprint on America through her centuries of arduous struggle to achieve self-determination and equality."¹ There is rarely any discord among black writers who attempt to relay the saga of the black woman's journey through American history. Few will deny her suffering in bondage nor her contributions to resistance movements; few will deny her sexual abuse nor her systematic elimination from employment opportunities. Especially in the last decade, black writers have been unified as they adamantly demanded the recognition of the black woman and her contribution to the survival of her race.

While the black woman holds a revered place in the

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history of black Americans, her presence in American literature has been less than honorable, for the portrait which black and white writers have painted of her has been a denigrating distortion of her true character. In the last decade, however, black writers have been overwhelmingly concerned with destroying images and myths that have crippled and degraded black people; they have delved into their own folk culture and traditions to create more positive images and myths. While the primary concern was with stereotypes which distorted the black male image, now much attention has been given to a serious analysis of the black female image in literature. Though both black male and female writers are "image makers" undertaking this task, it is inevitably upon the shoulders of the black woman writer that the task of defining the black woman through positive images lies.

In her essay, "Changing Concepts of the Black Woman," Frances S. Foster described four concepts traditionally employed by those creating images of the black woman; these included: (1) Topsy, the impish black child with big eyes, long skinny legs and a head full of plaits; (2) Peaches, the luscious, sly, loose black woman; (3) Caldonia, the matriarch - fat, loud, and emasculating; and (4) Aunt Chloe, the stalwart Christian Voodoo Crone.2

The images of the black woman projected in American literature have not adequately reflected the

reality of her existence in America. Commenting on the way black women are characterized in literature, Sarah Wright wrote, "Mothers are treated as stranglers, as people who eternally refuse to 'cut the naval cord' even as the child grows up to be one hundred."3 She also spoke of the overused "stern and fearsome grandmother" stereotype. Other images have been the tragic mulatto - the black/white woman torn between the black world and the white world, belonging to both, but accepted by neither, and the Mammy, the big, black woman forever suffering and enduring, but making no effort to overcome.

The black woman's challenge to these images has been recorded by editor Pat Crutchfield Exum, whose Keeping the Faith gives credence to the black woman writer's efforts to present positive and complete images of black life. Pat Exum describes the black woman writer as a "participant observer" attempting to shatter racial myths and projecting a social consciousness and black self-awareness. Exum contends that

...like the women who wrote before them, contemporary black women are attempting to counter long-standing social myths, to turn them around into positive and complete images. The stereotypes of the loveless, rootless black family, the worthless black man and the black child are more than the negative images that have been imposed upon them...things that do happen are not

treated as isolated instances of black madness.

Thus it is evident that rather than being content with blaming others for maligning the black woman in literature, the black woman writer has assumed the responsibility of projecting realistic images of the many facets of black womanhood. The black woman writer has become a conscious image-maker fostering a positive self-image in the black woman.

One black writer who has been very outspoken about the manner in which black women have been characterized in literature is Paule Marshall. Born in 1929 of Barbadian parents who immigrated to America shortly after the First World War, Paule Marshall is the author of several works which depict various dimensions of the black female experience. She has written *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, both novels, and *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*, a collection of short stories.

Described as a writer "whose sense of ambitious responsibility to her sex and to her race has added a
genuineness to her high aesthetic aims," Paule Marshall has worked in various New York City libraries and has written feature stories for the magazine Our World, often traveling on assignments to Brazil and the West Indies. Her stories have appeared in periodicals and anthologies, and she has received a Guggenheim Fellowship (1961-1962), the Rosenthal Award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1962), the Ford Foundation Theater Award (1964) and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (1967).

According to Paule Marshall, the portrayal of the black woman as a character in American literature has been confined to stereotypes and fantasy figures which have little to do with the black woman in reality. She writes,

...the black woman as portrayed has suffered the same unhappy fate as the black man. She has in a sense been strung up on two poles and left hanging. At the end of one pole, there is the nigger wench - a sensual, primitive, pleasure-seeking, immoral, the siren, the sinner...

At the other end of the pole, we find that larger than life figure, the Negro matriarch, who dominates so much fiction - strong, but humble, devoted, devoutly religious, patient, wise beyond all wisdom, the saint, the mammy...

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It is not necessarily criminal to write about matriarchs, wenches, sinners or saints, but what is criminal in Marshall's viewpoint is that the black woman has been confined to these stereotypes. Marshall continues, "The black woman is denied the complexities, the contradictions, the ambiguities that make for a truly credible character in fiction."

The underlying reason for the way in which writers have chosen to portray the black woman are many. Paule Marshall argues that the purpose was to justify the inhumane abuse unleashed upon her. For if, in the minds of white America, the black woman was viewed as less than human, whites could abuse her without having felt they committed any transgressions against mankind.

Black sociologist Joyce Ladner's assessment of the manner in which black women were conceptualized in the minds of white America offers a similar hypothesis. According to Joyce Ladner, the black woman was viewed, on the one hand, as a loose and immoral woman. However, because she endured the harsh economical and social conditions that ensued beyond bondage, she was perceived as being stronger than other women and certainly stronger than the black man whom she purportedly emasculated. This dualism of the immoral nigger wench and the emasculating matriarch...characterized the way in which the black woman is perceived by the dominant society.

\[11\] Ibid., p. 21.
(the towering pillar of strength and an immoral person who cannot approximate the white woman, who has become the adorned symbol of femininity)...

Throughout the decades, this dual image of the black woman so pervaded the American psyche that, according to Paule Marshall, black writers at one time succumbed to it. She charges that rather than directing their concerns toward capturing the richness and complexities of black life, and exploring the fullness of black character, black writers reacted by creating counter-stereotypes and one-dimensional caricature-like characters. Marshall cites as an example of such counter-stereotypes, the reappearance of the tragic mulatto as a genteel woman who was as good as her white sister despite her few drops of black blood.

Literary critic Nancy Tischler also has spoken of the tendency of black writers to oversimplify black characters in literature. In *Black Masks: Negro Characters in Modern Southern Fiction*, she described how black writers adopted anti-stereotypes in their depiction of black characters. Tischler defined stereotype as a "refusal to come to grips with the ambiguity, diversity, and complexity of human nature."  This refusal leads to the same stereotypes with which Paule Marshall has taken issue in her search for complex and diverse characters in literature.

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Some black writers whom Paule Marshall cites as having escaped "the narrow confines of the stereotype" include James Baldwin (Go Tell It on the Mountain), John Williams (Sissie), Alice Childress (Like One of the Family), Gwendolyn Brooks (Maude Martha), Dorothy West (The Living Is Easy) and, of course, herself (Brown Girl, Brownstones).

Directing her attention more specifically to the role of the black woman writer in portraying the black woman in literature, Paule Marshall states that the black woman writer is confronted with the task of refuting all the various stereotypes about black women. She prescribes ways for the black woman writer to undertake this task.

One is for the Negro writer, when dealing with Negro life and Negro characters, to write about that life and depict those characters in full, in all their complexity and richness... the writer has to remain at all times true to her personal vision, even though it might not be in fashion...another responsibility is to tell her story with eloquence, and according to the highest literary standards. 14

In an attempt to assess the extent to which writer Paule Marshall follows the prescriptions she implores other black women writers to follow, this study will examine the black women characters in Paule Marshall's Brown Girl, Brownstones, Soul Clap Hands and Sing, and The Chosen Place, The Timeless People. The following study of

Paule Marshall's black women will hopefully determine whether or not they are diverse, complex, and credible fictional characters.
CHAPTER I

BROWN GIRL, BROWNSTONES

"In Paule Marshall are combined two segments of the African heritage - West Indian and Afro-American."¹ Her visits to Barbados as a child and her later assignments with Our World magazine allowed Paule Marshall to spend considerable time in the West Indies where she became closely acquainted with the dialects, customs and folkways of her ancestors. In Brown Girl, Brownstones she captures and preserves the richness of the West Indian culture and fuses it with the Black American experience, weaving a moving account of a West Indian family's struggle for survival in a new cultural environment.

"Containing poetic imagery as effective as that in Toomer's Cane, dialect as precise as that of Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, and the gentle warmth found in Brooks' Maude Martha, Brown Girl, Brownstones is the story of the youth and maturation of Selina Boyce."² She is the brown girl searching for an understanding of herself and her West Indian heritage, growing up amidst the brownstones abandoned by whites fleeing the neighborhood.

in Brooklyn. "Racial conflict and the anger and frustration it nurtures are part of this tale, but equally, if not more important, are the personal conflicts of men and women making roots in a new land, of men and women caught in duels of love and hate, of ambition, envy, and failure."³

When *Brown Girl, Brownstones* begins the reader is introduced to young Selina Boyce, the ten-year-old daughter of Deighton and Silla Boyce, her Barbadian immigrant parents. It is through their parental clashes and the struggle of other West Indians around her that Selina's growth from a young girl to a woman becomes meaningful. Selina's mother, Silla Boyce, is a fugitive from the poverty of rural Barbados, and is struggling to make for her family a respectable living in America. Deighton Boyce, Selina's father, is nostalgic and yearns to return to his homeland.

Selina is caught up in the conflict between her father's desire to return to Barbados and build a house on a plot of land he inherited from a sister, and her mother's determination to sell the land to make a down payment on the brownstone house they are living in and leasing. Silla sees nothing worth returning to Barbados for and is obsessed with achieving a life of respectability in the United States. In her obsession she contrives a plan by

which she sells the land without Deighton's knowledge or consent. Deighton gets revenge by squandering the money on presents, clothes and a golden trumpet.

Selina's allegiance is to her father who, later injured in a war plant, finds solace in the cult of Father Divine. When Silla turns Deighton over to the authorities to be deported for entering the country illegally, Deighton either jumps or falls from the ship when it is in sight of his homeland, and drowns. Blaming Silla for the death of her father, Selina becomes more estranged from her mother. In her anger Selina rejects all that her mother stands for, while searching for the meaning of her own existence. "Her release from the image of her father and her advances to womanhood are signalled by a love affair with a Barbadian bohemian, whose failure as a painter stems from his subjection by a possessive mother." ⁴

Selina's later encounter with racism while in a white dance troupe opens her eyes to the suffering borne by her mother, the other West Indians and all Blacks in America. For Selina this confrontation brought an understanding of herself and what her mother represented. Before this confrontation she had had no sense of her mother's suffering, nor did she develop any until she herself suffered from the failure of a weak man to give her the support she needed.

in a crisis.\(^5\) In her maturity Selina accepts all that is best in her heritage but rejects the chauvinism and the petty materialistic ambitions of her West Indian mother.

In *Brown Girl, Brownstones* Paule Marshall provides several images of black womanhood that transcend the one-dimensional stereotypes that are so omnipresent in black literature. Commending Paule Marshall on the way she portrays her characters in this novel, critic Philip Butcher writes

> Paule Marshall handles deftly a rich assortment of characters, all delineated in depth, all functioning within the configuration of a transplanted West Indian culture gradually modified to conform to the patterns of American life. \(^7\)

"Paule Marshall succeeds in interlocking the lives of her main characters so thoroughly, in such a necessary way, that though it is possible to isolate them for the purpose of analysis, it is hard to think of them except in relation to one another."\(^8\)

However, let us examine closely the black women whom we meet in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. First there is the heroine, Selina Boyce. The manner in which Paule

\(^7\)Ibid.
\(^8\)Miller, *Op. Cit.*
Marshall describes her as a child in the opening pages of the novel foreshadows the difficulties Selina will have in adjusting to her environment. Selina is a thin child with "a truculent face and eyes too large and old." (6) Her eyes were not the eyes of a child, for

...something too old lurked in their centers. They were weighted, it seemed, with scenes of a long life. She might have been old once and now, miraculously, young again - but with the memory of that other life intact...she did not belong here. 9

Although Selina favored her father and defends her father's dreams when attacked by her mother's practicality and realism, there was a part of her that always wanted the mother to win. Still she repeatedly denies that part of her mother's personality that she identifies with. It is not until Selina comes to understand the source of her mother's inner strength that she accepts the fact that she is, in truth, her mother's child. Selina can later tell her mother, "Remember how you used to talk about how you left home and came here alone as a girl of eighteen and was your own woman?...That's what I want."10

Silla Boyce, Selina's mother, is a strong, determined, hard-working black woman who fled the slavish toil she

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10Ibid., p. 307.
knew as a child in Barbados, and who, as she speaks, becomes "the collective voice of all Bajan women, the vehicle through which their former suffering found utterance." (45) Silla displays a perceptive understanding of the order of things in white America. She is thankful for not having a son to die in another "white man's war." She believes in God, but she is neither pious nor passive; in her own words, "each man got to see God for himself."

Silla believes that despite discrimination, blacks can make headway in America. She understands the power and race struggle among whites and other ethnic groups in America and verbalizes this to the other Bajan women with whom she associates.

...People got to make their own way. And nearly always to make your way in this Christ world you got to be hard and sometimes misuse others, even your own... It's true the roomers is our own color. But if they was white or yellow and cun do better we'd still be overcharging them. Take when we had to scrub the Jew floor. He wasn't misusing us so much because our skin was black but because we cun do better...Power is a thing that don really have nothing to do with color...Take this world. It wun always be white...It gon be somebody else turn soon - maybe even people looking near like us. But plenty gon have to suffer to bring it about. And when they get up top they might not be so nice either, 'cause power is a thing that don make you nice. But it's the way of this Christ world best-proof! 11

\textsuperscript{11}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 224-225.
To Silla life means "having a little something so you can keep your head up and not have these white people push you 'bout like you's cattle." (172)

In her determination to make it to the top, Silla destroys those for whom she has worked so hard to make a better life. Silla worked in the war plants, made and sold Barbadian delicacies, and did day's work, hoarding every possible penny to help secure the family's entrance into prestigious Crown Heights. Deighton's refusal to engage in this struggle for a piece of middle-class white America draws contempt from Silla. She accuses him of not being a "real-real Bajan man," and further thwarts his attempts to escape his "Bajan" responsibilities by having him deported. Silla's determination to get what she wants finally results in the destruction of her husband and the alienation of her daughters.

In speaking of the Bajan mothers in Paule Marshall's Brown Girl, Brownstones, Henrietta Buckmaster said

The mothers in this story are all strong and tend to devour; most of them have a fervent realism which miscarries. 12

Examining Silla as a Bajan woman/mother in light of Henrietta Buckmaster's criticism that the women in Brown Girl, Brownstones "are strong and tend to devour," one would conclude that Buckmaster's assessment is correct. Other reviews of Brown Girl, Brownstones have similarly

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described Silla as "iron-willed and industrious"¹³ and "gaunt and strong."¹⁴ However, despite her strength and the fact that she contributes to the destruction of Deighton's dreams and indirectly, his death, Silla is not an emasculating termagant. The responsibilities for his failures cannot so easily be blamed on Silla because of Deighton's shortcomings.

Before one can state for certain why Deighton failed there are many questions to be considered. Had Deighton's failures prior to coming to America made him a broken man? Did Deighton refuse to face the reality that his blackness meant restricted economic and social gains in white America? These are questions that cannot be dismissed by simply saying that Silla emasculated her man.

The creator of this character had this to say about Silla:

...the mother is complex. Strong, yes. Determined to make her way, and yet, at the same time, weak, as we all are weak. Loving and yet at the same time quite capable of destroying those she loves. Reaching out to her children, and at the same time, driving them away. ¹⁵

Both Silla's strengths and her weaknesses are human qualities

¹³The Times Literary Supplement, Friday, August 8, 1960, p. 533.
that make her not only complex, as all individuals are, but truly a credible character.

The other Bajan women/mothers in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* are portrayed as strong in comparison to their weak and too frequently irresponsible husbands. For example, in conversations about who is making it in terms of the number of houses purchased, the Bajan men do appear weak.

...Look Eulise Bourne. She is buying another despite the wuthless husband...Vi Dash on Fulton Street crying poor but she buying the second house bestproof. But how she does do it, and the husband is nothing but a he-whore? How yuh mean? She does beat he and take 'way the money, nuh... 16

One exception to this sketch of the black woman is Gert Challenor, wife of the successful leader of the Barbadian Association and whom the other Bajan women scorn for her docility. She is clearly the submissive, obedient wife who responds eagerly to her husband's requests and agrees quickly to his words of wisdom.

The strangling mother image is also present in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Such is the case of Selina's lover Clive, who either will not or cannot break the stronghold of his possessive mother. Clive and Selina often discussed Clive's mother and Clive once stated

Mothers? Hell, they seldom say die!... They form you in that dark place inside them and you're theirs. For giving life,

16 *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, p. 73.
they exact life. The cord remains joined, and all that implies. They hold you there by their weakness, their whining, their sickness, their long suffering, their tears and their money...We're all caught within a circle of women, I'm afraid, and we move from one to the next in a kind of blind dance. 17

However, Clive's weakness is that he recognizes his mother's possessiveness but continues to seek the protection of her possession instead of "cutting the cord" and becoming his own man. It is this weakness in him that forces Selina to end their relationship.

There are other models of black womanhood that Paule Marshall provides in Brown Girl, Brownstones. There is the whore Suggie Skeete, who becomes more than just a sex-starved woman who indiscriminantly hops in and out of bed with men. Like the other West Indians, she has difficulties adjusting to the new cultural environment. Suggie has also suffered humiliation and racial abuse while trying to find happiness and peace of mind.

Every Saturday, her day off, she waited for a lover, knowing that she could not endure the next week without having someone tonight on the noisy bed. Tomorrow, early, she would return to the sleeping-in job and the insolence of white children, the lonely room under the high roof... 18

Suggie is a roomer who lives in the brownstone house that Silla is buying; Silla later has her evicted as an undesirable tenant. She feels the pressure of the other West Indians who scorn her laziness and immorality, but she

17Ibid., p. 262.
18Ibid., p. 18.
fails miserably at the factory jobs the other Bajan women seem able to succeed with. In her resistance and hopelessness, Suggie laments that she "ain gon be like them, all cut out the same piece of cloth." (81) She says,

> When people see me coming they gon know it's Suggie Skeete, even if it's only because I's the biggest whore out... 19

Selina is Suggie's only friend and the only one who treats her "like she was people." It is Suggie who encourages Selina to shed the black garb she has worn so long in mourning of her father, and urges her to begin living again.

Another character who helps guide Selina's search for an understanding of herself and her people is Miss Thompson. "A drawn woman, faded brown in color and no longer young," Miss Thompson operated a beauty parlor during the day and worked as a cleaning lady in an office building at night. She carried the scars of her battle with life in the form of a festering "life-sore" on her foot.

Miss Thompson was not caught up in the West Indian race for status, but she understood Bajan people's motivation and fervor. It was this understanding that she begged Selina to seek in order to understand her mother. She counseled,

> ...So when you start talking so big and smart against people, you'll be talking from understanding. That's the only time

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19Ibid., p. 81.
you have a right to say whether you like them or not, or whether what they done was right or not. But you got to understand why first. 20

Like Miss Thompson, Selina’s older sister Ina is a minor character. Her calm acceptance of things as a maturing youth contrasts with the turbulence and rejection of things that characterize Selina’s maturation. Quiet and withdrawn, Ina always avoids conflicts and seeks peace and solace in a quiet corner where she can be left alone and untroubled by others’ problems. Ina finds fulfillment in the church (to the disgruntlement of her mother). She willingly, but unhappily submits to a future already cut out for her - marriage to a safe West Indian and a life in a small home that will soon be graced with two well-behaved children.

These are the women of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Although their aspirations differ and they travel diverging roads in pursuit of happiness, they all have suffered because of their blackness. The protagonist Selina finds that her safe world is shattered when the mother of a white friend commends Selina on developing her race’s "natural talent for singing and dancing," and then urges her to say something "in that delightful West Indian accent." (288-289) Listening to the woman praise how Selina does not even "act colored," Selina finally sees reflected "in those pale

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20 Ibid., p. 218.
eyes...the full meaning of her black skin." (289) Seeing clearly for the first time the image which whites saw when they looked at her, Selina finally realizes that "like the night, she was to be feared, spurned, purified - and always reminded of her darkness." (291)

Silla and the other Bajan women realize the limitations that being black in America has put on their aspirations to be a part of middle-class America. Because blacks are relegated to lower paying jobs, Silla and the other women must do day's work to supplement the incomes of their husbands. As servants in the homes of whites, Silla and the others are subjected to all kinds of racial abuse.

Even Miss Thompson found the carefree days of her youth marred by an attempted rape during a visit with her relatives in the South. She was assaulted by a white man who resented how she acted like an "uppity nigger." In his futile attempt to rape Miss Thompson, the white man gashed her foot with a rusty shovel. The infection that later ensued accounts for the festering "life-sore" which many years later forces Miss Thompson to walk with a cane.

The legacy of these suffering black women has been a strength and endurance passed from generation to generation, from mother to daughter. Selina knows now that "like all her kinsmen, she must somehow prevent it from destroying her inside..." (291) The common suffering
of Silla, Suggie, Miss Thompson, Selina and the other Bajan women makes them one. This oneness is expressed by Selina at the close of the novel when she realizes

...she was one with Miss Thompson...one with the whores, the flashy men, and the blues rising sacredly above the plain neon lights and ruined houses...And she was one with them: the mother and the Bajan women, who had lived each day what she had come to know. 21

The black women of Brown Girl, Brownstones surpass the boundaries to which stereotypical, one-dimensional, stock characters are confined. On the contrary, the major female characters are realistic representations of different models of black womanhood. The portrayal of Silla Boyce demonstrates Paule Marshall's attempt to seriously capture the network of sentiment, motivation and misfortune that are a part of human behavior. Silla is presented as a strong woman/mother; but her strength is both a positive and a negative force, for those whom she so fervently loves are in many ways destroyed by that love. However, Silla is presented in such a way that although the reader may dislike what she has done, he is sympathetic towards her and understands her actions.

There are several dimensions to the portrayal of Suggie Skeete. She is not presented as a typical whore. Paule Marshall portrays her as a black woman whose many relationships with men occur because of certain psychological and emotional needs that for some reason cannot be

21Ibid., pp. 292-293.
satisfied otherwise. The reader can accept Suggie and her frustrations without being asked to pass judgement on her morals.

The heroine, Selina Boyce, may act like many adolescents on the road to maturity, but she cannot be defined as a typical teenager experiencing growing pains. The dynamics of her maturation in this novel embrace the confusion of two cultures in conflict. She represents the synthesis that occurs as a result of two ways of life meeting and merging to create something distinctly new.

These are some examples from *Brown Girl, Brownstones* which indicate how Paule Marshall has carefully constructed realistic fictional characters. The portrayal of the black women in this novel encompasses the diversities, the complexities and the contradictions that characterize human behavior. For this reason the black women in this novel are truly credible fictional characters.
CHAPTER II

SOUL CLAP HANDS AND SING

The futility of an aging man's search for identity and meaning in life is the theme which unifies the four short stories which comprise Soul Clap Hands and Sing. In four short stories, each named for its locale, Paule Marshall presents a man unsuccessfully grasping at life before it is gone and the woman involved in this last desperate attempt to recapture life.

"Barbados," the first story, describes the efforts of a small Barbadian landowner who is struggling to find himself after returning from a self-imposed exile in America. Mr. Watford sought refuge in America as a young man after the death of his parents left him in abject poverty. For fifty years he worked in Boston as a hospital attendant, accumulating wealth which he, as an old man, brought back to Barbados. Mr. Watford lived a cautious life characterized by loneliness and hard work, the panacea which he prescribed for the black race.

Despite his wealth, Mr. Watford is a lonely man harboring hatred and contempt for the race to which he belongs. His indifference to the plight of Blacks in Barbados and his attempts to make Blacks an insignificant part of the orderly world around him characterize Watford's daily existence.
A young village man who comes to harvest Watford's coconuts pays Watford the respect that only a white man would have received during Watford's youth. The memories that the young man's servility conjures up only serve to heighten the contempt that Watford has for the black race. The young man wears a political button which reads, "The old order shall pass." This button both mocks and challenges Watford because in a sense, he represents the old order - the hatred and subservience to which Blacks on the island are subjected and which compel them to leave the island to get work. The young man belongs to the Barbados People's Party, which advocates black control of a government that will provide jobs for Blacks and will eliminate the need for Barbadians to go to England and America in search of work.

While attempting to convince Watford of his responsibility of providing work for the poor, a local shopkeeper entreats Watford to hire a servant. The next morning she appears in Watford's yard. In describing her, Paule Marshall writes:

The folktale of creation might have been true with her; that along a river bank a god had scooped up the earth - rich and black and warmed by the sun - and molded her poised head with its tufted braids...her bare feet like strong dark roots amid the jagged stones...she might have been standing there always waiting for him.  

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Thus it is almost as though some supernatural or spiritual force had compelled Watford to return to Barbados to confront his roots.

Watford feels that the girl's presence is an intrusion into the order of his daily routines, and, of course, he resents that. Although he reluctantly permits her to stay, he refuses to have anything to do with her. He takes no more notice of her than he does the moths flying about him; he refuses to share of himself. It is Watford's intention to make the girl's presence as insignificant as that of the other Blacks around him. However, his attempts to do this prove futile.

As loneliness begins to haunt Watford, he finds the girl becoming more and more an important part of his orderly microcosm. When she leaves for the annual August Bank Holiday outing, the lonely Watford finds it difficult to adjust to her absence. His mind is filled with images of the girl being despoiled by lewd men. He fights an urge to punish and protect her, to find her and lead her back to the house.

As Watford sees the girl returning from the excursion with the young man with the political button, the competition between Watford and the young man grows; both are in pursuit of the girl's affections. As Watford sees them frolicking in the field, his need to prove himself better than the young man intensifies. The young man is able to offer the girl new life, new direction, and a
sense of identity. The young man symbolizes the promise of a better life for Blacks in Barbados, while Watford symbolizes the contempt and subservience of the old order. Watford feels that if he could only prove himself better than the young man, he could win another chance at life. However, when Watford turns to the girl, she spurns him, telling him that "he ain' people." It is through this rejection that Watford eventually realizes the "waste and pretense which have spanned his years." Suddenly the meaning of his life becomes clear.

...it had been love, terrible in its demand, which he had always fled. And that love had been the reason for his return...But all Mr. Watford could admit...was simply, that he had wanted to live - and that the girl held life within her... 2

It is the young man who wins the girl. Her relationship with him transforms her into a woman, defines and brings her life into focus. "There was a woman's force in her aspect now; a tragic knowing and acceptance in her bent head, a hint about her of Cassandra watching the future wheel before her eyes." (25) The girl now wears the young man's political button which seems to steady and protect her. She has become a part of the new order, and in condemning Mr. Watford, she condemns the old order and any qualities of the old order which he represents. The passing of Mr. Watford becomes symbolic of the passing of

\[2\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 40.}\]
the old order and the coming of the new order. The girl embodies the Blacks with whom Watford refused to identify, and his final acceptance of the girl (his people) comes too late; he belongs to another order whose time has run out.

A similar attempt of an aging man to recapture life through the affections of a young woman is found in "Brooklyn." This story traces the search of a broken Jewish college professor for fulfillment in life through an affair with a young black school teacher. As a result of an investigation in which he would neither confirm nor deny allegations about his Communist affiliations, Max Berman is stripped of his job at a community college in upstate New York. After living the life of a recluse, he returns to Brooklyn where he grew up, an aging frustrated man, to try again at life. He is hired to teach a French literature course in a small community college in Brooklyn.

One of Max Berman's students is Miss Williams, a young, southern mulatto school teacher who has come north to work on her master's degree. A Jew who suffered because of his ethnic background, Berman identifies with the suffering that Miss Williams' blackness represents.

Her presence brought a fleeting discomfort and irritation; discomfort at the thought that although he had been sinned against as a Jew, he still shared in the sins against her and suffered from the same vague guilt; irritation that she recalled his own humiliations. 3

Berman feels that through a relationship with Miss Williams

3Ibid., p. 38.
he can do penance for all the sins he has committed against mankind and therefore escape suffering. Miss Williams

...seemed to bring not only herself but the host of black women whose bodies had been despoiled to make her. He would not only possess her but them also...Through their collective suffering, which she contained, his suffering would be eased. 4

Berman waits for an opportune moment to approach Miss Williams. He finds an opportunity when he detains her after class to discuss the merits of a paper she has written on Gide's The Immoralist. At the suggestion that the paper has the makings of a master's thesis, Miss Williams is quite eager to hear his comments. She begins to explain what she feels is the philosophy expressed in The Immoralist: in order for a person to live and know himself, somebody else must die; and the only way one begins to know what he is and how much he is capable of is by doing something which tests him.

Berman's interest in the paper Miss Williams has written is merely a pretense; he really has no interest in her paper or in what she thinks. In suggesting to Miss Williams that they get together to discuss her thesis, Berman proposes that she come to his home to spend the weekend. This proposition sends a shocked Miss Williams away where she begins to seriously examine her life.

Miss Williams' life has been characterized by confusion created by her protective parents who sought to

4Ibid., p. 40.
shield her from racism. All her life her parents warned her that if she left white folks alone, they would in turn leave her alone; she was admonished to stay away from niggers (anyone darker than she). They sheltered her and attempted to make her middle-class existence in white America as safe as possible. She was unable to marry the man she loved because he was too dark for her parents. After her parents died, Miss Williams began to realize the confusion that plagued her life. She saw that she had no sense of racial identity because she had been taught to avoid both the black world and the white world. Who was she and with what or whom could she identify?

Berman's proposition forces Miss Williams to seek an answer to this question. She comes to see that despite her fair complexion, she is as black and as vulnerable as any other black woman. Because of Berman she now understands how the white world perceives her. Her realizations permit her to identify with other black women and the sexual abuse that has accompanied them throughout history. A new beginning has come for Miss Williams.

Like Gide's immoralist, she does something daring in order to test herself as a black woman. She accepts Berman's offer and goes to his estate, feeling brave for the first time in her life. She forces him to see exactly what he is - an old, lonely man, lusting after black flesh, seeking to extract her vitality. She denies him the
opportunity for salvation through the sexual exploitation of a black woman. Finally, Miss Williams knows what she is and accepts her blackness with a strength and new determination to take back to her students in Richmond. As in the case of the girl and Mr. Watford in "Barbados," the parting of Berman and Miss Williams forecasts an awakening and a new sense of direction for the young woman, and loneliness and ultimate death for the aging man.

Loneliness and death appear to be the inevitable fate of the aging men in Soul Clap Hands and Sing. Such is true for Gerald Motley, the protagonist of "British Guiana." He is an aging director of a broadcasting station, who realizes that he has been the victim of the false image that others have created of him. A mixed breed Guianan, Gerald Motley is one of the colored elite of Georgetown, British Guiana, and shares his class's indifference to the colony's troubles. Educated in England, Motley has lived through a string of jobs secured by various members of his wealthy family. Now that he has dissipated the wealth of his family and betrayed the pride that went with it, he spends his remaining days in self-mockery.

Motley's confused identity begins with the many racial strains which combined to make him; he is part white, part Chinese and part black. "This sense of being many things and yet, none, this confusion, had set the pace of his life." (70) Those around him continue to offer him the image of the successful man - the first
black to hold a position such as his. Actually his job is a mere sinecure and Motley is unworthy of any accolades which may have been bestowed upon him. Motley is a man who has not fully realized his purpose in life; and he blames Sybil Jeffries, the woman whom he loved, for preventing him from discovering his purpose in life.

Sybil Jeffries is the Chinese-Negro woman whose affair with Motley twenty years earlier caused Motley's wife and child to leave him. The daughter of a Chinese shopkeeper, Sybil did not belong to the colored elite of Georgetown, but her European education provided her with opportunities which she would not have gained otherwise. She became the first black reporter for the Georgetown newspaper and later worked with Motley at the broadcasting station. After she left Guiana, Sybil went to Jamaica where she is now assistant program director of Radio Jamaica.

Despite her many accomplishments, Sybil is a lonely woman. Her successes in both British Guiana and Jamaica contrast sharply with her unhappiness with Motley, a later broken marriage, a string of frustrating love affairs and her continuous loneliness. Unlike her prosperous sister Murie, a town doctor, Sybil has never been able to become a part of British Guiana.

The many years of Sybil's past relationship with Motley had been characterized by a frightening loneliness
that always seemed to be a part of her. Motley both
resented and feared that part of Sybil's love that included
her loneliness and suffering.

...whenever he had slept with Sybil she had
not only brought her body and laid that
beside him, but her loneliness also...her
intense, almost mystical suffering, asking
him to silently assuage it. But she had asked
too much. He would have had to offer up him-
self to do so and he refused. 5

Although Motley deeply loved Sybil, he would not
marry her. Some people said it was because she was too
dark for him and did not belong to the colored elite, but
Motley had other reasons. Underlying his refusal to commit
himself to her was not only his fear of her loneliness,
but a deep resentment of her denying him the true vision
of himself. During the earlier years of their relationship,
Motley ventured out into the uninhabited Guiana bush in
search of what he claimed was the true vision of himself.
Sybil interrupted this search by urging him back; and
Gerald has never forgiven her for that.

When Sybil returns to British Guiana twenty years
later, she not only brings with her the memories of their
love, but also the memories of that day in the bush. She
returns seeking Motley to fill the job of coordinator of
Radio Jamaica; however, he finds her suggestion that he
fill the job ludicrous. Reflecting about how Sybil always
urged him to undertake tasks he had no ability to perform,

5 Ibid., pp. 309, 93-94.
Motley realizes

She had, how often in the past, urged him to something just in this way, not knowing as he had secretly known that it was not hesitancy or a lack of confidence on his part, but simply the terrifying awareness of his deficiencies. 6

Sybil is finally able to see in Motley the confusion that began with his mixed heritage and would end with his death. She grants him his final wish by agreeing to talk to his young assistant about the job; this is her final farewell to Motley, who like Watford in "Barbados," dies never having found a sense of identity or a purpose in life.

"Brazil" captures the desperation of an aging night club entertainer in pursuit of the identity which he lost on the road to greatness. Heitor Baptista Guimares found that when he forfeited his name to become O Grand Caliban, he also relinquished the identity of Heitor Baptista Guimares. As he prepares to announce his retirement, Caliban realizes that he is lost in the image created by O Grand Caliban and can no longer tell where O Grand Caliban ends and where Heitor Guimares begins. Caliban’s frenzied efforts to recapture the identity of young Guimares sends him back to the slums in search of some memory that will assure him that he is, in fact, Guimares. However, the search proves futile, and he is forced to accept the fact that Caliban is someone who

6Ibid., p. 122.
belonged to another time.

Caliban also begins to see himself in relation to the city of Rio, where he is a highly acclaimed entertainer. Despite the admiration he has always received, Caliban has always felt like a small animal who "...had been fitted out in an absurd costume and trained to amuse, some Lilliputian in a kingdom of giants, who had to play the jester in order to survive." (140) The city seemed indifferent to his success, and he knew there would be other Calibans to take his place. Rio had made him famous, had given him an identity, but after his retirement as O Grand Caliban, he would be left without a self.

Miranda, Caliban's white Brazilian partner, ruthlessly reminds him that he is getting old. The decor of her apartment permits Caliban to clearly understand his relationship with the enormity and whiteness of Rio. He sees himself as a house pet, a tiny dog who lends an amusing touch but has no real place there. The abundance of whiteness throughout strips him of importance, denies him all significance.

In an attempt to recapture his youth and the identity that went with it, Caliban marries Clara, a young black woman. The marriage was easy to arrange because Clara was the granddaughter of a distant cousin. Upon seeing her that first time, he had wanted to confess to her as to a priest. Now Caliban finds himself
disappointed with Clara because she is not able to provide him with satisfying memories of his youth.

It was as if he had married her hoping that she would bring, like a dowry, the stories and memories of him as a young man, as Heitor, only to discover that he had been cheated. 7

In a symbolic attempt to lash out at the pretentiousness of Rio, the sham that had consumed his identity, Caliban, in a frenzy destroys the gaudy furnishings of Miranda's apartment. With this destruction vanishes confusion and despair, leaving an emptiness which Caliban knows will remain with him to the end. His only remaining desire is to sleep beside his wife, to find the peace and tranquility that the Black Madonna can offer.

Soul Clap Hands and Sing describes aging men who face loneliness and death; it tells of a search for identity and purpose in life. However, this work is not only about old men grasping at life before it is gone, but also about human relationships. This was realized by a critic who wrote

Time and again Paule Marshall brings us to the question of human relationships. Beyond the barrier of race, all men are the same; they share the same loneliness and the same hopes; the bridges of communication have to be built. 8

7Ibid., p. 156.
Such is true of the men in this work. Despite their differences, all of the men were forced to confront and evaluate their purpose in life. They were all pursued by the loneliness they sought to evade. They all experienced the pain of not knowing who they were and the pain of not making commitments to others.

Each of the stories of Soul Clap Hands and Sing shows an elderly man who suffers the final and fatal defeat of his life at the hands of a woman. As critic Henrietta Buckmaster writes, "...the women are essentially passive instruments who deal the fatal blows which strip away tenuous hopes." The girl in "Barbados" spurns Mr. Watford when he needs her the most; Sybil denies Motley the true vision of himself; Clara is unable to give Caliban access to the memories of young Heitor Guimares.

In each story the women involved are both a positive and a destructive force. The girl in "Barbados" represents both the destruction of the old order and the coming of the new order. Sybil represents both Motley's salvation and his destruction. Her attempts to make a good life for him would save him; but Motley would be unable to live the kind of life Sybil wants for him. It would surely kill him. Clara's inability to provide Caliban

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the memories he needs to salvage his lost identity destroys his hopes of finding young Heitor; but she is there to comfort him after he sheds the sham, the confusion of his life, and is left with nothing but his Black Madonna.

Since the black woman in Soul Clap Hands and Sing appears as a minor character, she is not developed to the extent that Paule Marshall's women are developed in Brown Girl, Brownstones. It would be completely incorrect to state that the women in Soul Clap Hands and Sing are complex and diverse characters. However, they are diverse in the sense that the women represent different social and economic levels of the societies to which they belong; but their characterizations do not involve the many dimensions that we see delineated in the black women characters formerly discussed.

Paule Marshall uses the women in this work to demonstrate certain needs of mankind: the need for an identity, the need to love and have that love reciprocated, the need to understand one's purpose in life. The black women in Soul Clap Hands and Sing serve as a mirror through which each man can view his failure to fulfill these needs. However, the black woman as a character in this work has not become the victim of any stereotyped images or caricatures of female "types." Even in the limited presentation of black women in this work, Paule Marshall has not done an injustice to the black woman in literature.
CHAPTER III

THE CHOSEN PLACE, THE TIMELESS PEOPLE

The Chosen Place, The Timeless People has been described by critic Robert Bone as the best novel to be written by an American black woman. The culmination of five years of toil, this novel describes a West Indian community facing the West on the one hand, and clinging to a memorial past on the other. The Chosen Place, The Timeless People dramatizes what follows when a well-meaning crew of Americans embark upon a remote end of a West Indian island, bringing with them plans to improve the lives of an otherwise "backward" people. The chosen place is Boumehills, a near-wasteland of eroded hills on the fictitious Bourne Island. It is a place that lives its past, and its inhabitants, the timeless people, are committed to that past. Boumehills is

a little cut-off community that had, in the days of slavery, conducted a successful slave revolt and had never forgotten it. It was a community of cane cutters and fisherfolk that strangely clung to its memorial Africa - living it, in fact, each day, and resisting all efforts to modernize it into something shoddy and less secure. 1

To Boumehills comes the advance research team of

a large American research development project. This group includes Saul Amron, an aging Jewish anthropologist, Harriet, his wife, and Allen Puso, Saul's young assistant. Like the timeless people, each of these Americans will be forced to come to grips with his past and in doing so will ultimately either accept Bournehills or reject it.

Because no attempt was ever made to understand the people of Bournehills, other redevelopment projects in the past have failed. The Chosen Place, The Timeless People traces Saul Amron's attempt to understand Bournehills and its people, a task which in the process of completing, he begins to see more clearly those events in his past which marred his success with similar projects. While focusing on Saul's attempt to solve the enigma surrounding Bournehills and its people, this novel provides insight into the relationship between an oppressive colonial structure and an oppressed people, and delves into the lives of Saul, his wife Harriet, Allen, and the protagonist Merle Kinbona.

Merle Kinbona is not just the main character of The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, but the force which knits the entire novel together. She is the link connecting the many levels of Bournehills society - from the higher echelon representing the absentee landlords to the poor, lowly canecutter. Merle's lineage to the great Vaughn family, once great landowners in Bournehills, gains her respect
from the bigwigs in town; however, she clearly identifies with the small people of the village. As literary critic Robert Bone puts it, "She commands the loyalty of the villagers by virtue of the obeisance they accord her suffering."²

Merle Kinbona embodies Bournehills. Her face which "attested to some profound and frightening loss," reflects the African and Western influence on the lives of the people of Bournehills. Merle's dress is made from cloth of vivid tribal motifs and like many West Indian women, she wears the heavy, crudely-made silver bangles. Still Merle's hair is pressed and her ears are adorned with earrings carved in the form of saints found on certain European churches. The way Merle dresses suggests not only the clash between the Western and African traditions, but also her attempt to recover something lost in her experience with each. Paule Marshall writes

...she had donned this somewhat bizarre outfit, each item of which stood opposed to, at war even, with the other, to express rather a diversity and disunity within herself, and her attempt, unconscious, probably, to reconcile these opposing parts, to make them a whole...she appeared to be trying to recover something in herself that had been lost; the sense and certainty of herself as a woman, perhaps... ³

Merle's life has been a painful one. The child of the white landholder, Erskine Vaughn, and his sixteen year-old black mistress, Clara, Merle saw her mother shot down at the age of two. Her father made no attempt to apprehend her mother's murderer; it was rumored that Vaughn's wife had killed Merle's mother. Vaughn virtually ignored Merle until his wife died. Then when Merle was thirteen, he sent her to the town's fashionable girls' school and later to college in England. However, Vaughn still never devoted any time to her.

Merle spent close to fifteen years in England where she studied history at London University and ran around with an "offbeat" crowd. After her father learned of her intentions to leave school and stay in England, he discontinued her allowance. Merle was then taken in by a wealthy white woman who kept Merle dependent on her with money and gifts. (Paule Marshall implies, but never clearly states that the woman was a lesbian.) After several years Merle, disgusted with her relationship with the woman and not quite sure exactly what she was, left the woman and tried to make it on her own.

Merle then met Ketu Kinbona, an African student who was studying in England. They eventually married and Merle later gave birth to a daughter. The woman meanwhile continued to send Merle money which Ketu was told had come from Vaughn. When Merle attempted to sever completely the ties with the woman and accept no more money or gifts, the woman informed Ketu of Merle's past. Declaring Merle
unfit to be the mother of his child, Ketu took their daughter and returned to Africa. The desertion by her husband made Merle very ill; after being nursed back to health by friends, she returned to Bournehills, hoping to sort out her life and come to some understanding about herself.

Merle has always sought to suppress the memories of her mother's death and the loss of her husband and child while in England. She blames herself for not remembering the face of the person who murdered her mother, despite the fact that she was only two years old at the time. In addition to this, Merle still cannot understand how she allowed herself to lose the two most important people in her life - her husband, who without realizing it proved to Merle that she was still a woman, and her daughter.

Despite her painful life and the suffering she has endured, Merle is not a broken woman; however, the pain she has known has taken its toll upon her. Her incessant chatter serves as an antidote for the painful memories that she continues to suppress. She is always in motion "as if she is afraid to let herself be seen clearly in repose and without distracting sound, as if some secret may be revealed by stillness...or silence."4 Whenever she becomes extremely upset about things, she is subject to seizures during which time she remains shut up in her room.

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oblivious to the world around her.

During his initial encounter with Merle, Saul's reaction is to escape from this woman "who had not learned how to live with her bitterness and pain, how to control and disguise her rage; and who moreover insisted on holding every stranger accountable." (90) Merle certainly is not a woman given to biting her tongue, and she freely admits that her sanity has been the high price she has paid for speaking her mind. Her bitterness toward her father is common knowledge around Bournehills. Her abhorrence of the absentee landlords who subjugate the people of Bournehills, and their puppets who maintain the status quo on the island, comes as a surprise to no one.

Merle's understanding of the importance of her people's past and her loathing of the colonial structure which oppresses them underlies her commitment to the people of Bournehills. When she expresses to Saul her disapproval of "any white man coming here from some muck-amuck country like America with all sorts of plans," she is speaking for the people of Bournehills. She realizes that any interests whites have expressed in the island have been for selfish reasons and she can speak firsthand of the subjugation that comes with "Greeks bearing gifts." (She wears the saint-carved earrings that the wealthy woman in England gave her as a reminder of her subjugation while in England.) Despite her knowledge and understanding, Merle is as powerless as the rest of the
people of Bournehills. She tells Saul, "You feel so helpless at times you want to scream like a mad woman or rush out and murder somebody." (228)

Merle cannot do anything to alleviate the conflict between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in Bournehills until she resolves the inner conflict that has brought her life to a standstill. Outside of talking and her useless ranting and raving, Merle takes no definite action to help her people. She tells Saul from the very beginning:

I'm a talker. Some people act, some think, some feel, but I talk, and if I was to ever stop that'd be the end of me. And worse, I say whatever comes to my mind and the devil with it. But I'm harmless. And I mean well. (65)

Her constant chatter about everything but those painful memories of her past, and her assumed indifference to things is merely a facade. She realizes that certain events in her life have immobilized her and she longs for some force to give purpose and meaning to her life again. She says:

I'm about as much use as those old people you saw dragging around this yard awhile back. As half-alive as them. No, less so. At least they shuffle around trying to keep the circulation going, but I've stopped dead in my tracks. Paralyzed. People in Bournehills would say somebody's worked obeah on me...And they'd be right, because in a way...I am like someone bewitched, turned foolish. It's like my very will's gone. And nothing short of a miracle will bring it back. I know. Something has to happen - I don't know what, but something - and apart from me (because it's out of my hands I'm convinced) to bring me back to myself (230)

What does bring Merle back to herself is the relationship that later develops between her and Saul.
He helps Merle to understand the importance of going back into history, even though going back is painful, and attempting to come to grips with the things that have happened in life. He stresses that people, as well as nations, have got to face up to their past. Merle comes to believe that she must go back to her individual past and gain an understanding of all the things that have gone into making her what she is, before she can go forward. Going back for Merle means returning to Africa to find her child. Unless she does this there will always be a void in her life. Until she fills that void, she will never get around to doing anything with what is left of her life. She says

I'll just go on as I am. Doing nothing but sitting out on this veranda...blaming everything for the botch I've made of things. And talking...going on like some mad woman all the time but doing nothing. And letting the least little thing set out my head, but doing nothing. (464)

As a result of Saul and Merle's mutually supportive relationship, Merle can talk about her shameful experiences in England, the loss of her husband and child, and the guilt she carried because she could not identify her mother's murderer. She commits herself to returning to Africa to find her child, the first step in a new life for Merle. She can now talk about her plans to go into the hotel business when she returns, the possibility of going back to the teaching profession, and the idea of starting a
radical political party, one that will truly address itself to the needs of the people of Bournehills. All this, of course, is talk, but once Merle steps on the plane bound for Africa, her talk takes on a new dimension. They are the words of a Merle no longer running from her past, but planning for the future. She has donned an Afro hairdo and discarded the earrings that she wore as a reminder of her subjugation.

The Merle that emerges at the end of this novel is a strong woman who has survived the suffering and shame of her past and who has quieted the inner turmoil that was taking its toll on her psychological well-being.

*The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* is a story of deep personal relationships. These relationships cross color lines, ethnic lines and class lines. It is a story of people using each other knowingly to satisfy personal needs. For example, Merle and Saul use each other to assuage the hurt of painful experiences of the past. It is through her relationship with Saul that Merle finds herself and gains the strength needed to pick up the pieces of her life.

Again, as in her other works, Paule Marshall demonstrates her concern with the relationship of an individual with other people in the world, regardless of color, race, or country, and the individual's important search for identity. Such is particularly evident in the case of the protagonist Merle Kinbona.
In speaking of Merle, West Indian critic Edward Brathwaite says:

Merle Kinbona...talks incessantly, but she never comes off the page. Her mannerisms, her moods, her devotions are lovingly described. But they remain descriptions. We are brought too close to her; there are too many protruding angles and details for us to be able to enter the West Indian consciousness of the book since she represents it...we simply read about Merle with her tremulous earrings, her 'inner sunlight' eyes, her sudden hoots of manic laughter and her ruined Bantu face. The fictional representation of the middle class West Indian woman's predicament has eluded Paule Marshall. 5

It is not certain that Paule Marshall was attempting to depict the middle class West Indian woman's predicament (whatever that is). Merle certainly could be said to belong to middle class West Indian society, but her allegiance is with the poor villagers with whom she identifies. She does own property, and her economic status is such that she does not have to work in the canefields, but because she does not forsake the poor to struggle for a little niche among the "haves" in Bournehills, she is unlike other middle class blacks on the island.

Paule Marshall does not use Merle as a tool to propagate the cause of self-determination among oppressed people in the world. What she does present is a realistic

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portrayal of a woman and her relationship with other individuals around her. Merle is presented in all her diversity; we see her complex family history, the relationships in her life that have had different effects on her personality, her likes and dislikes, her fears, strengths and weaknesses.

Merle expresses a certain level of political awareness, but her political consciousness does not initiate any action. Like the other people of Bournehills, Merle is waiting for the coming of a messiah, another Cuffe Ned, to unite the people and bring about a revolution. Before Merle can entertain any thoughts of taking steps to change things in Bournehills, a revolution must occur within her; she will have to build something out of the shattered pieces of her life and move on. This is the story of The Chosen Place, The Timeless People.

Another important character in this novel is Leesy, an old widow whose husband was crushed to death in the rollers of the Cane Vale sugar factory. Leesy shares a closeness with Merle and can empathize with the pain and suffering that Merle has known. It is she who helps care for Merle during the seizures that leave Merle helpless. Leesy possesses an understanding of Bournehills that escapes many people, and she exhibits a strange prescience of the turn of events that will later effect the lives of the people there. Her mistrust and aversion to machines
is symbolic of the island's resistance to the technology which the West has introduced to Bournehills.

Through Leesy, Paule Marshall captures the attitudes of the folk toward Western attempts to bring them in step with other civilizations. Leesy has seen development projects come and go, and she is immune to the excitement surrounding the research team's presence on the island. She reflects to herself

...But I wonder why these people from Away can't learn...Everytime you look here comes another set of them with a big plan. They're goin' do this, they're goin' do the other, and they end up not doing a blast. And they always got to come during crop when people are busy trying to get their few canes out of the ground and over to Cane Vale, always walking about and looking...like they never seen poor people before...I tell you they's some confused and troubled souls...Change Bournehills! Improve conditions! Ha! (142)

Nothing ever changes in Bournehills, and Leesy is quick to remind those around her with her scathing "ha" which never ceases to quiet any talk of change.

Leesy knows that the wounds of the "have-nots" are too deep for band-aid attempts to ease the suffering with development programs. Her remedy for bringing about change is to completely level Bournehills with a bulldozer and build it up again from scratch. Interpreting what Leesy says from a political perspective, nothing short of a revolution which completely destroys the old order and allows for the creation of something new, will bring
meaningful change to Bournehills.

Leesy is content to work the small half-acre plot of land that she owns. She fervently cares for the land with the belief that her family in England and America may one day return to Bournehills financially spent or ill. If they had nothing else, they would at least have the small plot of land off which they could survive. This was the "belief by which she had ordered her life, which had kept her alive beyond her time." (34)

In a sense, Leesy, "is perhaps the island - old, endurable, nursing the spirit of the living with the memory of the dead." She exhibits a strong belief in the spiritual and the supernatural. She always wears a bit of camphor in a sachet pinned to her undershirt as protection against a variety of ills and as a phylactery against imagined evils. Hanging on the wall of her small old home are the silver-plated plaques inscribed with the names and dates of the family dead. These plaques, taken from the coffins of her dead relatives, are polished every week without fail. Each night when she goes to bed she drapes a dark cloth over the mirror so that the ghosts of the family dead will not come to look at themselves while she sleeps.

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Leesy knows of the arrival of her great-nephew Vere beforehand because she was given the sign by his dead mother's spirit. One day while working in the yard, Leesy is visited by the spirit of Vere's mother, who tells Leesy to go and see about her boy. This vision prompts Leesy to make weekly journeys into town to inquire about Vere at the labor office. Vere's return brings joy to Leesy, but this joy is later replaced with concern when she sees that the Vere who left her many years ago is not the Vere who has returned.

Leesy's disapproval of Vere's preoccupation with a wrecked car that he purchases and rebuilds for the Whitmonday car races causes distance to develop between himself and Leesy. Leesy warns him that the car "don't mean him no good," and upbraids America for corrupting her boy. She knows of the human sacrifices that machines exact from mankind, and when Vere is killed in the race, Leesy is not the least bit surprised. Another prophesy is thus fulfilled.

A very proud woman, Leesy is not foolish, nor does she believe in false hopes. Old and wise, Leesy analyzes carefully the world around her. In contrast to Merle, who easily displays her emotions, Leesy does not openly display her feelings; nevertheless, Leesy loves and grieves. Although Paule Marshall doesn't devote much time to this character, Leesy is still a
significant character because, like Merle, she embodies Bournehills. Whereas Merle represents the hope of the new order, Leesy represents endurance amidst the old order. The characterizations of these two women form the epic of survival that Paule Marshall ingeniously spins in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People.*
Paule Marshall has successfully created a variety of characters which depicts the many dimensions of what it means to be a black woman in a Western/European society. The black women characters in her fiction assume numerous faces and represent various levels of the societies to which they belong; they have backgrounds as diverse as the communities from which they come. Different social and economic levels are represented by the black women in the works of Paule Marshall. There are professional women, domestics, fieldhands, social climbers, whores, housewives and students. Their ages range from the young teens to the elderly; some have little or no education, while others have college degrees. Together they constitute a realistic portrait of black womanhood.

Paule Marshall combines a variety of plots, settings and conflicts to create realistic representations of black women, and in doing so, projects positive images of the black woman in literature. Such settings highlight a black community on a West Indian island (The Chosen Place, The Timeless People), in Guiana and Brazil (Soul Clap Hands and Sing), and in New York City (Brown Girl, Brownstones). Both urban and rural settings are used to portray experiences of urban and rural black women in the
western hemisphere.

The works discussed have serious plots - growing up, searching for love, struggling for survival, and searching for identity. Self-realization and the search for identity are recurring themes which are characteristic of Paule Marshall's works. In many cases, the women are forced to undergo a reawakening, a development of a certain level of consciousness in order to obtain meaning and direction in their lives. These self-purgations to which these women subject themselves permit them to better understand and relate to those around them. Such is true of the protagonist in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.

Selina Boyce, the protagonist in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, must suffer the pain of a racial confrontation before she accepts her West Indian heritage and her blackness. Her encounter with racism while in a white dance troupe opens her eyes to the suffering borne by her mother and the other black women in her community. It is not until this experience that she begins to identify with her people and accepts the fact that her black skin makes her life different than that of the white youths around her.

Miss Williams of "Brooklyn" (*Soul Clap Hands and Sing*), a young mulatto school teacher, gains a sense of identity when she is propositioned by an aging Jewish professor. Until that experience she had never established
an identity with either the white race or the black race. Because of Professor Berman's proposition, Miss Williams clearly sees exactly how whites perceive her; she learns that despite her fair complexion, in the eyes of white America she is as black and as vulnerable as any other black woman. Her acceptance of this fact assists her in establishing a sense of identity which gives her a sense of direction that she can hopefully share with her young black students.

Merle Kinbona of The Chosen Place, The Timeless People must come to grips with her painful and shameful past before she can take any steps to improve her life or the lives of the people Bournehills. She finally comes to believe that only by accepting and understanding her past can she go forward; she is able to accept those parts of her past that not only immobilized her, but kept her sense of identity at best nebulous. Once Merle establishes an identity with her past, she is able to confront those memories with a new strength and plot a course of direction for the future. She is able to return to Africa in search of her child, she accepts the shame of her experiences in England, and she no longer feels guilty for not being able to identify her mother's murderer.

The black woman as a character is very prominent in the works of Paule Marshall. In both Brown Girl, Brownstones and The Chosen Place, The Timeless People the
protagonists are black women, and other black women in the stories have major roles; in *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* black women are not limited to mere character types (wenches, matriarchs, etc.) but have many characteristics which transcend any one type.

In all of the works discussed black women have struggled to maintain that inner strength which enabled them to surmount obstacles of race, sex and economics. Silla Boyce in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and Merle Kinbona in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* are classic examples of such women. The black women are shown as individuals with different aspirations, with different strengths and weaknesses, all trying to realize some kind of goal. These women are weak in some ways and strong in other ways; they are desired by men and rejected by men; they are capable of being hurt by those whom they love and equally capable of hurting those whom they love.

Paule Marshall gives an overall fair representation of the black woman in literature. There were no matriarchs or wenches; there was one mulatto struggling with her identity, but hers was a battle that she clearly won when she accepted her black identity. There was one "strangling mother." The minor characters in Paule Marshall's works were more or less one-dimensional, but they were in no way constructed to malign the black woman.

This study has sought to explore the black woman as a character in the works of Paule Marshall to determine
if she has created in her works the kind of black woman
which she implores other black writers to create. This
paper has examined Paule Marshall's black women characters
in light of her charge that too often the characterization
of the black woman has been limited to stereotypes and
fantasy figures, to nigger wenches and matriarchs. The
findings of this study are that Paule Marshall has
successfully created diverse and complex characters.
These characters are delineated with an apparent sincerity
in depicting the true characteristics of human behavior.
In her attempt to provide realistic representations of
the black woman in fiction, Paule Marshall demonstrates
a serious commitment to the female sex and the black
race.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS


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PERIODICALS


**BOOK REVIEWS**


**DISSERTATIONS**