

TRANSCENDENCE AND CONTINUITY IN PAULE MARSHALL'S STORIES

Transcendență și continuitate în povestirile Paulei Marshall

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Abstract: Paule Marshall's feminist fiction reconstructs African history, culture and gender. The paper will analyze Paule Marshall's female characters battle the twin oppression of sexism and racism and the Self that emerges as their ultimate source of strength. Using language as a powerful instrument, black women are shown creating the power to define their lives in a new cultural background. The analysis will focus on Marshall's volume of short-stories entitled 'Reena and Other Stories' and will highlight the manner in which she reclaims African culture for Black Diaspora and how she manages to transcend her ethnic barriers in the short story entitled "Brooklyn".

Keywords: transcendence, continuity, fragmentation, liminality, wholeness

Motto: "Transcendence establishes the continuity between the old and the new"¹

Paule Marshall and Afro-American Literature

Paule Marshall, a middle-twentieth century Afro-American writer, born in New York, of West Indies parents, grew up in an immigrant community confronted by racism and the challenge of maintaining a Caribbean identity while succeeding in the capitalist culture of the USA. Not surprisingly, the themes of colonialism, immigration, the lure of American materialism, racism, African, Caribbean, or African-American cultures, and the importance of women's voices in the intersection of these cultures are central to Marshall's works.

In her much-quoted essay "The Making of a Writer: From the Poets in the Kitchen" (2001) Marshall traces the powerful influence that her mother and her friends had on her writing. By claiming these supposedly "ordinary" women as her primary literary mentors, Marshall emphasizes the artistry of the oral tradition, so much a part of Caribbean culture, as well as the American belief that the day-to-day rituals of life are the sources of art. She wants to demonstrate how blacks in the diaspora imbued the American English with their own values and aesthetics

¹ Mayra Rivera & John Milbank, *The Touch of Transcendence: a Postcolonial Theory of God*, USA, Ed. Westminster Know Press, 2007, p 28.

much before other well-known Afro-American writers; the beauty of the narrative art inherited from her black ancestors stands clear in the essay: “If you say what’s on your mind in the language that comes to you from your parents and your street and friends, you’ll probably say something beautiful”.²

Marshall has scanned the American stereotypes of gender and race through complex characters. Written against the ideological position that the black family is deviant, the evolving position according to which West Indians are a model minority, as well as the 1950s American belief that women are to be submissive, Marshall questions in her writing stereotyped American concepts of white vs. black womanhood and manhood. For her, black is beautiful and deserves to be developed as a theme in the narrative art.

Paule Marshall deserves literary introspection as an Afro-American female writer for at least four reasons: first, because of her triple identity (Black, Caribbean and American): “I am Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American”; second, her triple invisibility (woman, black, foreigner); third, her interest in fragmentation as Pettis states: “Fiction by *black women* illustrates the *schism* that occurs when blacks – particularly women – ignore the politics (and lessons) of *race, class, and gender* and blindly subscribe to the *American Dream*, but only Marshall implicitly asks, how African Americans can remain *culturally moored* and *psychologically whole* while participating in economic enterprises that almost guarantee *fragmentation*.”³ (emphasis added); fourth, her status of a postcolonialist Afro-American black woman writer.

The Indian critic Nada Elia, providing a compelling feminist analysis, explores the way in which Marshall’s black women characters have been forced to rewrite history and substitute a communal and individual wholeness for alienation and separation in America: “Africana women novelists are *mediators*, then, functioning *liminally*. As such, it is not surprising that their stories always feature *travel*, whether it is the nomadism of the postcolonial subject or the forced uprooting of the enslaved African, or both, in the case of the *postcolonialist* Africana subject. More importantly, however, their stories feature the *return trip* that allows for *healing* and the restoration of *wholeness*”⁴ (emphasis added). According to her, black women writers act as intermediaries that function liminally, neutrally, while a favorite theme approached by them is the

² Paule Marshall, “The Making of a Writer: From the Poets in the Kitchen” in *Callaloo*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2001, p 4.

³ Joyce Pettis, *Towards Wholeness in Paule Marshall’s Fiction*, Charlottesville & London, Ed. University Press of Virginia, 1995, p 114.

⁴ Nada Elia, *Trance, Dances and Vociferations*, N.York, Ed. Taylor & Francis, 2007, p 151.

theme of journey taken by the postcolonial subject, a journey back to his/her cultural roots for spiritual healing and achieving psychic wholeness.

Paule Marshall also views fiction as a tool to reconnect to the African cultural past. In her essay “Shaping the World of my Art” (1973) she explains the creative role of history for oppressed people used as an instrument to pursue present political, social and economic battles; in other words, the role of the colonial past in building up a postcolonial present identity:

“An oppressed people cannot overcome their oppressors and take control of their lives until they have a clear and truthful picture of all that has gone before, until they begin to use their history creatively. This knowledge of one’s culture, one’s history, serves as an ideological underpinning for the political, social, and economic battles they must wage. It is the base upon which they must built”⁵.

Marshall’s stories were ahead of their time in that they clearly focused on the world of outside the US, on the variety of black communities and on black women mostly, at a time when black cultural nationalism fostered a monolithic, uniform view of blacks as urban African American and males. Marshall, in particular is concerned with the ways in which American materialism threatens black cultural wholeness.

African-American Centrality: ‘Separate but Equal’

Most African American literature of the time focused mainly on black manhood. African-American women writers such as Alice Walker portrayed black women’s centrality within the context of a specifically black culture. However, Paule Marshall, as a postcolonialist writer, had this same interest much before Alice Walker although she is less known than Alice Walker or other Afro-American women writers.

What is also worth mentioning in this postcolonial context is her affiliation with Homi Bhabha’s post-colonial theory regarding hybridity and liminality, the double colonization (because of sex and racism) and the Self as a source of strength when facing different cultural experiences.

“Separate but equal was a legal doctrine in US constitutional law that justified systems of segregation. Under this doctrine, services, facilities, and public accommodations were allowed to be separated by race, on the condition that the quality of each group’s public facilities was to

⁵ Paule Marshall, “Shaping the World of My Art”, in *New Letters*, no. 40, 1973, p 107.

remain equal”⁶. According to this discriminatory definition, highly opposed by Marshall, the two cultures under discussion-African and American- are inherently the same, but are treated as separate. The African culture is marginalized, belonging to the oppressed, while the American one is mainstream, and belonging to the oppressor. There is no possible communication between the two cultures.

Paule Marshall and Postcolonial Ethics: ‘Separate but Equal’

‘Separate but equal’ means the two entities are not the same, but are treated equally. This is the aim of Marshall’s characters: to prove the possibility of equality between the oppressed/colonized and the oppressor/colonizer in a liminal, neutral space where ethnic barriers are erased.

From a postcolonial angle, the Indian critic Homi Bhabha (1994) explores in narrative fiction what hybridity can offer to ethics: he questions (cultural) identities as “fixed locations of culture” and his discourse of marginality does not view “colonizer” and “colonized” as separate entities that define themselves independently. He suggests that the negotiation of cultural identity involves the continual interface and exchange of cultural experiences that in turn produce a mutual recognition (or representation) of cultural difference. This “liminal” space is a “hybrid” site that witnesses reflection and production of cultural meaning⁷. The critic Nederveen Pieterse speaks about this space as a space of cultural fusion where “multiculturalist racial intermixing, syncretism, and transnationality”⁸ appear.

This “liminal” space links African and American traditions (oral/written tradition, cyclic/linear nature of time, duality of life, living/static history) and from these shared experiences, fragmented times, spaces and psyches, P. Marshall achieves the cultural mooring into her ancestral past; by acknowledging this ancestral past she manages to reanchor her characters into the present, psychologically whole, i.e. to restore them their fragmented psyches.

⁶ Wikipedia, URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Separate_but_equal

⁷ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Ed. Routledge, 1994.

⁸ Nederveen qtd. in David Herman & al, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, N.York, Ed. Routledge, 2005, p 228.

The Trauma of the ‘Middle Passage’

This psychological healing takes place on a psychological threshold, in a liminal or transitional space and characters pass through a trauma of self-transformation while mediating rather than separating their mutual exchanges. This cultural mediation in a liminal space is between people of mixed ethnicity in their capacity of both participants and observers in the act of culture.

‘Crossing Over’ the Bridge “Brooklyn”. ‘Different, yet Similar’

The stories collected in Marshall’s volume *Reena and Other Stories* (1983) are stories of transcendence and continuity. A feminist reading of the stories highlights the black female characters’ will to ‘power over circumstances’⁹ (Gates qtd. in *Reena*). To illustrate the thesis I have chosen from the volume the short-story entitled “Brooklyn” where characters belong to Black and Jewish immigrant communities. I will demonstrate how Miss Williams, the black female student, moves from colonial division and fragmentation to postcolonial wholeness through a metaphorical journey into her own black cultural roots; by acknowledging her past colonial history, a history of oppression, she can transcend it and continue as a postcolonial subject; due to the empowerment of that colonial past she can turn from an oppressed subject into a psychological oppressor of Max Berman, the Jewish teacher, supposedly a member of the white imperialist society. The title of the short story “Brooklyn” in this cultural interpretation refers to cultural diversity, to an independent art scene where characters can experience optimism and inspiration for their future.

Although the physical colonization has ceased, characters suffer mental colonization or even “double colonization” (race and gender discrimination) as in the case of Miss Williams. We have the oppressor/the colonizer (Max Berman, the teacher) versus the oppressed/the colonized (Miss Williams, the student). They take a literal journey into the countryside (Max’s cottage) which is the beginning of a psychological journey away from the American materialism, back into their own past cultural experiences. The liminal space used for sharing these cultural experiences is an open space. Belonging to the black race, female characters, mostly, are obsessed with open spaces, light, nature, water, “unimprinted spaces”, where they can unleash

⁹ Gates qtd. in Paule Marshall, *Reena and Other Short Stories*, N.York, The Feminist Press, 1983, p 216.

“the outrage of a lifetime, of [their] history, which was trapped inside [them]”¹⁰. At the opposite pole is the city, which, in Marshall’s view, stands for breakdown of culture and lack of Afrocentric values, hence its inability to be a site for cultural renewal.

Postcolonialism and Identity Formation: Transcendence and Continuity.

The title of the article was inspired from Mayra Rivera’s book on postcolonialist theory entitled *The Touch of Transcendence: a Postcolonial Theory of God*, where she says that “transcendence establishes the continuity between the old and the new”¹¹. Being associated with “divine transcendence”, “transcendence” has acquired the reputation of being a tool of patriarchal and imperial self-legitimation. Hence the inextricability characterised by certain degree of lack of choice of the human Other. In the case of Paule Marshall she draws on the inextricability between transcendence and continuity and her implicit interest in communal continuity as an alternative to spiritual transcendence, the latter representing the ability of an individual to stand outside of her immediate sense of time and place and to view life from a larger, more objective perspective.

The key words in attempting such research spins around inner causality (i.e. emancipated consciousness) that has reached such level of development that it can see itself as the cause vs. external factors that contribute to its emancipation. The real self is not the self in relationship with the exterior but with the interior. This transcendent potential is manifest in a search for “meaning” (connected to external things, situations, conditions, etc.). Activities are now a manifestation of the meaning inside. In humans all potentials need the cultural factor to develop and manifest (without it, they remain potentials).

Biology and culture evolve together in human beings. As the cultural expression of our biology is often limiting, degrading, first you have to become aware of yourself and only then can you realize whatever transcendence is “outside”.

We live in fractured times. Continuity is thus what unifies spirituality, past and future. The individual is part of a whole, cannot alienate oneself from the continuity of existence. Hence suffering is part of the process of life: “in order for a person to live someone else must die”¹², reflects Miss Williams.

¹⁰ Paule Marshall, “Brooklyn” in *Reena and Other Short Stories*, N.York, Ed. The Feminist Press, 1983, p 38.

¹¹ Mayra Rivera & John Milbank, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theory of God*, USA, Ed. Westminster Know Press, 2007, p 28.

¹² Paule Marshall, “Brooklyn” in *Reena and Other Short Stories*, N.York, Ed. The Feminist Press, 1983, p 47.

Mind and body co-exist. We are simultaneously addressing our lives as individuals and our lives as part of the whole. We will no longer be in confusion, divided as self-against-world. We will contemplate the historical and cultural origins. From this we are able to understand that we are not divided from the whole.

Accordingly, through bicultural tensions, historical awareness, de-stereotyping, etc. “the moment of breakdown is not a moment of isolation but a moment of contact”¹³, as Rhonda Cobman (1993) argues. This contact is a spiritual contact that is done through healing rituals, in an interplay between races and classes. This healing ritual results ultimately in an exchange of roles between oppressor and oppressed/victim, enabler/catalyst and unabler.

The moment of contact between Miss Williams and Max Berman materializes at the countryside cottage. The function of the liminal space to elucidate answers becomes visible here in the open countryside.

The two characters start confronting memories in a dual confrontation. Miss Williams recalls her childhood, her parents’ warnings against speaking or dating strangers with skin color darker or whiter than hers, the man she loved and did not marry because she knew her parents would disapprove, her graduation and her similar state of confusion and fright after starting to teach back home. Her past recollections bring about epiphany; she has instant moments of revelation: “I thought ... about my parents how wrong they had been, how frightened, and the terrible thing they had done to me... and I wasn’t confused any longer.”; “In a way you did me a favor. You let me know how you and most of the people like you – see me”¹⁴, she admits to professor Max Berman at the end of the short story.

The process of sharing through contact awakens her back to life. She does not feel frightened or tensioned anymore. Likewise, she does not regard her teacher as superior anymore: “Look how I came all the way up here to tell you this to your face. Because how could you harm me? You’re so old you’re like a cup I could break in my hand.”¹⁵. Her posture from the class that expressed fear, submissiveness, lack of courage to react has changed now into a full command stance: “I will do something. I don’t know what yet, but something...”¹⁶.

¹³ Rhonda, Cobham, “Revisioning Our Kumblas: Transforming Feminist and Nationalist Agendas in Three Caribbean Women’s Texts”, in *Callaloo*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1993, p 57.

¹⁴ Paule Marshall, “Brooklyn” in *Reena and Other Short Stories*, N.York, Ed. The Feminist Press, 1983, p 47.

¹⁵ Paule Marshall, “Brooklyn” in *Reena and Other Short Stories*, N.York, Ed. The Feminist Press, 1983, p 47.

¹⁶ Paule Marshall, “Brooklyn” in *Reena and Other Short Stories*, N.York, Ed. The Feminist Press, 1983, p 45.

The same contact in the case of Max reverses his role from an oppressor into a victim, an oppressed one. Similarly, he starts remembering his childhood, his father calling him a bad Jew, his desire to become a doctor, his wives whom he married out of insignificant interests, his inquisitors, etc. The more empowered the Black student becomes, the less enabled the Jewish teacher is. Her questions “What did matter?”¹⁷ “What will you do now?”¹⁸ bewilder him more and more. His evasive answer “I will do something. I don’t know what yet, but something.”¹⁹ contrasts strongly with her firm answer “I can do something now! I can begin”²⁰. Moreover, she is the catalyst, the ‘bridge’ to reconnecting him back to life. His realization that he has been indifferent to his past, to love, job, family, community, faith and himself can set him now, due to her, on a new life.

For the first time in her life she feels almost brave. While envying her rage and empowerment, he “accepts ... his responsibility ... for all those at last whom he had wronged through his indifference: his father lying in the room of shrouded mirrors, the wives he had never loved, his work which he had never believed in enough and lastly (even though he knew it was too late and he would not be spared), himself”²¹.

It is now his turn to fear her touch. When she fulfilled the swimming ritual of ‘metaphorical rebirth’ in the lake, he finally understood “the profound cleavage between them and the absurdity of his hope. The water between them became the years which separated them. Her white cap was the sign of her purity [rebirth], while the silk darkening the lake was the flotsam of his failures”²².

Listening and speaking to each other’s colonial past experiences builds ‘arcs of communication’ between two different, yet similar through oppression groups. Bridging their colonial pasts they could also bridge through language their colonial loneliness and destinies of oppressed and oppressor.

¹⁷ Paule Marshall, “Brooklyn” in *Reena and Other Short Stories*, N.York, Ed. The Feminist Press, 1983, p 44.

¹⁸ Paule Marshall, “Brooklyn” in *Reena and Other Short Stories*, N.York, Ed. The Feminist Press, 1983, p 45.

¹⁹ Paule Marshall, “Brooklyn” in *Reena and Other Short Stories*, N.York, Ed. The Feminist Press, 1983, p 45.

²⁰ Paule Marshall, “Brooklyn” in *Reena and Other Short Stories*, N.York, Ed. The Feminist Press, 1983, p 47.

²¹ Paule Marshall, “Brooklyn” in *Reena and Other Short Stories*, N.York, Ed. The Feminist Press, 1983, p 48.

²² Paule Marshall, “Brooklyn” in *Reena and Other Short Stories*, N.York, Ed. The Feminist Press, 1983, p 43.

Conclusion: “The Arc of Recovery” to Afro-American Culture

Being concerned with the ways in which American materialism threatens black cultural wholeness, Marshall’s characters complete a journey that critic Susan Willis calls “an arc of recovery”²³ to Afro-American culture, for they take a cultural journey back – a journey that they begin in the USA through the Caribbean, to an African communal past, to regain their sense of wholeness. Unlike other literary critics, Willis looks at Marshall’s theme of movement from the past to the future by focusing on the power of language. In this sense, Marshall proves brilliant at using neocolonialism tools, such as language and history, to demolish neocolonialism itself. Through language and acknowledgement of cultural roots, Miss Williams, the black female student, reconciles her past and present and hence she can *transcend* ethnic barriers and *continue* her life in a patriarchal, postcolonial, capitalist, and white supremacist world order. Black women, in Marshall’s organic view, have a keen awareness of history as change that allows them to function as mentors and factors of cultural continuity; they can act as ‘bridges’ using the past as a key to the future, and the present as the end of the past.

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²³ Susan Willis, *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience*, USA, Ed. University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, p 53.

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