



# A Thematic Discourse of Paul Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*

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## Abstract

The article focuses on the thematic discourse of Paule Marshall's *Brown girl, Brownstones* and the character having different facets rooted in their culture and society. Also, It explores the longing of the characters for freedom and escapism from gender oppression and racial oppression. The characters of Silla and Selina struggle to fulfill their desire due to environmental influence. The novel clearly portrays how discrimination of the black community and stress of the very need of reparation for an injustice done to the blacks inspired millions of reading community, imbibed faith and courage in them, and created the thirst for freedom and identity.

## Keywords

Culture, Gender Oppression, Escapism, Stereotype, and Discrimination.

## Introduction

African-American Women Writers of the 20th Century have stamped their presence by their inspiring revolutionary writings. Their writings peel the issues of the blacks. Specifically, the writings of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall, Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks bring limelight the discrimination, physical assault, and mental agony faced by the blacks. Their writings give a new life to the African-American women literary tradition and force to introspect the livelihood of the black women in the American society. They reverberate their self which intertwined with the importance of history, and culture in their writings. Furthermore, their writings guide other blacks who struggle to attain heights in society.

African-American women writers instil the confidence among the readers and sensitize the issues of race, gender and class in the American society. It is not an easy task for the writers to imbibe the confidence in the readers, but it makes possible in the context of African-American women writers because of their concern about the blacks' history.

Though numerous writers brieing out the hardships experienced by the blacks, Paule Marshall is the only writer who shows a distinct style and gives reality in narration. The way she brought up in the society, the perspectives she got from the society shape her fiction. Her works are like her own manifesto. She portrays her characters having different facets yet they are always rooted in their culture and society. In her works, the readers can see characters' yearning for freedom and escapism from gender oppression and racial oppression.

Unlike the stereotypical thoughts, men, women and transgenders do have emotions, regardless of gender, as discussed by Suganya et al in their article “Communal Expectancy and the Authentic Self of Men and Transgenders - Arms and the Man by George Bernard Shaw and Birthday by Meredith Russo” (Suganya et al, 880). The characters she creates are phenomenal and have complex psyche. She fathoms an array of themes like motherhood, sisterhood, marriage, mother-daughter relationship, father-daughter relationship, and deeply inspects how it affects women’s mental health and life.

Nee Valenza Pauline Burke Marshall was born on April 9, 1929 in Brooklyn, New York. Her parents Ada and Samuel Burke were from Barbados. Marshall was brought up in the atmosphere of listening to stories from the conversation of her mother’s friends in the kitchen of her home. “It was the museum of all the lives that had ever lived here” (Marshall 3). Marshall’s visit to Barbados at her early age greatly impressed her to write a series of poems on Barbados culture and environment. The realization of the value of her culture after visiting Barbados made enormous changes in her perspectives on her community. It forced her to focus on the Barbadian ethnicity in African-American identity. The sense of subliminal towards African heritage made a disposition to instil the values of her community to other African-Americans. She began to use female characters in her fiction for the purpose of preserving and teaching the African cultural practices for the next generation.

At the initial stage of her life, Paule Marshall was not interested in teaching and doing social work. So, she has decided to choose the field of Journalism. As a result of her efforts, she was appointed as a researcher and a staff correspondent in *Our World*, a magazine. She was the only woman among the host of male staff members. She was assigned to the work of writing on the topics of food and fashion. After finding her enormous talent, she was permitted to write feature articles. Her columns captured the attention of the readers from Latin America and West Indies. She used to write her tales after the working hours in the office. While working at the magazine, she completed a short story *The Valley Between* (1954) and simultaneously she wrote the first draft of a novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). The success of her earlier works encouraged her to produce many works: *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* (1961), *Reena* (1962), *Some Get Wasted* (1964), *To Da-duh: In Memoriam* (1967), *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969), *Praise-song for the Widow* (1983), *Daughters* (1991), *The Fisher King: A Novel* (2001), and *Triangular Road: A Memoir* (2009) (Web).

## Thematic Analysis

The aim of this article is to analyse Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, which is a milestone in African-American fiction, not only it goes against stereotype in its portrayal of African-Americans but also has personal touches to the blacks. This novel uses “journey back” (Marshall 2) as one of the tools, for achieving wholeness to the protagonist Selina. “Go away, pestilence, you’re not to bother me when I have my plains” (Marshall 5). The story revolves around the characters of Selina Boyce and her parents Silla Boyce, a mother and Deighton Boyce, a father. Parents’ dissociated perspectives and futuristic plans about their children affect the maturity process of Selina. Silla chases the American dream adamantly and craves for materialism abundantly. She perceives materialism as a haven for her and for the blacks like her. In contrast, Deighton thinks of materialism as nothing, he wants to settle in his native land, Barbados with his family. These two different views come to an end when Deighton was dead. Selina’s maturity begins when she receives, first time in her life, racial discriminatory comments while dancing in the party. This incident divulges her how the black community faces the challenges for survival in the society. She ponders over the blacks’ life, how they work hard and do the menial job whatever it is like cleaning houses, and scrimping for surviving and achieving the goals. They realize that they need strong economic background to prove their existence. They begin to save money to own brownstone house which symbolically appears as pride in the white culture. They want to be fully adjusted to their adopted country, if they want to achieve their American dream. “I don know what wanna New York children do find in a movie, he said after a time” (Marshall 3). But the culture they inherited from the birth becomes barrier to embrace the alien culture.

It confirms that they are firmly rooted in the Caribbean rituals and traditions that they left behind. “First, there had been the Dutch – English and Scotch – Irish who had built the houses” (Marshall 2 ).The theme of the novel is very appropriate to the title of the novel. *Brown Girl, Brownstones* represents the major conflict: unravels the two major conflicts. *Brown Girl*’ represents Selina’s struggles to identify her black identity and ‘*Brownstones*’ stand as the symbol of material pride to a black woman like Silla.

Paule Marshall uses the tool of history to animate the plot of the story in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*, *The Chosen Place and the Timeless People*, *Praise song for the Widow*, *Daughters*, and *The Fisher King(web)*. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones* the building 'Brown stone' stands as historical and material pride and becomes haven for blacks. The historical incidents like The Depression, Word War II and Vietnam war's impact delay the process of coming-of-age of Selina Boyce and her reconnection to the own culture.

The protagonists of her fiction both men and women – Silla Boyce, Selina Boyce, Merle Kinbona, Harriet Shippen, Vere, Avey Johnson, Ursa, Mr. Watford, Max Berman, Gerald Motley, Rio de Janeiro- quest for their history to find their self and wholeness(web). Some historical incidents or cultural memories help the characters finding the path for attaining wholeness – Selina Boyce through one of her bangles and neighbour's oral stories, Silla Boyce through *Brownstones*, Deighton Boyce through Panama Canal, and Father Divine Movement, Merle Kinbona through Cuffee Ned Revolution or Pyre Hill, Vere through Car race, and Avey Johnson through Carnival festival.

In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, the art of oral culture is expressed by Selina's neighbours' women who surrounded the kitchen and gossiped about how their days passing on that day. "We ain rich but we got land" (Marshall 9). Kitchen is the place belonging only to women . As said by Suganya et al in their article "Gender Performance on the Reinvigoration via Food", "the concept of cooking and the kitchen always evolved in relation to women" (Sugnay et al, 887) .Selina Boyce was brought up amidst their speeches. In the beginning Selina's life, like her mother, gives importance to materialism. "Glaring down, she shook her fist, and the bangles sounded her defiance with a thin clangor" (Marshall 2). In due course of time, she realizes that her culture is her identity which is symbolically expressed by throwing her one of the bangles on the *Brownstones* and keeps wearing the other bangles on her hand as a symbol of realisation.

## Conclusion

At once, it seemed possible, the blacks would be forgotten in American and European society, but those thoughts are now completely changed. At once, it seemed possible, a black woman writer like Paule Marshall would be forgotten in America and European society, but ignited ideas about the blacks elevate her to one of the premier writers among the men of letters. Her propaganda of writings tries to instil the African-American values of history and culture among the blacks. It was a time of violence, racism and civil unrest when Marshall wrote about the discrimination against the black community and her stressing of the very need of reparation for an injustice done to the blacks inspired millions of reading community, imbibed faith and courage in them, and created the thirst for freedom and identity through her thought-provoking words.

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