



RESEARCH ARTICLE



VOICES OF RESISTANCE: GENDER AND IDENTITY IN PAULE MARSHALL'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT



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This article examines the self Identity and Gender discrimination in the works of Paule Marshall: *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969), *Praise Song for the Widow* (1983), and *Daughters* (1991). Using the scope of postcolonial feminism, this research highlights the impact of Marshall's narratives on black women's lives across various cultures and histories, particularly in the context of their personal and collective encounters with power structures. Her main characters are Selina Boyce, Merle Kinbona, Avey Johnson, and Ursa McKenzie illustrate diverse generational experiences of women coping with transgenerational trauma, prescribed social roles, and the diaspora. Every character experiences reconfiguring transformations that are facets of a deeper struggle for acceptance, self-definition, and belonging.

Based on this article, Paule Marshall's fiction as a chapter of postcolonial literature and black feminism. In doing so, it shows how these women continue to have a difficult time while also celebrating her inexhaustible spirit and the transformation she achieves. According to Marshall's work, the idea of empowerment, in an always paradoxical way, cannot be reduced to an act of rebellion but is in itself a redemptive act of anti-rhetorical self reclamation; a feminist resistant tale is a story of self reclamation, it is experienced in activity that is shaped by tradition, self-narrative and spiritual renewal. The article contends that the journey of self-identity in Marshall's fiction is very intimately tied to the collective memory of resistance and the ongoing fight for freedom and self-assertion.

Keywords: *Paule Marshall, Self Identity, Gender Discrimination, Resistance, Postcolonial Feminism.*



**INTRODUCTION**

Themes such as identity, cultural displacement, gender oppression, as well as social resistance have been part of the African American literary tradition for a long time. In this tradition, Paule Marshall breaks through the overwhelming space, particularly through the nuanced portrayals of Black women in their race, gender, class and culture crossing paths in which they challenge dominant narratives. Her novels are *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969), *Praise Song for the Widow* (1983), and *Daughters* (1991) delve deeply into the lives of African diasporic women and their quest for self-definition amidst oppressive social structures. By moving back and forth between the Caribbean and the United States, Marshall demonstrates how legacies of the past, stories of the community and the choices of individual characters intersect to shape the identities of her protagonists.

Brown Girl, Brownstones, Marshall's debut novel, follows the coming-of-age story of Selina Boyce, a Barbadian-American girl growing up in Brooklyn. Selina's journey toward self-awareness unfolds against the backdrop of diasporic tensions, generational conflict, and the pressures of assimilation. The novel foregrounds the challenges of negotiating multiple identities—ethnic, national, and gendered—while asserting one's individuality. She represents this broader fight for autonomy and voice among immigrant women countered by the contamination represented by rigid expectations from their immigrant mothers and their communities.

Marshall also reroutes her attention to a fictional Caribbean island known as Bourne Island where she looks into the socio-political consequences of

colonialism on the people of the island in her book *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. Merle Kinbona is a fiercely independent and complex woman who serves as a cultural and emotional anchor for the island's people and the narrative centers on her. According to Merle's personal trauma and political activism, personal identity is entangled with national consciousness. Both, colonial legacy as well as patriarchal systems, contribute to the marginalization of women ; however, Marshall also reveals the potential of collective resistance and transformation through Merle.

In *Praisesong for the Widow*, the journey of Avey Johnson, an African American middle aged widow, is a spiritual and psychological one during which she goes on a Caribbean cruise only to leave it, for an ancestral pilgrimage. Avey's reconnection with her African heritage and spiritual roots is traced out in the novel and it suggests that self identity is intricately related to the memory of the past and the sense of being part of a particular world. Avey reclaims a feeling of self through ritual, music, and oral history, repressed for so many years of materialism and assimilation into the white American culture.

Finally, *Daughters* follows in Marshall's footsteps in concerning identity through the character of Ursa McKenzie, a political scientist and the daughter of a Caribbean politician. Caught between her American education and Caribbean culture, Ursa struggles between the two burdens of familial expectation and gender inequality. The patriarchal structures she desires to fight make her romantic relationships and professional choices. The novel foregrounds the generational tensions between mothers and



daughters, while also underscoring the importance of political agency and self-determination.

Across these four novels, Marshall crafts a rich tapestry of female experiences that interrogate the cultural, psychological, and political dimensions of identity. Her protagonists are not passive victims but active agents who confront and resist the forces that seek to define them. By centering Black women's voices and experiences, Marshall offers a counternarrative to dominant literary and cultural discourses that have historically marginalized them. As Carole Boyce Davies asserts, "Marshall's work functions as a site of resistance, challenging the silences imposed by history and reclaiming a space for black women's stories" (Davies 134).

This article aims to examine how Paule Marshall portrays the quest for self-identity and the experience of gender discrimination in her selected novels. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory and cultural criticism, the analysis will explore how Marshall's characters negotiate the complex interplay of race, gender, class, and culture in their journeys toward self-realization. Particular attention will be given to the strategies of resistance—both personal and communal—that her protagonists employ in asserting their identities and challenging oppressive structures.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand a quest for self identity and experience of gender discrimination in Paule Marshall's chosen novels, need a critical theory from postcolonial feminism, intersectionality, and a diasporic identity theory. Using these theoretical lenses, it unpacks the various degrees of meaning contained in Marshall's work, especially in regard to how Black women, in the African diaspora,

experience and negotiate their power positions based on the issues of race, gender, class, and history.

POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM :

The limitations of traditional Western feminist theory led to the development of postcolonial feminism, which instead recognizes the relation between what is considered female from a Western ideology specifically with the context of a woman's cultural and historical context in the postcolonial setting. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Trinh T. Minh-ha for instance argue that feminist theory should investigate how colonialism, nationalism, and cultural imperialism impact how gendered experiences take place.

According to Mohanty, Western feminism deduces the 'Third World woman' as one monolithic subject at the mercy of tradition and patriarchy (Mohanty 61). On the contrary, postcolonial feminism is focused simply on the agency of women in colonized and formerly colonized societies while still taking into account the after effects of colonial times on gender roles and gender identity. In other words, Paule Marshall's work is a case in point of this framework as her novels depict women who inhabit or are created by postcolonial conditions, however, within the Caribbean or the seeping diasporic communities of the United States.

Marshall's characters not only resist patriarchal oppression but also colonial ideologies with which they continue to live. For example, Merle Kinbona in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* symbolizes a postcolonial consciousness that challenges both neocolonial economic exploitation and traditional gender norms. Postcolonial feminism thus provides a



vital lens for understanding how Marshall's protagonists seek liberation on multiples fronts

INTERSECTIONALITY

Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the term "intersectionality" refers to the interlocking systems of oppression that individuals experience based on their multiple identities, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality (Crenshaw 1245). For African American and Caribbean women, identity formation cannot be understood in isolation ; rather, it is shaped by the overlapping forces of racism, sexism, and socioeconomic marginalization.

Paule Marshall's protagonists inhabit these intersectional spaces. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Selina Boyce is a Barbadian-American girl who grows up in 1940s Brooklyn, mediating the tensions occasioned by race, culture, and generations. Her identity is shaped by her Blackness, her Caribbean heritage, her status as a woman, and her position as an immigrant's daughter. Her mother's drive for material success clashes with Selina's desire for independence and authenticity. The novel highlights how class aspirations intersect with racial and gendered expectations, revealing the multifaceted nature of Selina's struggles.

In *Daughters*, Ursa McKenzie faces similar dilemmas as she attempts to reconcile her political activism with her personal and cultural identity. The pressure to conform to societal expectations as a daughter, lover, and professional woman forces her into a continuous process of negotiation and resistance. Intersectionality allows for a more nuanced understanding of these challenges, as it situates them within broader systems of power.

DIASPORIC IDENTITY AND CULTURAL HYBRIDITY

Diaspora theory, as discussed by Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, emphasizes the fluid, fragmented, and hybrid nature of identity among people of African descent living outside the continent. Hall asserts that identity is not a fixed essence but a "production" that is "always in process," particularly for diasporic subjects who must negotiate between cultural traditions and contemporary realities (Hall 222). Gilroy, in *The Black Atlantic*, frames diasporic identity as transnational, shaped by the movement of people, ideas, and cultures across borders (Gilroy 19).

Marshall's protagonists exemplify this diasporic hybridity. Avey Johnson in *Praisesong for the Widow* undergoes a profound transformation as she reclaims her African ancestral roots. Her spiritual awakening is facilitated by her journey from the United States to the Caribbean, where she reconnects with the cultural traditions her modern American life had suppressed. This return to origins is not literal but symbolic—a re-centering of cultural memory and identity through diasporic consciousness.

Similarly, Merle Kinbona's identity in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* is informed by both her European education and her deep ties to Bourne Island's colonial history. Her internal conflicts and outward activism reflect the tensions of belonging to multiple cultural and historical legacies. Diasporic theory helps to illuminate the fragmented and reconstructive nature of identity in Marshall's narratives.

FEMINIST THEORIES OF RESISTANCE

The concept of resistance is central to feminist theory, particularly within the framework of Black feminist thought. Scholars like Bell Hooks and Audre Lorde have emphasized that resistance is not merely



oppositional but also creative—it involves the reimagining and reconstruction of self, culture, and community. Lorde writes, “The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,” highlighting the need for alternative strategies rooted in women's lived experiences and cultural practices (Lorde 112).

In Marshall's fiction, resistance takes many forms: it may be a daughter's rejection of traditional expectations, a widow's spiritual rebirth, or a political activist's defiance against neocolonial forces. These acts are not just responses to oppression but affirmations of identity and agency. They reflect what Patricia Hill Collins calls the “outsider-within” perspective, wherein Black women develop unique insights and modes of resistance from their marginalized positions (Collins 14).

For instance, Selina's refusal to join the Barbadian Association in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* is a rejection of conformist ideals and a declaration of her values. Merle's leadership in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* challenges the gender norms of her community, even as she battles personal trauma. Avey's dance in the ritual at the end of the *Praise Song for the Widow* becomes a symbolic act of liberation and spiritual return. Each character demonstrates that resistance is not a singular event but a continuous, dynamic process of self-assertion.

SELF IDENTITY AND POSTCOLONIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Merle Kinbona, the central figure in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, represents a more complex and fractured self—one deeply marked by trauma, colonialism, and exile. As a mixed-race woman raised in the Caribbean, educated in England, and politically active in Africa, Merle embodies a postcolonial subjectivity shaped by displacement and

contradiction. Her return to Bourne Island is both physical and psychological—a confrontation with a past she cannot escape and a community she longs to heal.

Merle's identity is fragmented: she is at once insider and outsider, revolutionary and damaged survivor. Racial, gendered, and colonial burdens, including personal betrayal and political disillusionment, essentially stimulate her mental breakdown. Her return to the island's life however has to contend with unresolved pain and in activism, seek redemption. Merle also recovers her own identity that was oppressed or wounded as she becomes involved in grassroots political mobilization.

By using Merle's character, Marshall explores how the recovery of postcolonial identity does not just see the restoration of one's self but the painful reconstruction of one's self. Merle's relationship with the white American sociologists, Saul and Harriet, highlights the racial and cultural power dynamics that still operate in postcolonial spaces. She refuses to face their gaze, their attempts to tell her story, and their will to tell it. Her final act was to walk to the village after a storm as she was determined to rebuild herself by being responsible and taking part in the culture of the place.

RECLAIMING THE SELF THROUGH ANCESTRAL MEMORY

Amongst all of Marshall's protagonists, perhaps, Avey Johnson's journey in *Praisesong for the Widow* is the most literal and symbolic. Avey is a middle class African American widow, who goes on a Caribbean cruise, she disembarks on the small island of Grenada for no apparent reason. All of this leads to a spiritual odyssey a reconnection with her ancestral heritage



and a reconstitution of a self, eroded by its materialism and cultural amnesia.

Memory does its bit in catalyzing Avey's transformation: personal, and collective. She starts remembering stories her great aunt Cuney told her about the Ibo Landing, a place where just such enslaved Africans had chosen death over bondage. Now the departed memories that were trashed as folklore before, become sacred truths that help her rise. Avey's ritual, community interaction, and her participation in the Lavée, a ceremonial procession, reconnect her to those rhythms, values and cosmology of the African heritage.

Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic' helps to understand the identity reconstruction by Avey. She returns from a diaspora, though not a return home to a single homeland but back into the cultural and spiritual continuum she has lost to slavery and colonization. Avey reclaims a Western modernity-oriented system of embodied knowledge alienated from them, by participating in ancestral rituals. Because she decided to come back to Tatem, South Carolina and be with her grandkids again, she shows a deep rootedness in her roots, a desire for cultural transmission and a set of remembrance and resurrection. She lives outside capitalism and the values that fragment her identity, and the ideologies of assimilation.

INTERPLAY OF SELF-IDENTITY AND GENDER

Paule Marshall's novels are not only intimate explorations of identity but also powerful critiques of gender discrimination. Her works foreground the complex experiences of Black women negotiating systemic patriarchy, both within and outside their cultural communities. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, *The Chosen Place*, *The Timeless People*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, and *Daughters*, Marshall constructs a

lineage of women whose resistance takes different forms—from subtle defiance to radical political engagement. These novels show where gender oppression intervenes with race, class, and colonial history and how the resistance is usually based on cultural memory, community bonds, and personal awakening.

Among Marshall's most robust female figures, Silla Boyce is a combination of the victim and the agent of patriarchal abuse. Silla's drive to own property is in itself a kind of resistance to economic disempowerment in a society where Black immigrant women are marginalized. But her ambition is a patriarchal model of success, one that expects sacrifice and emotional hardness from the person. Silla subverts traditional gender norms in the household, yet she is vilified for enacting behaviors that readers are encouraged to admire in men: strength, assertiveness, and ambition.

Her fight for owning a house is the fight for autonomy in a society that defines value within ownership. Deighton, her husband, is a passive masculine who dreams of going back to Barbados but is incapable materially. An act of betrayal, as well as an act of survival, is when Silla goes and sells Deighton's land in Barbados without his consent. Even if she alienates Selina in the process, these actions highlight the immigrant women's lack of choices. This gives Silla's resistance a double edge : she upends gender roles but also commands others to follow, even forcefully. The cost of choosing to pick her battles as a Black woman in a patriarchal society shows well in her story.

**GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE**

The theme of Merle Kinbona's life is marked by colonial trauma, personal betrayal, and political activism. Merle is a woman and yet she doesn't perform like a 'good woman' in a Caribbean society. She defied convention : she did not marry, remain silent, derive her value from a man. Her strength is also the fruit of pain. It is NOT a sign of weakness to have her mental breakdown but has stemmed from bearing the emotional and social weight of being an activist, mother, and personal sacrifice.

The way that Marshall uses Merle when considering how the resistance has to be rebuilt from ruins. She has a relationship with the American woman Harriet and an impression of her falls under the gaze of both fascination and judgment that evolves into one of mutual recognition. This dynamic speaks to the potential for cross-cultural feminist alliances, albeit fraught with power imbalances. Merle's greatest act of resistance lies in her return to the community, where she recommits herself to local empowerment. Her decision to stay and rebuild Bournehills after the storm is symbolic of her enduring spirit and belief in grassroots resistance.

In *Praisesong for the Widow*, Avey Johnson's awakening from the numbness of middle-class assimilation is a profound act of resistance. Her rejection of the cruise and her surrender to the rhythms of Caribbean life signifies a turn away from capitalist, patriarchal definitions of fulfillment. Avey's journey is not a rejection of comfort per se but of a lifestyle that has alienated her from her roots, her body, and her spirit.

The Lavée ceremony, which she joins on the island of Carriacou, becomes a moment of cultural

and spiritual reawakening. Avey recovers a history of resistance from African and Caribbean traditions through dance, song and communal participation. There is resistance to this gendered and racial erasure, her story is one of reclaiming cultural practices. This is a feminist act of cultural preservation, as she chose to take her story back to Tatem to educate and share her journey with her grandchildren.

As Marshall (2008) presents it, Ursa's resistance is ongoing and multifaceted. There are internalized sexism, familial expectations and societal scrutiny she has to deal with. Through each confrontation, however, she becomes more self-defined. Her story reflects what Audre Lorde describes as "the transformation of silence into language and action" (Lorde 42).

Marshall's novels do more than depict individual resistance—they emphasize the power of collective and intergenerational struggle. Whether through mother-daughter relationships, communal rituals, or mentorship, her characters find strength in others. Selina's tension with her mother, Avey's reconnection with her ancestor, and Ursa's questioning of her familial legacy—all reflect the ways women both inherit and resist gendered oppression.

These novels suggest that feminist resistance is not a monolith. It can be maternal, political, cultural, or spiritual. It can be expressed through economic ambition, ritual participation, or bodily autonomy. What unites Marshall's protagonists is their refusal to be confined by patriarchy. They dig their pockets into spaces of their own making, at great personal cost but always in hopes of transformation.



Paule Marshall's contribution to the Black feminist literary tradition of lived experience, cultural memory, and communal struggle in exploring gender discrimination and resistance. Her characters do not merely survive to be things that we do not want to experience; her characters imagine new ways to be, new ways to love, and new ways to resist.

In Marshall's works, the process of self-identification is not individual but collective. Both assimilation and cultural preservation attempts and self-assertion and societal expectations mark the protagonist's journeys. Marshall's novels are full of the fluidities and complexities of identity that always change with desire and forces external and internal to self.

Marshall's interrogations of various forms of gender, like the rest of her work, also separate critiques of patriarchy. On the other hand, her protagonists retaliate against gendered oppression in different ways; they strive toward economic autonomy, political participation, culmination of power over the dominant culture, and bodily defiance. These acts of resistance are personal, and they are personal in a way where they connect to the history of Black women resisting not only in their bodies but also across the collective. No resistance comes without cost, but it has helped the characters transform and redefine themselves as well as their positions in their communities.

The process of resistance becomes a trajectory where cultural memory matters in the works of Marshall. In many cases, the characters' paths to reconnect with suppressed or forgotten ancestral traditions, oral histories, and collective rituals of various races often lead them to reconnect with other suppressed or forgotten traditions. These are

practices of strength, and empowerment, that allow the protagonists to resist the erasure of their identities and to reclaim their agency.

The Lavée ceremony functions as Avey's spiritual awakening, and following the ceremony she returns to her family and community, a movement that represents a general cultural reclamation. In doing so the ceremony manifests the reconnection to African roots as being significant to struggling against oppression both of gender and race. In *The Chosen Place*, *The Timeless People*, Merle's decision to return and to remain and rebuild Bournehills after the storm signifies a commitment to collective action and the redemptive power of community as well. Marshall illustrates key feminist acts of resistance that stress the unity in resisting the tyranny of patriarchy and colonialism and that collective feminist action is necessary.

FINDINGS

In all these novels, cultural background and community ties are telling constituents of self-identity, which Marshall portrays as fluid and ever-changing. Discrimination on the basis of gender is not simply as personal subjugation; rather it is interlaced with issues of race and class. Many of Marshall's characters reclaim their sense of agency culturally and communally, which embodies a hybrid form of asserting power that is suggestive of collective resistance.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Paule Marshall's novels are a source of exploring self-identity as well as gender discrimination and resistance. According to her works, one should realize that the search for self-identity is never a solitary undertaking, it is always mediated by the social, cultural and historical



settings in which the individuals find themselves. Furthermore, Marshall's characters resist not only for survival but to enter new possibilities for themselves and do it in a way that conditions a better future for their communities.

Marshall's fiction encourages thought regarding the myriad ways in which Black women fight oppression while building up their identity. Her protagonists defy the constraints placed upon them by society to gain back the recognition of their cultural heritage and to proclaim their autonomy. And what they do is, they create by creating new spaces of Black womanhood, and nonvictimhood, but with strength, resiliency, self determination. Marshall's decentering of the Black woman from the category of the abject corpse and her struggle against the forces of terror and surveillance that try to confine her also offer an alternative image of planet Earth in which Black women can be free to formulate their image in their voices

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