Poetics of Prophecy in Paule Marshall’s novels

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ABSTRACT

Paule Marshall believes that the forces of colonialism have deprived both the oppressed and the oppressor of a sense of identity and purpose. In The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, she concentrates on history, culture and myth. She reveals events on a human, historic, and cultural continuum that evokes a time past in time present. This study attempts to examine poetics of prophecy in Paule Marshall’s novels.

KEYWORDS: Paule Marshall, poetics of prophecy, Colonialism, Time, Culture, History.

INTRODUCTION

Then she remembered the two silver bangles she had always worn. She pushed up her coat sleeve and stretched one until it passed over her wrist, and, without turning, hurled it high over her shoulder. The bangle rose behind her, a bit of silver against the moon, then curved swiftly downward and struck a stone. A frail sound in that utter silence (Marshall 1959:255). With these lines concludes Paule Marshall’s first novel Brown Girl, Brownstones and we are immediately brought into the world of ontological transmutation of the black woman’s existential conditions in America. Selina’s symbolic act of tossing the bangle high into the air and abandoning the Chauncey Street tenements and brownstone houses, where she grew up, is in itself a testimony to Marshall’s prophetic vision that announced that the black woman in America was no more a mule of the world (Hurston 1938:29) carrying the burden heaped on her back but a radiant female hero. By casting off from her imprisoned psyche the dragon of Thanatotic, self-loathing conditions, she marched straight into the world of Eros - a state of self assured Paradise from where she could proclaim to the world in a voice so heroic, and so articulate that they are now the creatoress of a new world where "we build our own temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves" (Hughes 1926:694). The ebony phoenix, the avatar of wholeness, feels herself elevated to the status of divinity of ontological power. "I found god in myself/ & I loved her fiercely" (Shange 1977:67). Selina’s bangle, as it flew through space, triggered around it arcs and circles which defined Paule Marshall as the forerunner of the black women’s renaissance. It was she who, by tracing out new grounds, beating out the first contours of a new era of mind and thus exploring an unchartered territory of new womanhood, forged a path for the black women writers who were to emerge in the 1970s and ’80s. The arcs and circles of Selina’s bangle announced that Marshall, a pioneer in her own right, had already prophesied the themes crucial to defining the "new black womanhood" and a host of other subjects which were to be incorporated into the fictional canon of the makers of that second Harlem renaissance.

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Her novels establish her as the sculptor of "new womanhood". Because, delving deep into the psychological complexities of her characters, Marshall invented new lives which not only challenge society's hegemonic, negative definitions of black womanhood but also seek self-affirmation within the context of she breaks from her predecessors for her women are neither middle-class, bourgeois, romantic, near-white pariahs alienated from their cultural cords, nor victims hopelessly drawn into the "quagmire of sexism" and the quicksand of circumstantial forces, but the self-seekers and perennial rebels who demolish the community's definition and with great strength and power place themselves on the pedestal of humanity thus far denied to them in the history of America.

They are no more "creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain" (Walker 1983:232) but Marshalls and Moseses who illuminate themselves and the people around them through darkness and
crisis. Silla in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, for instance, leads a life that is a paradigm of the community. She is its
touchstone for she proclaims loudly the deep troubles and aspirations of her people.

(She) is not only the mainstay of the Boyce family, but she is pre-eminent in the Bajan community. She is the pioneer, forging a path through unfamiliar territory, cutting bush for those behind her... with her powerful gift of words she expresses... its (Bajarr's) fears and aspirations. She is the avatar of the community's deepest values and needs (Washington 1981a:313).

Merle Kinbona, the enigmatic figure in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, is the breath and bone of Bournehills people, an embodiment, the guardian of the whole community. She is the one who poses a major threat to the white souls pledged to the goddess of America's modern machine world and its power structure. Silla and Merle Kinbona are perhaps the ones who inform Maya Angelou's Vivian Baxter, Morrison's Sula, Walker's Meridian, and Naylor's Mama Day (Miranda), of the power they possessed in them. Marshall "ushered in a new period of female characters in Afro-American Literature" (Christian 1985:103) and prefigured the major themes of black women's fiction in the 1970s: the black woman's potential as a full person and necessarily a major actor on the social, cultural, and political issues of our times (ibidem:10S).

Seeking explorations into the psychic dilemmas, oppressions, trials, triumphs and rejections from the insider's point of view, Marshall examines the innate humanity of her characters who embody in them the qualities that make them neither the queens of the universe nor the helpless actors enacting their tragedy. There is little effort to conceal the pain, and just as little to create the ideal, but a great deal to reveal how black women incorporate the negative and positive aspects of self and external reality into an identity that enables them to meet the challenges of the world in which they must live (McKay 1987:186).

It is through this process that Marshall sees her female characters - Selina, Merle Kinbona and others - attain the state of wholeness, fullness of being and incarnation. She achieved this particularly when the literary scene in America was still dominated by drum-beating "black boys" and "invisible men" with not a single hum of a "tar baby" on the "blue print of their literature," and when society nursed the belief that women did not need any form of creativity other than motherhood. It is with these historical and literary omissions in the mind that we must view Selina's movement toward wholeness, for she proceeds to this task with little precedence in literature (Washington 1981a:319).

Paule Marshall dramatizes the idea of incarnation of new womanhood in all her novels. She sees all her major characters - Selina, Merle Kinbona, Reena and Avey Johnson – participate continually in the process of dying, being, becoming and finally getting reborn into a state which bestows on them the knowledge of their existential tension. Her first novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, for instance, centers around Selina, a girl-child of first generation, Barbadian immigrants, growing up black and female from a traumatic, wintry childhood to maturity and awareness. Pitted hopelessly against a hostile society attenuated totally to the white standards of feminine beauty - blonde hair, blue eyes and white skin with regular features - Selina feels she "carried what seemed the weight of winter in her body, which felt sear, numb and as though laid in some chill place" (Marshall 1959:156). With a damaged psyche and feeling unworthy of white elegance and refinement, she judges her self-worth through white lens. She longs madly to be one of the white dolls' and enters a world of fantasy. Their white hands trailed the bannister; their mild voices implored her to give them a little life. And as they crowded around, fusing with her, she was no longer a dark girl alone and dreaming at the top of an old house, but one of them, invested with their beauty and gentility (ibidem:9).

Probing such a state of mind, Marshall digs into the sickness of the black female psyche damaged by the racist and sexist ideology. To internalize and then to incorporate such a white ideology into the fabric of your consciousness is also to reject your own community, your oppressions and your own value system. Identifying yourself as part of your oppressor also becomes an act of providing a dynamics, vital for perpetuating relentless oppression and colonization of every sort which young Selina fails to grasp. Interestingly enough, the same theme is later explored by Toni Morrison (1978, 1981) and Maya Angelou (1969) in their early works. Adding equally to Selina's torments, confusion and estrangement is the conflict between her parents, Silla and Deighton, over the issue of buying a house. Caught in the crossfire of their conflicting attitudes, Selina finds herself in a Hamletean shell of...
confusion, unable to decide whose daughter she should really be. Dissociating herself from Silla, the mother, she becomes "Deighton's Selina." However, emerging slowly but certainly out of the web of confusion and initiated by the elderly black women, "the poets in the word shop of kitchen," Selina is able
to detect the ideological apparatuses that held her in a state of entombment. She is no longer a white doll but a rebel who must "grab the cane and rush into some store on Fulton Street and avenge that wrong by bringing it smashing across the white face behind the counter" (ibidem:179)

Disentangling herself not only from the white values, but also from the values of her father, a black male, she now becomes Silla's daughter. She now comes to see that "in the world of racism the mother is a fellow victim rather than a natural enemy" (Gayle 1984:10). Selina now perceives Silla as the emblem of ancient African womanhood which the entire western world has humiliated and despised. So, identifying herself with her mother, Selina confesses:

Everybody used to call me Deighton's Selina but they were wrong. Because you see I'm truly your child. 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? I used to love hearing that. And that's what I want. I want it! (Marshall 1959:252).

She identifies herself also with all the oppressed people everywhere in search for a viable "place" and self respect. At the end of the novel, she prepares herself to go to Barbados, the place of her roots, what she calls "centre of life." As she walks along Fulton Street, she finds on her way "spring rose from the pyre of winter" (ibidem:254) and "the moon discovered a ruined park... But despite the ruin, spring stirred and, undaunted, arrayed the trees ... sweetened the air" (ibidem). This renewed self of Selina's now sings and swings in full bloom. Selina's choice of values, her search for roots to understand her self identity is like the challenges thrown to her community, symbolized by the bangle she tosses high before departure. Thus

in making the choice to return to Barbados. . . Selina symbolizes the community's need to restore itself, to recognize the destruction of human values. It assigns even to oppressed people the power of conscious political choice. They are not victims (Washington 1981a:322).

Selina, the prototype of new womanhood, informs Marshall's belief that transmutation of the Black self must come from the knowledge of historical past, for the sense of wisdom that a person gains in the present is not born out of a void but descends from trials, endurances and rejections of the past. That gives sustenance and power for the future too. In fact all of Marshall's characters participate in the act of recreating a self 'through a specific ritual that consists of reentering the house of the their past, both the personal and historical past, and re investing those histories with new meaning (Washington 1981b:3).

And for a black woman, who suffers a tripartite crossfire of oppression, any act of negating her historical past would amount to no less than a sacrilege against her own essential self. To Paule Marshall,

the physical return . . . is a metaphor for psychological and spiritual return back over history which . . . Black people in this part of the world must undertake if we are to have a sense of our total experience and to mould ourselves a more truthful identity .... Exploration of the past is vital in the work of constructing our future (Marshall 1973:107).

Merle Kinbona in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People articulates this succinctly saying:"a person has to go back, really back - to have a sense, an understanding of all that's gone to make them - before they can go forward" (Marshall 1969:468). The yearly ritualistic Carnival dance that re-enacts the heroic feats of slave revolts in the past is not just a dead ritual but a live impetus that provides the timeless people the power and the force needed in the present. It becomes
a ceremony that marks the end of winter and also, . . . the death of the old symbol of power, ... the celebration of the death of Death. Simultaneously, it signifies the advent of summer and the new order, the resurrection of life (Byerrnan 1985:127).

The Carnival resurrects Bournehills people but kills Harriet, the arch colonizer through suicide. Merle Kinbona experiences a renewal in herself, for she also breaks the chains of psychological dependency preparing the way for a second coming of her own self. She now learns that she should survive not only racially but as a woman too. This, then, is the power and force of ever sustaining historical past which Marshall celebrates in all her works. The song of self and history that Marshall sings, echoes down the fictional corridors of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker in the 1970s.

Milkman Dead in Morrison's Song of Solomon (1978) and Jadine in Tar Baby (1981) for instance, break the cocoon of their personality and come to terms with their lives only through the journey into the past. Like Marshall, these novelists believe that the present self must seek a communion with the historical self in order to attain the state of wholeness. In the context of black cultural experiences, this becomes all the more a necessity and a prerequisite for meaningful existence.

This brings forth one more facet of Paule Marshall's apocalyptic vision. She defines the idea of "wholeness, and totality of experience through past" not only in terms of individual existence but in terms of collective experience as well. History, if used creatively, would reveal that the black people must build a world of harmonious human relationship and understanding for each other because they should not only survive but survive whole as well. She is frankly looking for new values, new modes of thought which would not only unite the black community but also obliterate the artificial, egocentric, sexual distinctions alienating black man from black woman. And herein lies Marshall's feminism which differs considerably from the feminism of her sister novelists of the 1970s and '80s because "Marshall presents not a dismissal of the male but an affirmation of the female" (Denniston 1983:45).

As a sculptor of new black womanhood, Paule Marshall does uphold the negation for affirmation philosophy so crucial to the making of a revolution but never subscribes to any ideology of blatant sexual warfare leading the black culture to the morass of fragmentation. The idea of homophobia and divisive tendency is something that Marshall warns everybody against because it is the same phenomenon which led not only to Mother Africa's 'downfall but also contributed freely to the perpetuation of the dehumanizing process of slavery in America. Marshall believes that the sexist oppression of black women must be explored in literature not through inflicting too many wounds upon the black brothers but through a process of understanding, healing up, and through positive affirmation. As an ethnic feminist, she feels that there is a need "of being able to give the Negro man the kind of love and support he so desperately needs in a society that has conspired over the past 400 years" (Marshall 1966:23).

This idea of harmonious gender relationships takes expression in all her works. Silla's obsession to buy a house arises mainly out of her desire to create a protective barrier for her children and husband. Silla starts a fierce quarrel with Deighton, yet loves him intensely. In fact, she acts out of a deeply tormented and highly possessive love for her husband. At the end of the novel, she tells Selina: "I din do it out of hate, it's just that I can bear to see him suffering" (Marshall 1959:251).

Merle Kinbona, a ferocious figure for the white colonizers, becomes feebler than an ordinary loving housewife when she thinks of her husband, Ketu, and her child. Intense is her love for them. "Lifting her face, she offered them her dark cheek to be kissed. And she insisted upon the kiss" (Marshall 1969:68). She yearningly looks for their company and finally, to seek their love, she decides to leave Bournehills and go to Africa. Cassie, the self-affirming protagonist in Marshall's short story, "The Valley Between," fiercely quarrels with her husband, Abe, still reciprocates his love with equal intensity. Her exclamation at the end of the story, "Your supper's ready by now, Abe" (Marshall 1983:24) is not merely an expression of traditional female servitude to man but a promise of harmony and meaningful relationships with the other sex.

An artist committed basically to black cultural solidarity, Marshall believes that the omissions of history could primarily be corrected through better human relationship. Hence she proclaims to the Black world: Let us not create a world of polarization, antagonism, gender-warfare and fragmentation. Let us not accept an 'ideology that shuts us into a false entrapment. Let there not be only womanhood or only manhood but a world of univocal discourse between them. Let the principle of anima and animus that exists so inherently and naturally in everybody be also the aesthetics of our social life and literary exercise. Let us identify the real enemy for; the roots of sexism and homophobia are found in the same economic and political institutions, ... the same extremist circles that inflict violence on people of color are responsible for the eruption of violence inspired by sexist and homophobic biases" (Davis 1989:12).
Hence let us "keep the big guns on the real enemy ... and submerge all breezy definitions of manhood/womanhood ... until realistic definitions emerge through a commitment to Blackhood" (Cade 1970:109).

Fission and fragmentation distort the beauty of black culture. Hence, let us create a world of homogeneity, synthesis, balance and androgyny. Let this be the idiom of our literature too. Only through wisdom and solidarity call "Black American literature ... achieve the across-the-board renaissance" (Watkins 1986:37), a third Harlem renaissance, not only for men or women but for all the souls of Black folk. This was the prophecy made by the flying bangle of Selina.

REFERENCES