
II. LITERATŪROS NARATYVAI IR KONTEKSTAI / NARRACJE LITERACKIE I KONTEKSTY

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Finding Home: Paule Marshall's "The Chosen Place, the Timeless People"

The paper deals with the novel "The Chosen Place, the Timeless People" by Paule Marshall, one of the most significant precursors of the modern generation of African American women writers who were instrumental in voicing the concerns and aspirations of millions of black women. It develops some of the themes the writer addressed in her first novel "Brown Girl, Brownstones" and raises topical issues of power and domination, connections between the historical past and present, postcolonial mentality, individual and collective identity, racism, gender inequality, complex relationship between the oppressed and the oppressors, men and women in a male-dominated society, and women's struggle for self-identification and self-determination. The novel was published in 1969, a critical year in the Civil Rights movement that paved the way for major changes in the social and political life of the United States, and signified the emergence of black feminist writing focusing on the female protagonist of mixed descent who challenges the accepted views and mores and helps to introduce the new awareness of what should be done to break with the miserable past.

KEYWORDS: African American Fiction, Feminism, Gender, Postcolonialism.

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Paule Marshall and the Emergence of African American Women's Writing

Over the last decades African American women's writing has dominated in American literary studies, especially in the works of the American Feminist writers who have been extremely active on the academic scene. They emphasize the fact that black women suffer disabilities in all walks of life; the relations between even black men and women are constructed on gender inequality; women are treated as objects of desire in a male-dominated society with its hierarchical values. However, they refuse to accept this attitude and insist on self-determination, diversity of life choices, and fulfilment. In their books there is a celebration of their femaleness and blackness, which they claim as a source of pride and hope. They reject the role of women as passive creatures and break the boundaries of the man-made world.

Paule Marshall occupies a very special place on the literary map of America. She is a forerunner of the powerful group of black women writers of the 1970s-80s who considerably changed the canon of African American literature and the readership's attitude to works written by women of colour. She was born in New York into a family of émigrés from the West Indies. During her literary career she has been concerned with the problems of people of African descent who look for a home in an attempt to be fully integrated into American society. According to C. B. Davies, "both an insider and an outsider, Marshall explores the problems of displacement, the challenges of simultaneously occupying different cultural and social locations." (Marshall 1969: 192).

Her first novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) introduced a young black female protagonist (among the very first of its kind in US literature) and started a trilogy consisting of *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969) and *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). It was a breakthrough in raising the awareness of black women of the need to search for personal identity and to give visibility to their presence in American life. It focused on their dramatic experiences of a minority within a minority. Unfortunately, the book was not properly appreciated in 1959: the readership was not prepared for this kind of literature yet. Both the content and form of the novel seemed somewhat unusual to the then readership. *The Norton of African American Literature* explains it by the fact that "Marshall's first two novels as well as her stories of the 1960s were ahead of their time in that they clearly focused on the variety of black communities, and on black women, at a time when black cultural nationalism fostered a monolithic view of blacks as urban African American and male." (*The Norton* 1997: 2051–2052). Marshall was not the only one to have been underestimated by the readers and critics, especially if we take into account that at the end of the 1950s African American women's writing was very limited in scope and outreach. Analysing minority literature of the period when multiculturalism began to gain ground, the Polish scholar D. Ferens points out that "... some of the new books – particularly those that experimented with form or explored emotional lives rather than social relations – did not lend themselves to the then dominant modes of reading and fell by the academic wayside." (2016: 93).

Nevertheless, literary critics took notice of the talented writer, and by the 1980s her name became well-known beyond the professional circles. Her exploration of the issues that became topical after the "Black Revolution" of the end of the 1960s – the beginning of the 1970s was consonant with the aspirations of American society. As the writer Terry McMillan says, "Times have changed. We do not feel the need to create and justify our existence any more. We are here. We are proud. And most of us no longer feel the need to prove anything to white folks. If anything, we're trying to make sense of ourselves to ourselves." (1990: XXI). The book found an enthusiastic response when it was reprinted in 1981 showing Marshall's outstanding role in promoting black women's writing. K. Andrzejczak maintains that she "inaugurated the new feminist writing of African American women." (2003: 615).

The problem of gender is of utmost importance to the writer. The price, which African American women have to pay for becoming visible in American society, is enormous, and the writer is unsparing in showing how communal tyranny affects the maturation of her female characters. She focuses on the figures of father and mother in a family and gives an insight into the way fatherhood and motherhood are manifested in American life showing a very special role of women in the African American home and a singular bond between mothers and daughters. In spite of differences in their perception of the world they share the idea that the loss of identity leads to spiritual emptiness and a loss of home, which may have tragic overtones. Going through the painful road to self-identification they find a home; daughters begin to understand their mothers. Collective destinies become understood through specific individual lives, and support of and sustenance in each other turn out to be the source of energy and power for Marshall's women. Among the first African American women writers she presents black women as full-fledged, round characters who are indispensable for the transformation of the world dominated by white males.

The Chosen Place, the Timeless People as a microcosm of postcolonial world

In *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* Marshall focuses on the developments in the African Caribbean and African American communities and their complex relationship with the white community, the oppressed and the oppressor trying to understand the mechanism by which the former oppressors try to sell them "white" values at the cost of cultural assimilation. In R. Gray's view, the author "dramatizes a search for and reconciliation of the self with an African diasporic historical past." (2004: 700–701), identity construction being her focus – much in line with the position of James Baldwin who along with Ralph Ellison greatly influenced her. Joyce Pettis reiterates his statement,

The ideas in her fiction are explored against a geographically diverse canvas that includes the Caribbean with its history of European colonization and the segregational history of the United States. Thus, history and community, shapers of the past and the present, are vital subtexts in the lives of Marshall's characters. Just as important, Marshall explores the notion of cultural continuity through identification with African heritage and

culture as a means of healing the psychic fragmentation that has resulted from colonization and segregation. (2000: 228).

B. Christian draws attention to the width of the writer's scope, representativeness of her fictional world that is applicable to the discussion of the postcolonial structure of power and domination. According to her, "Marshall creates a microcosm representative not only of Bournehills but also of other 'underdeveloped' societies in the Third World, held captive both psychologically and economically by the metropolises of the West, yet somehow possessing their own visions of possibility." (1984: 167).

The critics are unanimous in their appreciation of *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* calling it Marshall's "most elaborately orchestrated effort" (Davies 1996: 196), "one of the most engaging works of fiction created by an African-American writer within the last half century of American creative effort." (Spillers 1985: 152). The novel prioritizes the search for identity and a home by people on the fictional Bourne Island in the Caribbean. *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* defines home as "1.1 the place where you live and feel you belong, usually because that is where your family is... 1.2 the area or country where you were born or where your home is." (*Collins Cobuild* 1998: 696). The people of the island have a problem with their identification of home. On the one hand, they belong as they are born there, have their families, and see their lives built into the life of the island, but they do not think that the island belongs to them because it used to be a British colony run by the "master race." It is their home only by the fact of their birth. Even after the British Empire collapsed and the island became independent, they are still dominated by the former masters. This explains their apathy and indifference. They do not care about the place, and all the efforts to "civilize" it fail. The former colony suffers from backwardness and misery, and the Center for Applied Social Research from Philadelphia is invited to work out a project aimed at providing a blueprint for modernizing (or westernizing?) the island.

Marshall explores the encounter of Americans involved in the project and islanders and its consequences for the future of the tiny island. The writer had intended to title the novel *Ceremonies of the Guest House* but preparing the book for publication changed it for *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* to emphasize the connection between the past and the present in a location that used to be part of the infamous Middle Passage. J. Pettis emphasizes that "The relationship between place and people is central to the vision of the novel." (2000: 234).

Marshall clearly demonstrates the political character of her novel describing the miserable postcolonial present of the former British colony in the context of the struggle against colonialism, racism, the arms race, and infringement of human rights that was going on in the 1960s. The writer shows how the private lives of her characters representing the formerly colonized and their colonizers, the oppressed and the oppressors are entwined with the developments on the island, which are triggered off by the economic policy of the former masters. Its economy used to be one-sided, being completely dependent on sugar cane production. However, it was getting unprofitable, and the British owner of the sugar

cane mill closed down the only enterprise that provided jobs for the islanders. The USA saw an opportunity to turn the island into a tourist attraction for American visitors, in fact, bringing back exploitation under a different disguise.

Glaring social contradictions are obvious in the description of the two parts of the island – Bournehills inhabited by the poorest islanders who made their living by growing sugar cane and New Bristol, the island's business and tourist centre, with the Heights inhabited by the local elite "*threatening* New Bristol from above." (Marshall 1969: 355, italics – mine. Yu. St.) It is hardly coincidental that New Bristol lies in the west of the island while Bournehills is in the east. New Bristol symbolizes the "promise" of western civilization but also corruption, a terrible gap between the haves and have-nots and betrayal of national interests. Their affiliations are with the former and new masters. On the other hand, Bournehills is a place of backwardness, poverty, misery, and despair, so much more so because Bournehillsians do not believe in "modernization" imposed by the former masters and are reluctant to the attempt to "civilize" them. Their icon is Cuffee Ned, a revolutionary who led a rebellion against the oppressors in the 19th century, managed to sustain the island's independence for two years and died as a martyr for the cause. He acquired mythic dimensions in the memory of the new generations. Each year he is celebrated during the Carnival, and the procedure never changes acquiring the function of a ritual of remembrance and loyalty and connecting the past and the present, as it happens in a myth embodying the ideals and inspirations of the islanders. Ferguson, a man who is proud of the island's past, keeps a fond memory of the times of Cuffee: "Cuffee had us planting the fields together, I tell you," he cried. "Reaping our crops together, sharing whatsoever we had with each other. We was a people then, man; and it was beautiful to see!" Behind his glasses his oversized eyes were filled with the memory." (Marshall 1969: 139). In spite of all odds, the process of coming to terms with the new reality is under way. No outsider will be able to give a new lease of life to the place; a new Cuffee Ned will have to appear to lead the people to true independence. Their refusal to change the tradition of the Carnival is a guarantee that sooner or later the islanders will again rise and put an end to oppression in whichever form it may be expressed. Only they themselves can bring change to the island, but it takes time and involves the islanders' self-actualization. That is why they are timeless.

The book consists of 4 parts – "Heirs and Descendants," "Bournehills," "Carnival," and "Whitsun", which go deep into the exploration of the place, its history of oppression and rebellion, mental frame of the islanders and its reflection in the two most important fêtes of the island. The three central characters – Merle Kimbona who may be called "the spirit of the island" connecting the past and the present, Bournehills and New Bristol, Saul Amron, head of the US team that is to prepare the project, and his wife Harriet who is a descendant of a Philadelphian family that made its fortune on slavery – are put in a situation when their humanity is at stake. They have to revisit the past to get their bearings in a rapidly changing world.

Merle vs Harriet Amron: the problem of identification

Merle is undoubtedly the most interesting character in the novel. C.B. Davies insists that she is “one of the few political female heroes in black fiction.” (Davies 1969: 199). After the dramatic events on the island in which Merle was directly involved she goes to Africa in order to return to the home of her ancestors as a new person who has finally acquired an identity. The problem of identity has been focal for all generations of African American writers. For Marshall it is complicated by her West Indian origin, though she herself does not see any difference between African Americans and West Indians. Nevertheless, it adds another dimension to the characteristics of race relations because of the former colonial status of the West Indies, which affiliated the islands with the former metropolis. In Merle’s case the situation is made even more specific by the fact that she is the daughter of a prominent local white planter and a black mother occupying a very special position on the island simultaneously belonging to its two parts. B. Christian who was among the first critics to promote Marshall’s oeuvre says,

Merle is the cohesive force in the novel. She is identified with Bournehills, that abandoned land which refuses half-measures of change but which can effect revolutionary change only if it insists on creating its own history. In struggling to confront her own painful past, Merle grows toward confronting the equally painful history of her people and finally to the point where she must act to reverse *her* present order. (Christian 1984: 167; italics – P. Marshall).

She displays not only her feminist stand speaking against discrimination by gender but also her determination to work for a better future for the island, which is steeped in the past. It is a difficult task when only radical measures can change the situation. Merle bitterly acknowledges,

Bournehills! Change Bournehills! Improve conditions! Ha!” Her laugh was full of a secret knowing. “The only way you could maybe change things around here would be to take one of Bryce-Parker’s bulldozers from the conservation scheme and lay the whole place flat flat flat and then start fresh. (Marshall 1969: 142–143).

Her whole life on the island was dedicated to the struggle against the vestiges of colonialism, which are deep-seated not only in the island’s social fabric but also in the mental frame of the islanders. As a teacher she told her students of Cuffee Ned – and was fired; as a person of prominence she took an active part in the effort of the farmers to save the crops after the white owners had closed down the mill – and the result was a nervous breakdown. However, she is undefeatable, for she has the courage and stamina to start everything all over again, ready to challenge the power of the West telling Harriet straightforwardly, “I don’t like people ordering me about like I’m still the little colonial. I’ve had too much of that. So when they say gee now, I haw. When they say go, I stay. And stay I will. Right here in Bournehills where I belong.” (Marshall 1969: 442).

She has to make Bourne Island a home for all those living there connecting it with the Americas, Europe and Africa, which is emphasized in Marshall's description of its geographical position where its smallness is juxtaposed with the vastness of the continent from which the ancestral slaves were brought in chains. Though "it was small, poignantly so, and vulnerable, defenseless... alone amid an immensity of sea and sky, becalmed now that its turbulent history was past, facing east, the open sea, and across the sea, hidden beyond the horizon, the colossus of Africa." (Marshall 1969: 13) it could be brought back to life if the dramatic lessons of the past could be used to advantage, and this is exactly the mission Merle takes upon herself. During her last meeting with Saul she emphatically says,

But I'll be coming back to Bournehills. This is home. Whatever little I can do that will matter for something must be done here. A person can run for years but sooner or later he has to take a stand in the place which, for better or worse, he calls home, do what he can to change things there. (Marshall 1969: 468).

Merle becomes a symbol of resistance that will transform the island.

The writer puts special emphasis on the place of women in society. In a *MELUS* interview (1991) Marshall said that she "saw them as agents of change, as embodying a certain power principle." Merle represents one end of the axis. As B. Christian writes, she is depicted as "a black woman as both outside and inside the black world, as both outside and inside the West." (Christian 1985: 241).

Harriet Shippen Amron is at the other end. She has come to the island with her husband on a "modernizing" mission. She represents the "master race" looking down on the islanders, never trying to understand their life. For her "this place isn't home, after all;" she is thinking of the time that "once the project's over we'll be returning home to the life and people we know." (Marshall 1969: 235). She associates home only with Philadelphia, all the time condescendingly calling the island "this place." Marshall makes a point that her social position is secured by her forbears like the widow Susan Harbin who "had launched the family's modest wealth by her small-scale speculation in the West Indies trade, which in those days consisted of taking a few shares in a number of sloops making the twice-yearly run between Philadelphia, the west coast of Africa, and then back across the Atlantic to the islands." (Marshall 1969: 37). Though Harriet prides herself on what she does in Bournehills, there is no human touch about it – she is described as an observer who is never really involved in what is taking place. Even during the Carnival she is detached from the fun and excitement of the event: "...as always, she had remained essentially out of it, removed, the spectator looking on from her seat near the wings. It had all seemed part of a somewhat busy drama which she could enjoy while only dimly understanding its meaning." (Marshall 1969: 292).

Her real attitude to the islanders is revealed when they refuse to follow her directions, which, she is sure, they needed: "being young, they were impetuous, headstrong, foolish." (Marshall 1969: 294). Marshall is unsparing in her description of the emotions of the white

woman who is accustomed to the domineering position. In spite of her attempts to be up to her husband, she is insincere in her dealings with the local women. She is sure that “[T]hey needed – the whole unruly lot of them – to be bathed, their mouths scrubbed clean of the tobacco and run smell, and put to bed.” (Marshall 1969: 295), and this is her response to the carnival in which they asked her to take part to celebrate their history. She loses her temper and, unable to control herself, expresses her anger and resentment at their unwillingness to fulfil her order beating those around,

In her sudden panic and hysteria she began slapping savagely at those closest to her, trying to beat them off. Her mouth twisting out of shape, she aimed for the faces that had refused to heed her advice, and the eyes that stared through her as though she wasn’t there. Her own eyes turned a dense winter gray, all the blue in them gone; and her hair, swinging violently from side to side each time she wiled and struck, was like a short whip with which she was flailing them. (Marshall 1969: 296).

Being an heir to the old slavery system, she cannot read the world that has started to change, and she is afraid that what she has seen during the carnival might signify would-be dramatic transformations in the relations between the oppressor and the oppressed. When the people continued to go their way in spite of her warnings, she understood the one thing, which her husband Saul had been trying to find out: “...the vast body of them would reach the goal they had set for themselves: the thing she had seen in their eyes...” (Marshall 1969: 297). The racist in her comes out, and all the subsequent events prove that her attempts to provide assistance to the people of “this place” were insincere, unlike those of Saul Amron who came to the island genuinely feeling the need to help the former British colony to get rid of poverty and economic dependence. He is really dedicated to the project doing all he can to make the island a true comfortable home for Bournehillsians, and his frustration at the news that he is removed from the project is enormous. His wife’s role in his removal brings their relationship to an abrupt end, which she cannot survive, committing suicide.

Saul tries hard to understand the social fabric of the island, its rootedness in the past as well as numerous failed attempts on the part of the European and American “benefactors” to “modernize” life on the island, but only active involvement in the everyday life of the local people, “rumshop” hours with men, the ritual of the annual carnival help him to get a clue as to how effect change: from within, not from the outside. Delbert, one of the local workers, explains to Saul,

Maybe the more you walk about and see for yourself how things stand with us, the better chance you’ll have of understanding the place one day. ‘Cause Bournehills isn’t easy to know. It might seem so, and it fools a lot of people. But it’s not. (Marshall 1969: 158–159).

That is why the Bournehills team keeps the theme of its carnival performance: the Cuffee Ned uprising against the oppressors. It is a means of self-empowerment and hope.

Saul has to go back to the USA, but his encounter with the island has produced a significant change in him. He has also discovered his roots, and this means that he will no longer be the same; now he has an identity. Comparing the husband and wife J. Pettis concludes, "As Saul's character has been shaped by identification with historical suffering, Harriet's has been shaped by a history of hegemony. Through her, Marshall explores the relationship between Western economic power and monetary disenfranchised." (Marshall 1969: 235). Harriet could not but disappear: her time is out; she does not belong in the chosen place. On the other hand, Saul learns his lesson; he reconnects with his past, which opens a door to the future, but while Merle has a home Saul has to find one.

Conclusions

The novel showed a profound change in what African American women writers could deal with in their books. By juxtaposing the past and present, showing the growing awareness of Bournehillians of the injustice of both the colonial and postcolonial systems, the emergence of people who did not agree to stick to the "old" rules that were based on the principles of white power and dominance Paule Marshall championed a new literary perspective that involved a strong political message. The book catapulted Paule Marshall to prominence as a leading African American writer. She influenced the cohort of women writers who started their career at the end of the 1960s – the beginning of the 1970s and began exploring the dramatic experience of black women in both the United States and the African Diaspora widening the horizons of American literature.

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