
WOMEN UNDER MARGIN: A STUDY OF PAULE MARSHALL'S FEMALE CHARACTERS

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ABSTRACT

From the time she started writing women have been central to her stories. There're a couple of reasons for this. One is that women were central to my world growing up. Her mother and a group of her close friends were the principal people in her early life. They were women of Great Spirit, resourcefulness, and poetry her mother most of all, before her life took its tragic turn. Women are central to her work is that they were seldom the principal characters in the books she read growing up and they were almost never black. So that without being terribly conscious of it, she determined to make women especially black women important characters in her stories when she started writing. To make up for the neglect, the disregard, the distortions, and untruths, she wanted them to be center stage. They're certainly at the center of the story in *Daughters*. Like most of novels, *Daughters* is about people, politics, culture, history, race, racism, morality, marriage, children, friends love, sex, the triumph and sometimes defeat of the human spirit, as as a few other things threw in for good measure. The novel is about the long hard battle we sometimes have to achieve true autonomy. The novel of Paule Marshall demonstrates how Africa functions and is represented in her works. She articulates the need for people throughout the African Diaspora to confront and use the past as a vehicle for empowerment. In this thesis, an attempt has also been made to study Paul Marshall's women protagonists, as portrayed by her in her novels, with a view to understand and appreciate their struggle for survival without probing deeply into the feministic aspects.

Paul Marshall is one of the few women writers who have made an everlasting impact in African-American literature. In her works, she situates her characters in historical context exposing them to their environments. She creates this environment by refreshing their past and also hints at the possibilities of change with the changing times. She is a pioneer in the discovery of themes such as ageism, sexual harassment and nuclear production. Marshall also brings forward the different ways and means her characters adopt to confront their problems and face them realistically. As a black writer she provides insights into various forms of existence such as the search for identity which Marshall herself has struggled with. She allows her readers to relate fully to the characters regardless of the past they bring into their reading. Another major theme involves looking at ancestors and heritage to glean some kind of meaning in one's present life. Her central point, however, concerns the sense of alienation and displacement which minority people experience. She suggests the need for reconciling cultural conflict through self empowerment of her female characters which becomes possible by their involvement with other characters.

In their struggle for dignified existence, they challenge the existing norms of the society by reliable dedication to non-violence defeating all those hurdles which obstruct their growth as well as their access to independence and self-empowerment. Thus, the world of Paul Marshall's fiction has an amazing variety of characters responding to their situations of life in different ways. Some of the forms which manifest it in the lives of the black people are violence, economic constraints and denial of basic human rights of equality and justice. These problems are faced by the blacks since the day they came to America as slaves. The blacks were subjected to extremely cruel and unimaginable tortures to keep them suppressed. Their powerlessness and extreme poverty made them depend on the whites for their survival. They in turn made their women the scapegoats for all their failures. They ill-treated their women folk with the same cruelty with which the whites treated them. But in Marshall's novels this is not the case. The focus of her novels is on the different roles black women are ascribed, either in search of their own identities or in their efforts to help other women find their identities.

DAUGHTERS (1991) a novel was about a West Indian woman in New York who returns home to assist her father's re-election campaign. The character, like most characters in Marshall's fiction, has an

epiphany after confronting her personal and cultural past. Seriously, it's the story of a family, a marriage, and of the young woman, Ursa Mackenzie, who is the sole issue of this marriage. Ursa is of dual American through her mother, a schoolteacher from Connecticut West Indian through her father, a leading politician on one of lands, a man known all his life. *Daughters* is, in part, the story of Ursa's struggle to come to terms not only with her family, especially her father, but with the two worlds she America, where she lives, and the island where she spent her childhood. *Daughters* is also about the array of women have an impact on Ursa's life in one way or another. These "daughters" of the title. Ursa, in turn, is the little girl of "daughters." They're an odd lot, these women. They're from backgrounds, two different parts of the world, even different time. They range from a long ago slave woman by the name Jane, who became a warrior, to Ursa's mother, Estelle, a Delta soror, who falls in love with this man, marries him, and goes to live on the island I call Triunion. It's the of their marriage and the problems of a personal, political, and nature Estelle wrestles with over the years. Estelle's story is an significant part of the narrative. "There's no resisting him," Ursa says of her father. For the women in *Daughters* the Paule *Marshall* possesses the magnetic properties of a polestar, so that for much of the novel these women, including Ursa, are like a constellation around him. In fact, she use that image in the novel.

When Ursa, at the behest of her mother, engineers the Paule *Marshall's* loss at the polls, she not only achieves personal liberation, she also destroys the configuration of polestar and constellation that involves the other women in the novel. Let me point out, though, that the action taken by Ursa at Estelle's orders is designed, not to defeat the Paule *Marshall*, but rather to restore him to his original commitment and values. To repeat the African proverb: "It's woman's power on which a society ultimately depends." And another reminder: whatever feminist note is struck in the novel is not meant to obscure what she hope will be seen as a major theme in *Daughters*: the need for black men and women to come together in wholeness and unity. It is this which informs the novel at its deepest level.

The structure of *Marshall's* different novels—and of *Praise Song for the Widow* in particular—reproduces the cyclical pattern of life, of nature which continually renews itself: *Avey's* life is a mirror image and a continuation of the life of her Grand Aunt Cuney. The past that she captures in the present is catapulted towards the future through her firm decision to share her past with others. For Avey Johnson, things did not work out as smoothly as expected: she had to follow a tortuous passage through gender and ethnic awareness, leading to the reintegration of an identity achieved through the Knowledge of her African roots.

The going back to the past “deconstructs not only linear temporality, but also the chronological progression of setting and characters, liberated from the bondage of time and of space; these characters are thus able to focus their energy on making a mythic journey that will mean the recovery of a dignified identity and a promising future.” The journey-quest is also important for the other protagonists of *Marshall's* fiction. Selina's decision to travel to the Caribbean is a proof that hers is an unfinished story. She needs to keep building on the foundations of her identity just as the brownstones that are laid one by one, she also must gradually achieve wholeness by combining her West-Indian heritage with her American background.

Reena is the perfect example of those who have had to face the irresponsibility's as black women, wives and mothers within social and political frames such as gender and ethnicity. She has been able to overcome the daily conflicts and to survive in a hostile environment and has gained strength in this process that leads to self-acceptance and recognition by others. As for Merle, her wounds have left some scars that continually remind her of her past and present situation in male-controlled society. However, her trip to Africa reveals her strong determination to continue the battle for a change; a transformation stemming from within, with a vision of hope in a future of possibilities for all, including black women.

Merle is fore grounded as the forthright voice who speaks out against the indigenous government which sponsors these and other similar international agencies furthering the vested interests of people in power and exploiting, in the process, the already helpless laborers of the plantations. Merle's colourful

personality and her privileged position among the islanders as Ashton Vaughan's heir whose genteel poverty and LSE socialistic idealism make her **the Little Fella's** champion actually cloak a sad personal story as daughter, woman, and wife. She frequently takes to bed in a depressed frame of mind for a few days, usually subsequent to an impassioned outburst on behalf of her people. In the novella, the representation of her personal life interwoven with the binding external events, invests it with a chronotopicity which leaves the situation at the end of the novel-time inconclusive and opened.

All five protagonists' lives are reinvested with worth because they have decided to "travel in search of their future of limitless possibilities. Marshall's works are very meaningful to black people, and especially to the new generation of black women who are constantly struggling to legitimate a dignified space for themselves within patriarchal society." There has been an important contribution by critics and scholars to her narrative; nevertheless, there are other important issues that hold rich potential for future collaboration. The scope of information can be widened or deepened with complementary studies concerning class awareness, language use, and the importance of family and community structures in Paul Marshall's fiction.

Finally, Marshall in her own artistic vocation can be defined as a writer of multiple experiences, with a full knowledge of the different aspects that intervene in the shaping and construction of an identity. Hers is a somewhat biographical exploration into identity, comprising gender and ethnicity. Marshall fully understands the past and the present and is firmly committed to ensuring the future by being profoundly engaged in the articulation of black womanhood in an anti-hegemonic discourse. Her artistic excellence is achieved because it is constructed as a solid pyramid. Through her novels and short stories, Marshall makes it clear that she looks back to a past of rich traditions in order to strengthen the future of black women, while breaking with a past of submission and of oppression by the ruling ideology.

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