Chapter – 4

Songs, Music, and Dance
CHAPTER 4

SONGS, MUSIC, AND DANCE

4.1. SECTION OVERVIEW

Western culture has viewed dance as an empowering activity, since it offers a forum for individual expression and, in the form of religious ritual, it binds the community and spiritually renews the individual. In literature, comedies, usually are concluded with a wedding dance, as in Shakespeare’s; very often music and songs are incorporated into the narrative. These art forms are used in literature to talk about “self-affirmation, eroticism, spiritual renewal, and communal bonding...” (Waxman 1994: 91).

African cultures also recognize the vital importance of the traditions of music, song and dance that carry history and meaning. According to John S. Mbiti, music, singing, and dance together are used “in all activities of African life: in cultivating the fields, fishing, herding, performing ceremonies, praising rulers and warriors, hushing babies to sleep...” (1975: 8). Paul Carter Harrison rightly points out that “Song, Dance and Drum are as important to the modes of contemporary Black experience as they always have been in traditional African life” (1974: 22). Though these traditional forms and rhythms have been present in the writings of
black people, from the time of slave narratives, a special emphasis is laid on their use by the Black Aesthetic Movement of the 1960s. Marshall and many African-American writers, who are the inheritors of both African and American cultural practices and attitudes, have turned to these art forms as a thematic or metaphoric motif for self-proclamation, spiritual empowerment, community solidarity and passing on of history.

Marshall uses snatches from various songs as chapter and section headings within her narrative, as in Praisesong for the Widow (1983b) and The Fisher King (2000). In an interview, Marshall has said: "I like to use lines from songs because they reinforce the material, they give it a kind of cultural authenticity" (Brock 1982: 203). In addition to orature, she also employs dance as a metaphorical device, as in almost all her novels. This chapter is to map some of the intersections between the perspective of Marshall and the art forms from oral tradition, and to examine the uniqueness of these strategies.

Section 4.2. points out that in Marshall's novels, music, dance and song help the characters to create an identity for themselves; that they also empower them spiritually through a knowledge of the self in relation to community, and enable them to dare transition. Section 4.3. highlights the therapeutic power and the purging capacity of black music, dance and songs, as exemplified in Marshall's novels. Section 4.4. shows how music, song and dance become charged with meaning and history, and how singing and dancing enable the black people to show their political resistance to oppression of any kind. Section 4.5. speaks about the role played by the performing arts in bonding the members of the black
communities together. Section 4.6. points out that the old-world rituals comprised of music, song and dance, contain valuable lessons of history and culture for their practitioners in the new world. It is also pointed out that Marshall has created a new genre, combining elements of literary writing with those of history and performing arts, to present her black perspective.

4.2. CELEBRATION OF IDENTITY

Writing of complex heroines who are black women is central to Marshall’s novels. Selina, the protagonist of Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959), is a powerfully creative woman, a dancer. Her story is a portrait of the artist as a young woman. Linda Pannill finds Marshall’s work as a whole to be “concerned with the shaping of creativity in individual women and in communities, an energy often represented by dance” (1985: 63). Marshall’s Selina is endowed with an artist’s sensibility. When Beryl, Selina’s friend, is assured of a car and a career by her father, Selina’s father has given her a sense of spring even during winter, a capacity to dream. Selina is “shamelessly romantic” (BGBS: 228). Selina knows what she wants; she wants to flow out of herself into life, to touch it and be touched by it. Against the wishes of Clive, her lover, and to the shock of Silla, her mother, she takes a course in modern dance at school and joins the Modern Dance Club. She visualizes her mind as a faceted crystal or gem mounted on a pivot. Each facet is a single aspect of herself; each one is suited to a different role. She plays many roles: she is a member of the Association, a student, a reader, a lover, a dancer and so on. Her sole concern becomes to
mould her body into an expressive whole. On seeing her dance, once Clive comments: “you’re very good. You have soul” (226).

Selina is chosen to do the climatic solo at the end-of-the year recital, a dance portraying the life cycle. She is the only black girl in the group. Selina rehearses well, with Rachel; yet, she is afraid whether she will rise up to the occasion. But, once it starts, she is sure, lithe and controlled; she performs well, the dance that portrays the birth to death cycle. Even though to her ancestors across the Atlantic, song and dance meant life itself, not even one of her people is present there. Selina is the star of the show. Selina feels a new sense of belonging. The dance indicates that it is a celebration of Selina’s selfhood; she thinks that it has brought her from marginality to the centre. She has finally become a person in her own right; she has created an identity for herself. But this sense of euphoria lasts only for a short time. The bubble is broken, when the racist Mrs. Benton reminds her that no success, no excelling white people and no artistic superiority can make her acceptable in the white world. Selina is made to remember that she is a perpetual and born outsider. She comes to realize for the first time, what it means to be black in America: “Those eyes [of Mrs. Benton] were a well-lighted mirror in which, for the first time, Selina truly saw—with a sharp and shattering clarity—the full meaning of her black skin” (237-38).

With the psychic wound inflicted by the Benton incident, Selina limps back to her community. She comes to identify herself with Miss. Thompson, an African-American, who has been literally wounded by a racist Southerner. She becomes conscious of the shared bond between
herself and her community. She realizes that this unity and cultural solidarity only can help her to fortify herself against racism and realize her full potential. Overwhelmed by an emotional crisis, Selina turns to Clive for some masculine support and healing. But his casual approach and his failure to be with her in the most needed moment make her leave him. Clive’s betrayal teaches her that she must face the problems all alone; that she must display the strength reserved for men, without losing the feminine qualities. This is what Suggie Skeete has done and Selina feels one with her. Thus, the dance recital has played a vital role in making Selina to come to terms with herself not only racially but as a woman as well.

When *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), Marshall’s first novel, describes the early stages in the career of a budding dancer, *The Fisher King* (2000), her fifth novel, traces the rise and fall of a jazz musician. Everett Payne, renamed Sonny-Rett after his debut as a jazz musician, rejects classical music, which he is compelled to learn, in favour of jazz; Hattie, who works in the record store he haunts, looking for the latest jazz, blues and gospel, notices him first. Later Hattie remembers: “...thirteen-, fourteen-year-old Everett Payne ... would slip into Birdell’s to listen on the sly to Tatum, Basie, Muddy Waters, et al.” (89). He finds understanding in Hattie, who keeps him informed of the latest trends in music. But his mother, Ulene Payne, who raises him to be a concert pianist who would one day play at Carnegie Hall, cannot understand or tolerate his abiding interest in jazz. She regularly applies the whip to him; but he never utters a word, never cries and never begs her to stop; he just stands there and takes it. It looks as if he has understood, even when so young, that he has to pay a dear price for playing what he wants to.
Upping his age, Everett Payne joins the army at seventeen. In the army also, he gets a chance to play “a lot of piano, and all kinds of music at that: the oompah-pah, military stuff in the band, light classics and pop tunes in the officers’ club, jazz…. And the blues” (137). As soon as he comes back from the army, he goes to Birdell’s “to check out the latest sounds” (Ibid.); Hattie is to bring him up to date, fill him in, as he has some serious catching-up to do.

It is customary at Putnam Royal, toward the end of the final set, to invite one or two of the young locals waiting for a chance to perform, to sit in with the band, each Sunday evening. One Sunday, not long out of the army, Everett Payne gets the chance. He starts playing “Sonny Boy Blue” at a slower tempo and with a formality that lends “the Tin Pan Alley tune a depth and thoughtfulness no one else would have accorded it” (138). After paying his respects to the tune as written, he unleashes, “a dazzling pyrotechnic of chords (you could almost see their colors), polyrhythms, seemingly unrelated harmonies, and ideas – fresh, brash, outrageous ideas” (Ibid.). When he plays, he holds his head angled to the left, tilted toward both heaven and earth. His right ear is directed skyward, hearing up there a new kind of music. His left ear remains earthbound, trained on the bedrock, Bach and the blues. He takes the listeners again and again on “a joyous, terrifying roller coaster of a ride” (140) and everyone in Putnam Royal is overcome; they are so overcome by the flooding music that they forget to clap. At last, Alvin Edwards leaps to his feet and renames him; Everett Payne is known from then on as Sonny-Rett Payne.
Word about Sonny begins to spread after that Sunday in 1947; he starts getting offers from both decent and nondescript clubs around Brooklyn. Sonny plays music, no matter where, when, or whatever the conditions; he is eager to show what he can do; he loves to "dazzle and confound" (185). Wherever he plays, Hattie, who runs the Maconettes, and Cherisse, who sings in it, are there also. After some time, Cherisse loses interest in the group and in singing altogether; so, Hattie disbands the Maconettes, since, it has been created for Cherisse. The three young people become a unit, a triangle. Eventually, Cherisse marries Sonny-Rett and Hattie becomes the perfect audience and trusted critic.

Sonny-Rett comes out with three albums in a single year. The following May, an invitation to the International Jazz Festival in Paris and the promise of the bookings in cities across Europe come his way. What Sonny-Rett has been hoping for all along is "a place, a country, a continent where he could breathe and create without a lot of hassle..." (187). So, when such a chance presents itself before him, he grabs it and goes with Cherissse to Paris, never to return; Hattie follows them to Paris, to make the triangle intact again. Sonny-Rett plays, composes and records all over the place. Now, he has a manager, a booking agent, a record producer and an entourage. He is doing so well that they move into one of the grand old apartment houses in Paree Cinq, where the best people live.

Cherisse is in her element, in Paris, "A city made to order for her" (188). She prefers to stay at home and work on her French. She is willing to share everything, including Sonny-Rett with Hattie and Hattie becomes Sonny-Rett's unofficial road manager, whenever he plays outside of Paris.
As Rosamond S. King points out, “Hattie intellectually stimulates him and manages the finances, and one or the other of the women is usually physically available to him” (2003: 545). Ultimately, “Monsieur Goody-two-shoes who feels he has to act the Puritan from time to time” (FK: 194), keeps his moral qualms aside and is comfortable with his liaisons with both the women. Everything becomes perfect with the arrival of a third woman in Sonny-Rett’s life; it is Jojo Payne, the daughter of Cherisse and Sonny-Rett. She comes as a miracle in his life and he composes a lullaby in her name, which becomes one of his signature tunes. Sonny-Rett is considered “almost French” (201) and he is one of the prominent musicians who is commissioned by the state radio in Paris to compose and arrange the music for the various studio bands. He is regularly booked at the big, well-known clubs, for concerts and yearly festivals. Besides all these, he has the standard engagement at the Belle Époque, where his image is hung out in the front.

Sonny-Rett, the jazz musician, gains name and fame, a luxurious life, love and honour and self-fulfilment; the music he plays and the songs he composes make him immortal. His decision to come to Paris to play the music he loves, has paid him off well. But the jazz scene in Europe has started to change around the mid-sixties, especially in France. New cabaret laws and rules have come into existence; there are to be no more all-black bands, and the playing of non-French music on the radio is to be strictly limited. A number of black musicians gets the message and leaves for home. But Sonny-Rett chooses to remain in Paris and the down-spiralling starts. Due to his choice, he has to pay a heavy price – his death and the falling apart of his family. It is highly unfortunate that racism and narrow
nationalism have brought about a sudden end to the career of a great musician.

When *The Fisher King* (2000) glorifies the power of music in shaping the lives of people, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983b) highlights the affective and spiritual powers of dance. The widow’s ‘marvelous real’ narrative is replete with music, song and dance. Avey, the protagonist of *Praisesong for the Widow* is in quest of herself. At the age of sixty four, in the middle of a Caribbean cruise, Avey experiences a sense of dislocation from herself; she feels a mind - body split: “Her mind in a way wasn’t even in her body” (10). She has not been feeling herself, the last couple of days. She has simply awakened in the middle of the night and decided to spend the rest of her vacation at home. She has packed all the six suitcases of hers, and is ready to quit the cruise after only five days, forfeiting the fifteen hundred dollars she has paid. She questions herself, as to from where she comes and how experiences have changed her.

Avey has lost touch with the racial reverence taught by her Aunt Cuney and the ethnicity of her newly-wed days; she neglected her racial past, the values and traditions of Africa. She has, consequently, lost contact with aspects of her own identity. When she looks at her own reflection in the mirror, she is not able to recognize herself; only upon second glance, she realizes that the stranger in the mirror is herself. When she mentions it to her doctor, he jokingly says that it is a “a sure sign... of money in the bank” (49). But, money does not assure happiness. Avey is forced to ask herself the question, whether the price she and her husband paid for their
material success and security was truly necessary; it has resulted in the creation of an inner void, spiritual decadence, and mind-body split.

Marshall uses dance as a metaphor to signify Avey’s self-discovery, self-expression, and self-endorsement. She traces Avey’s journey back to herself and her Caribbean and African ancestry. When Avey is waiting in Grenada for the plane to New York, she meets an island native, Lebert Joseph. Guided by him she takes the Carriacou Excursion, which is undertaken annually by the Out-Islanders of Grenada. In Carriacou, Avey participates in the Big Drum ceremony and hears the Beg Pardon Song. The ceremony starts with the elders dropping down on their knees, headed by Lebert Joseph. He slowly opens his arms, raises his tremulous head to the sky and offers up the opening statement of the Beg Pardon Song. His relatives behind him on the ground quickly join the singing; the makeshift drums that have been silent all along begin a solemn measure:

Arms opened, faces lifted to the darkness, the small band of suppliants endlessly repeated the few lines that comprised the Beg Pardon, pleading and petitioning not only for themselves and for the friends and neighbors present in the yard, but for all their far-flung kin as well – the sons and daughters, grands and great-grands in Trinidad, Toronto, New York, London…(236)

During the singing, all those present there bow their head.

The Beg Pardon is followed by the Nation Dance. The oldest member of a tribe or nation starts the dance in honour of the dead and the
memory of that ancestry. From the nations of Africa emerge the Temne, the Banda, the Arada, the Mako, the Cromanti, the Congo and the Chamba. The dances follow a set pattern. First, a lone, cracked, atonal and old voice would come from around the yard; quickly, other voices and the keg drums follow suit. The old souls whose nation it is, would sing their way into the circle and dance there. They are “Saluting their nations. Summoning the Old Parents. Inviting them to join them in the circle” (238). They believe that, invariably, the old parents would come as a small land crab, a moth, a beetle, a fly or a mosquito. They dance till they become tired; then, they go over to the lead drummer and lightly touch the goatskin top of his drum; instantly the music comes to a halt. Then, another nation dance commences.

When all the nation dances are over, the Creole dances begin; the mood in the yard changes and it begins to fill up with young people. In keeping with the changed mood, the drumming has grown more spirited; “The bottle-and-spoon boys” (242) have brought bottles, cowbells and hoeblades which they are either shaking or beating with spoons. The presence of the younger people has rendered a heightened note to the fete. Lebert Joseph sprinkles rum over the trampled earth and prepares it for the dance to follow. The drumming becomes more extravagant, complex and more joyous. Both the young and the old people are dancing; when the young do the “Trinidadian jump-up”, the older folk perform “the rhythmic trudge… A non-dance” (246). Now and then, for a fraction of a second, a plangent note is produced by the drummer, to remind the dancers of the true and solemn business of the fete; then, it is gone. The sound of the struck iron is on par with the voice of the drums. “Clangorous, insistent,
soaring, the iron was... calling for its namesake and creator... Ogun Feraille” (Ibid.). The elders, like Lebert Joseph, can sense the presence of Ogun.

Everybody, except Avey is dancing; even Avey is no longer controlled by her own inhibition. She takes a step forward into the ring and dances with the others, who are doing the Carriacou Tramp. Suddenly, she feels “the threads streaming out from the old people around her in Lebert Joseph’s yard. From their seared eyes. From their navels and their cast-iron hearts” (249). She feels one with them. Her feet, on their own accord, have discovered the old steps, which Avey has seen practised by the Ring Shouters in the church in Tatem; it is a counter – clockwise movement; it “enacts the spiritual / cultural grounding and flight signified in Avey’s name: Avatara – 'bird-earth' and 'avatar’” (Cartwright, 2003: 132). Avey finds “All of her moving suddenly with a vigor and passion she hadn’t felt in years, and with something of the stylishness and sass she had once been known for” (PSW: 249). Yet, not once do the soles of her feet leave the ground; her feet hold to “the restrained glide-and-stamp, the rhythmic trudge, the Carriacou Tramp, the shuffle designed to stay the course of history” (250). Lebert Joseph sees her dancing unconsciously her nation dance, and he goes to stand facing her; then, he bows a profound, solemn bow that is like a genuflection. All the elders, following Lebert Joseph, tender her the deep, almost reverential bow; they pay her the homage of recognition. When one elderly woman asks her “And who you is?” (251), Avey remembers her great-aunt Cuney’s admonition. The old woman used to insist that whenever anyone asked her name she was not to say simply “Avey”, or even “Avey Williams”, but always “Avey, short for
Avatara” (Ibid.). Remembering this, Avey replies by saying her correct, given name, Avatara.

To the widow the name ‘Avatara’ was given by her father’s great-aunt Cuney, in memory of Cuney’s own grandmother, whose name it was. Great-aunt Cuney had dreamed months before Avatara was born that she would be a girl and sent word that she should be called Avatara, because “It’s my gran’ done sent her. She’s her little girl” (42). Abena P.A. Busia rightly points out that the name which has at its root

a word meaning a passing over or a human manifestation of a continuing concept or entity, is of great symbolic importance; it was the name of the woman from whom Great-Aunt Cuney learned, at Tatem, the story of Ibo Landing, which carries the spiritual burden of the tale, and it is the name given by her to the woman who finally understands that tale and accepts the mission to pass it on. (1992: 242)

As the reincarnation of great-aunt Cuney’s gran’, Avey accepts her mission to pass on the story of the Ibos to her own and other children of the community.

The way Avey danced the Carriacou Tramp has made the elders think that she is an Arada. According to Gay Wilentz, “The celebration of the Nation Dance is the culmination of Avey’s personal awareness, her acknowledgement of her heritage, and the acceptance of her mission” (1990: 15). By listening to the song, dance and drum of the festival, Avey
comes to realize the full extent of her collective history and the ability of
the people of diaspora to transform the suffering into beauty through song.
Both Marshall and Avey feel that this ability to transform tragedy into
beauty on a communal level is to be transmitted. Thus, Avey’s journey
culminating in the Nation Dance has led her from “division to wholeness”
(Collier 1984: 295) and has empowered her self “through a rekindled
knowledge of the self in relation to society” (Reyes 1992: 247).

4.3. PSYCHIC HEALTH

Marshall demonstrates in her novels, that small, loving rituals such
as listening to music and dancing are necessary for psychic health. In
Marshall’s Brown Girl. Brownstones (1959), Suggie Skeete, one of the
tenants in Silla’s house, proves this. Suggie, a Barbadian immigrant, works
for a white family in the country. Saturday is her day off. Besides thinking
of Barbados with wistfulness and waiting for a lover, Suggie indulges in
blues music and dancing. These things only help her to endure the next
week and “the insolence of white children... the lonely room under the
high roof...” (20). The blues is peculiarly African-American and it
epitomizes the condition of American blacks. “Alienated, lost, financially
insecure, cheated in love, these Blacks wail their misery into a responding
guitar or piano either actively or vicariously and find their way out of the
deep, dark, funky holes of despair” (Harris 1983: 58). The blues as a
musical form allows the blacks an outlet for their frustration. Dance also
has the releasing effect; Selina, who is weighed down by the death of her
father, dances with Suggie and finds herself released from the thoughts of
death; when Silla dances for a brief moment at ‘Gatha Steed’s wedding, her
vibrant sensuality and sparkingly happy nature, which have been repressed by her desire to buy a house, are revealed.

According to Trudier Harris,

Silla’s very life is a state of the blues, and her lack of a sustained means of expressing it, either artistically or otherwise, intensifies the complexity of her personality... Silla, like Toni Morrison’s Sula, becomes destructive... because she has no instrument for expression...-(Ibid.)

She becomes the picture of frustration, because she turns the pain inward instead of releasing it outward. It leads to self-destruction, loss of her humanity and, ultimately, to the loss of peace of mind. Whatever she does to reclaim her peace of mind, does not bring in psychological comfort and purging effect. Yet, Silla keeps reaching for something that will bring satisfaction to both her family and herself; but, she loses Deighton and alienates her children. Her inability to give herself up to “the release of music or of love, is what insures that her state of the blues will never find an outlet” (67).

Merle, in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People (1969), is another character for whom dance is not a means for either liberation of the self or the discovery of the community. She takes Saul, Allen, Lyle and Dorothy Clough to Sugar’s, a night club. It is “the one truly egalitarian institution” on the island “where the cats can look with impunity on the kings...” (79). On the dance floor an assortment of dances are seen; but Merle does not join them. It is not in her, to let go of herself in abandon. She is an
embodiment of deep frustration. She experiments with radical politics; her fight is against colonialism and imperialism with its invisible centres of power; she confronts the landowners of the world. Her attempt to square off with the owner of the Sugar mill deepens her frustration. It is not dance, but catatonia that is her mode of self retrieval; it is a zone for the restoration of self from which the body and mind emerge, to take up the fight once again.

Jay and Avey Johnson of Halsey Street, in *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983b), are portrayed as a happy, loving couple; and music, songs and dance play an important role in their happiness. At the workplace, the store, Jay has acquired the reputation of being “hard-working, efficient and dependable” (92). Once he comes home, he gets a balanced cultural nourishment from diverse black artists and musicians. The best of jazz and blues, which he considers sacred, provides healing and strength, at the end of each day, to his tense and work-worn body and mind: “...the fatigue and strain of the long day spent doing the two jobs – his and his boss’s – would ease from his face, and his body...” (94). Marshall depicts the change that black music has brought on Jay:

The Jay who emerged from the music of an evening, the self that would never be seen down at the store, was open, witty, playful, even outrageous at times: he might suddenly stage an impromptu dance just for the two of them in the living room, declaring it to be Rockland Palace or the Renny-(95)
Jay becomes affectionate and passionate. As Giulia Scarpa rightly points out,

the rhythm and mood of his domestic life is accompanied and dictated by the blues. Each of Jay’s and Avey’s intimate thoughts and gestures finds its correspondent in a song: the courtship, the tender reliance upon each other’s understanding, the little rituals, the love-making. (1989: 98)

Avey shares Jay’s love for music, dance and poetry. They recite fragments of poems written by Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Langston Hughes and James W. Johnson. On Sundays, they listen to spirituals. Such practices, gradually fall “victim to the strains, to the sense of the downward slide...” (PSW : 129). Their journey up the social ladder coincides with their forsaking of African-American cultural heritage. Jerome Johnson stops calling himself Jay. He views “the world and his fellow man according to a harsh and joyless ethic...” (131). He blames the blacks for always depending on white people, instead of getting out and doing for themselves. Jerome Johnson takes to saying such things: “…If it was left to me I’d close down every dancehall in Harlem and burn every drum! That’s the only way these Negroes out here’ll begin making any progress” (132). Yet, he is haunted by the memory of Halsey Street, upto the moment of his death; and “Jay’s death had taken place long before Jerome Johnson’s” (135). When Avey and Jerome Johnson stop practising the black music and dance, when they abjure the magic of being themselves, they undergo a spiritual decline of their marriage and themselves.
The therapeutic power of songs and music is underlined in *Daughters* (1991) also. The novel opens with Ursa’s abortion in a fancy New York clinic. “Juxtaposed against a deteriorating relationship with her boyfriend Carruthers as well as childhood memories of her father,” as Pettis remarks, “her abortion encodes her loss, rejection, and disappointment, both in intimate relationships and in broader contexts” (1993: 7). Seated on the side of the bed in the clinic, Ursa silently repeats “Ke’ram... a sound designed to quiet the mind and suspend all thought” (17). That does not seem enough to soothe her mind. She plans to “Go hear Carmen McRae at the Blue Note, if she’s in town. Or Betty Carter at the Village Vanguard” (6). She thinks: “May be Abbey Lincoln is singing, screaming somewhere. *I need to hear Abbey do some screaming tonight!*” (Ibid.). Ursa seems to recognize music as a therapy that will help her to remove the discomfort she experiences.

### 4.4. POLITICAL RESISTANCE

In Marshall’s novels, singing and dancing not only help one to realize his or her own self and ensure emotional well-being, but also serve as a form of political resistance. For example, in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969), the Bourne hills people, who live under a modified plantation system, stage their open defiance in the form of the enactment of Cuffee Ned’s attack on the plantation owner. The Cuffee Ned Revolt, re-enacted every year during the Carnival, reminds the residents of the ethics of “peace, freedom, and the refusal to allow the self to be violated” (Harris, 1981: 66). The Carnival in Bourne Island is a Bacchanal, a Big Fete; all work ceases for two days, the Monday and Tuesday preceding Ash
Wednesday. At the time of the Carnival, the grand float, built years ago, depicting Pyre Hill in flames, with a model of the planter’s estate house at its summit, is hauled over to the main road. The float is freshly painted; the costumes – loose-fitting, wide-sleeved tunic of coarse blue-and white striped Osnaburg cotton, modelled on the dress worn during the revolt – are aired. On Tuesday, the parade takes place till mid-night; that morning the Bournehills band is well on the road to town. It is a slow and sorry-looking cavalcade, yet there is something impressive about it.

Delbert is in charge of Bournehills band and Merle is one of the dozen or so holding poles supporting the ‘Pyre Hill Revolt’ banner. Immediately behind comes the Spiretown steel band, to spell out on their converted oil drums, the story of Cuffee Ned and the revolt. Behind them march, people of all ages. It is a silent march in the beginning. But, the measured tread of those countless feet in the dust and the loud report of the bracelets produce an awesome sound. The members of that band, bent figures with the dazed look of defeat, present an awesome sight. They have been performing the masque for so many years that they have actually become those they are depicting. From time to time they look up, it is an unnerving look, asking the others to acknowledge them, love them and act in some bold and retributive way that would both rescue their memory and indemnify their suffering. But the crowd refuses to do so; it considers the people in the parade as pitiful, an eyesore and an embarrassment; it calls them “The shameless whelps! The disgraces!” (CPTP : 283).

Delbert blows on his conch, calling for the start of the pageant; the entire body of the marchers comes to a halt. Stinger enacts the role of
Cuffee and Ferguson that of Percy Bryam. After a long struggle, Bryam is defeated and led down the hill; a mock battle takes place between slaves and soldiers; and the rebels set Bryam's house on fire. Stinger parades his captive, Bryam, before the crowd; the triumphant song and dance are started and the once bowed heads are flung back. The song celebrates Cuffee Ned, his deeds and exploits. It does not seem that they are "singing only of themselves and Bournehills, but of people like them everywhere" (286). They tell the story of the revolt from the beginning to the end, from Cuffee Ned's secret planning and organizing for the rebellion to the eventual defeat, after three years of freedom. The story is half-sung and half-spoken; the proud voices drop, when singing of the defeat at the end. The singers describe Cuffee's death, in voices that would never cease to mourn him, and the bloody suppression that has followed. At the very end of the band, Mr. Douglin carries a tall pike with a doll's head in a tassled nightcap affixed to the top. But, Cuffee has died content; he has seen his life and deeds as pointing the way to what must be. He has believed that death is not an end, but a return. The singing voices trail into silence.

The pattern described above is repeated; but, during the evening, the time devoted to the numb procession and defeat becomes less and less; then, it disappears altogether. The only thing retained is the soaring tribute to Cuffee in song and dance, his victory on the hill and life in Bournehills, during his reign. Now, the resistance of the crowd gives way to grudging admiration: "you got to hand it to them, I guess. Those Bournehills fellas know how to beat the pans and those other brutes can sing" (289). Some join the March and dance; from other bands also people come to join them. The Bournehills band is twice its size now. Slowly it makes its way to the
Sports Oval; there is a final ‘jump-up’, then, the last march, the last lap. In re-enacting the rite each year, the Bournehills people are insisting upon revolution, because that is what Cuffee stands for. In a group discussion, Marshall herself remarks that “Cuffee Ned, in his person and his life, epitomized revolution, complete overthrow, complete change in a sense, and ... Bournehills people are insisting on that” (Haydn 1970: 6). That is why they are not ready to accept the half-hearted measures taken in the name of progressive change. In both *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969) and *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983b), the same dance, ‘Tramp’, is performed as a mark of black people’s resistance to neo-colonialism; while the resistance in the first novel is against political and economical aspects of colonialism, in the second novel, it is against cultural aspect of colonialism. This and the other ancestral dances danced by the present-day blacks in the two novels mentioned, underscore the continuity of resistance to oppression, suppression and seduction practised by the colonial and neo-colonial powers.

4.5. SOCIAL TOTALITY

Modern capitalist society has produced fragmentation, a characteristic of post-modernism, and there is a nostalgia for older, traditional communities in Marshall’s novels. To recreate the whole, one has to get in touch with the older generations. As said by Susan Willis, “Marshall’s novels enact the coming into being of social totality” (1987: 68). Songs and dance play a significant role in bringing about this totality, the deep and binding sense of community. In *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969), the totality occurs when the people of Bournehills
enact their version of Cuffee Ned’s revolt; it is present in *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983b) in the nation dances. When talking about totality in Marshall’s novels, Susan Willis remarks: “The masque recreates in history what Lebert Joseph’s dance of the nation accomplishes in culture; that is, the redefinition of scattered, daily experience in terms of a totality” (Ibid.).

Totality comes into existence in *The Fisher King* (2000) in the commemorative concert that is held at the end of the novel, to celebrate Sonny-Rett’s music on the fifteenth anniversary of his death. Sonny-Rett’s brother Edgar, a successful developer, arranges this concert. He also arranges for the trip of both Sonny-Rett’s grandson, Sonny, and Hattie, Sonny-Rett’s special friend and Sonny’s “fathermothersisterbrother” (FK: 18), from Paris to Brooklyn to attend the concert. The big night arrives, and every seat is taken in the concert hall. Putnam Royal, where Sonny-Rett was given a chance to play his jazz for the first time, has been transformed into an auditorium and concert hall.

To open the concert, the band plays “Sonny-Rett plays ‘Sonny...’” and “Basically Bach, Basically Blue”, the two songs that have become Sonny-Rett’s signature pieces over the years. Once the applause dies, Hattie addresses the gathering. She first does a reprise of that Sunday in 1947, when Everett Carlyle Payne was given a chance to sit in with the house band. She recalls the effect of his jazz music on the audience: “Silence like in church. Everybody blown away. Until one-armed Alvin Edwards leaped up and renamed him [Sunny-Rett] for life” (184). Then she tells the listeners about how Sonny-Rett’s name began to spread far and wide and how and why he chose to settle in Paris.
Two more songs of Sonny-Rett are played and Hattie resumes her place at the lectern. She expands on the sheer Euphoria of those early years in Paris, filled with tours, concerts and jazz festivals. She describes her role as Sonny-Rett’s unofficial road manager, when he played outside of Paris. The audience are treated as old friends and they gift Hattie with their total attention. Now the band plays three popular songs of Sonny-Rett. After the intermission, Hattie describes the change of the jazz scene in Europe. When she waits for the words to come, to describe the down-spiralling five or six years before Sonny-Rett’s death, the audience respectfully wait with her. After her description of Sonny-Rett’s last few years of life as a long free-fall, the audience are treated to two songs in which they can hear the long free-fall. Then the reprise of Sonny-Rett’s signature tune “Sonny-Rett plays 'Sonny...’” ends the concert; it is a different arrangement altogether from the version at the beginning.

The last piece of music of the concert opens with a solo by Shades Bowen. He transforms the old Tin Pan Alley song into a tender, complex, and eloquent New Orleans processional dirge out to the burial ground. His tenor, with its natural sweetness, not only bringing home Sonny-Rett Payne, born Everett Carlyle, Ulene’s boy child, but also bidding him a respectful and loving farewell, putting him to rest properly on native ground.(211)
That done, the brass section of the band rises to its feet and Shades Bowen leads the way; the procession back from the grave is, in the tradition, “a sudden up-tempo, swinging, joyous celebration of the man and his art” (Ibid.). At the end, the entire auditorium rises to its feet and the applause goes on endlessly.

In The Chosen Place, The Timeless People (1969), the Bournehills people have proved that “they had been a people” (287); forgetting their differences, they have come together and worked together to enact the Cuffée Ned revolt. The same is true of the people of Brooklyn, when it comes to celebrating and honouring the black music, jazz. Their music brings them together and instils in them the feeling that all of them are one. Even though, in Daughters (1991), music does not figure in the bringing-in of totality, corruption in the neo-colonial government can be viewed as a jarring note in music. People of Triunion join hands and remove the discordant note by defeating Primus Mackenzie.

Song and dance do not necessarily highlight only the positive values in black communities in Marshall’s novels. As Pettis points out, “The community can be brutal as well as embracing” (2000: 19). It augments Silla’s material thrust to buy a house and it rejects Deighton, who refuses to embrace their goals. The Calypso celebrations at the wedding of ‘Gatha Steed’s daughter becomes the community’s ritual of punishment and exclusion. When Silla is dancing with Seon Braithwaite, an old man known to her from her childhood, Ina with a boy and Selina with Beryl, to the calypso rhythms, Deighton comes and stands in the doorway. Selina waves to him and he signals her to remain where she is. He is startled to see Ina
with the boy and envious to see Silla with the old man. There is a longing
in both Deighton and Silla for each other. Deighton takes a step, but, Silla’s
derisive laughter drives him back. He can see no welcoming face, only
cold nods. The dancers’ backs form a wall against him; they close
protectively around Silla and Ina; some one pulls Selina back. Then, “the
dancers turned in one body and danced with their backs to him” (BGBS:
126). Deighton is agonized. He says in anguish: “Oh God... My God...
Why...” (Ibid.). Everyone turns his face to him:

From all over the hall those dark contemptuous face is
charged him. Those eyes condemned him and their
voices rushed full tilt at him, scourging him and finally
driving him from their presence, with their song, “Small
Island, go back where you really come from!” (127)

According to Lloyd W. Brown,

The calypso is, intrinsically, a rhythm symbol of the life-
force. But the ritual expulsion at the wedding party...
transforms the calypso into an instrument of the
immigrants’ determination to secure the material rewards
of a power-oriented culture. When Silla echoes the
calypso refrain at the time of Deighton’s arrest, she helps
to transform the calypso from its vital function into a
manifesto of machine power.(1984 : 314)
Marshall, by using calypso rhythm and dance in the eviction scene, brings out the Barbadians' insensitivity to values or persons outside their machine mass.

4.6. PRESERVATION OF HISTORY

Drumming and song styles are connected to every important life-cycle event as well as to all the major events in the African communities. The Africans deeply revere their history. Drummers are historians; through their talking drum they record the history of the people and convey the values of the community. Marshall does the same in her works, using music, song and dance as one of her narrative techniques. Because of the interaction between Barbadian and American culture in her community, Marshall has developed at an impressionable age, a sense of ritual, of shapes and forms of culture. In recreating the rituals, especially dance, she dramatically reiterates the lessons of history and culture in her fiction. Her first three novels, Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959), The Chosen Place, The Timeless People (1969) and Praisesong for the Widow (1983b), "constitute a trilogy describing, in reverse, the slave trade's triangular route back to the motherland, the source" (Marshall 1973: 107). While Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959) is set in the United States and The Chosen Place, The Timeless People (1969) in the Caribbean, Praisesong for the Widow (1983b) is set in the United States and the Caribbean, and it dramatizes the links between the blacks in the First and the Third Worlds and African culture. The search for the unity of self takes Marshall's women to the Caribbean and ultimately, to Africa.
One can trace the history of the black people from the times of slavery by doing a close study of Marshall’s use of music, song and dance in her novels; the study can start from Praisesong for the Widow. When Avey takes the boat journey to Carriacou, under the guidance of Lebert Joseph, she becomes sick and her body becomes the site for the memory of the Middle passage. During the Creole dances, joyous drumming takes place; the pace is set by the lead drummer. He is playing as if he and his instrument were one. Yet, very often in the midst of the joyousness and speed, he pauses, places his left elbow on the drumhead and draws his right thumb across the goatskin at an angle. It produces a “single, dark, plangent note... like that from the deep bowing of a cello”; it sounds “like the distillation of a thousand sorrow songs” (244). The note embodies the theme of separation and loss, conveys unacknowledged longing and sums up feelings beyond words and a host of subliminal memories. Marshall speaks about the lingering memories of slavery and the Middle Passage in the collective consciousness:

After centuries of forgetfulness and even denial, they refused to go away. The note was a lamentation that could hardly have come from the rum keg of a drum. Its source had to be the heart, the bruised still-bleeding innermost chamber of the collective heart.(245)

The note, which lasts for a fraction of a second, knifes through the revelry and speaks to everyone there, reminding them of the true and solemn business of Beg Pardon Ceremony.
Like the brief plangent note in *Priasesong for the Widow* (1983b), the loud music of the roaring sea by the side of Bournehills in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969) expresses deep lamentation over the wrongs done to the black people. The sea will not forget those wretched blacks who were constrained to jump from the slave ships during the infernal voyage across the Middle Passage:

It was the Atlantic this side of the island, a wild eyed, marauding sea the color of slate, deep, full of dangerous currents, lined with row upon row of barrier reefs, and with a sound like that of the combined voices of the drowned raised in a loud unceasing lament – all those, the nine million and more it is said, who in their enforced exile, their Diaspora, had gone down between this point and the homeland lying out of sight to the east. This sea mourned them. Aggrieved, outraged, unappeased, it hurled itself upon each of the reefs in turn and then upon the shingle beach, sending up the spume in an angry froth which the wind took and drove in like smoke over the land... to commemorate those millions of the drowned.\(^{(106)}\)

The miserable life of the exploited slaves who survived the Middle Passage, in the European colonies in the Caribbean, its echo in the lives of post-colonial Caribbeans and the resistance put up by black people in both colonial and post-colonial times are vividly told through the ritual enactment of Cuffee Ned Revolt in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless*
People. The demand of the people for total change is voiced through music, dance and song; they speak as one voice. The novel describes the exploitation of the black people who are leading an agrarian mode of life in a rural setting. The exploited people of Bournehills are kept pacified, and in ignorance by both the church and the rum shop, as Merle says. They are still invisible to the eyes of Sir John from England, who visits the Cane Vale factory. The corrupt officials of the Island government are for promoting industry and tourism at the expense of the much needed land reforms. Most of the land is with Kingsleys and Sons and the farmers hold only little plots, where they grow sugar cane, out of necessity; so, they have to import "the very basics of life" and "It’s killing, it’s crippling" (205) the island. The rice they import is awful and the cod, dry and bad-smelling. The hard-working people of Bournehills become exhausted at the end of the day and they look like zombies; they lose their humanity. Instead of changing the whole set up, the economic structure, in the name of bogus progress, welfare schemes are introduced. That is why the Bournehills people reject them and ask for a complete change, as it happened in the days of Cuffee Ned’s rule, through their Carnival Parade.

Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959), which tells the story of the West Indian immigrants in New York, reminds the readers that not only the blacks in the Third World Caribbean islands are oppressed and suppressed but also those in urban cities in the First World; in cities, it is black culture that is in mortal danger. Machine-force is the rhythm of American culture which is defined by power. Silla and other Barbadians have the ambition to succeed in that culture. The Barbadians have adopted the ethic of power thoroughly and it is demonstrated by the symbolic rhythms of the Calypso,
which is used to excommunicate Deighton, who does not fall in line with their view of life.

The Barbadians' adoption of the success theory of Americans bears testimony to a historical necessity. After the First World War, in 1920s, a large number of people of African descent from the Caribbean and the Southern states migrated to the Northern cities in the United States due to colonial oppression, exploitation, racism, poverty and tremendous population pressure. Silla and other Barbadians in Brown Girl, Brownstones are such immigrants, who have come to the United States seeking greener pastures. But, this displacement has not brought much change in their lives, because of the racist attitude of Americans. So, the assimilation process starts.

The Barbadians believe that property ownership can protect them from the white racist world. They work hard and save money in all possible ways to buy a brown stone house; they run small time businesses; they send their children to colleges; and they start the Barbadian Association of Home Owners. In the words of Selina, they live by “the most shameful codes possible – dog eat dog, exploitation, the strong over the weak, the end justifies the means…” (188). Selina feels that machine-force pervades them and is shaping them. Advocating the ethic of power symbolized by the machine force, Silla takes even unethical measures to get money for buying a brownstone house; no bars hold her in her rush to make money. She leaves love by the way side. Even though she is “not money-mad, avaricious, not a follow-pattern” (145), she believes that everyone must improve one self, because only for that they came from
home, that is Barbados. She allows this seeking of improvement to interfere in her relationship with her husband and also her children. It is clearly evidenced by the eviction scene, which involves the calypso rhythms. Interestingly, Suggie Skeete, a Barbadian immigrant, who rejects the machine-force, uses the calypso rhythm to express her vitality; Selina, who rebels against her mother's ruthless ambition, joins Suggie's calypso dance. Thus, Marshall utilizes the calypso rhythm and dance to outline the changes that come over the black people, when they move from a rural economy to an urban economy; to point out how the adoption of white man's cultural norms has affected the man-woman relationship among the blacks.

The fact that mindless amassing of wealth spoils man-woman relationship is proved in the case of Avey and Jay in Praisesong for the Widow (1983b). Only after the death of her husband, Avey realizes that money and commodities have substituted human relations. By taking part in the Nation Dances, Avey comes to realize who she is and what the African culture means. Reconnected to her ancestors' culture, which does not prioritize money over man, Avey looks at life anew. According to Frantz Fanon, colonized people are not only those people whose labour has been appropriated, but also those "in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality" (1967: 18). Marshall also warns the black people against this colonizing of the mind, giving examples in the persons of Silla, Avey, Jay, Lyle Hutson, Primus Mackenzie, Ulene Payne and Varina Jones; the suggested way out is reconnection with one's own cultural heritage, as is shown in the case of Avey, short for Avatara. The rituals related to the Beg Pardon ceremony,
naming one’s nation, Nation Dances and Creole dances tell tales about the presence of cultural continuum in the lives of the present day blacks.

The view of Ashcroft et al. is that “it is in their writing, and through other arts such as painting, sculpture, music, and dance that the day-to-day realities experienced by colonized peoples have been most powerfully encoded and so profoundly influential” (2002: 1). Marshall does make use of all these other arts, in her writings, to encode the day-to-day realities of black people. In The Chosen Place, The Timeless People (1969), in Merle’s room, there are faded prints and drawings depicting life long ago in places like Bournehills. There is a drawing of a three-masted Bristol slaver. It describes graphically the inhuman conditions under which the slaves were transported across the Atlantic ocean: “It had been meticulously rendered in cross-section to show how the cargo, the men, women and children, the babies at breast, had been stowed away on the closely tiered decks to take up the least room on the journey” (401). In The Fisher King (2000), the young Sonny is fond of drawing castles; outside the castle a miniature knight in full armour in the lower right hand corner of each page can be seen. The knight is fully armed; it is Sonny himself, guarding his grandfather Sonny-Rett inside. Sonny moves him to each new one he draws. The pressing need to protect black artists is succinctly told by Marshall in this metaphorical use of drawings.

Daughters (1991) showcases how deftly Marshall has used the sculptures of Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe, the slave-rebels of Triunion, to insist upon cross-gender political activism. She captures the reality of the nuances of diaspora interactions, by the musical form of jazz, in The Fisher
King (2000). It tells the story of a gifted musician and his cultural innovations; he captures the soul of his listeners with his new music. The power of music brings together three people from three different groups of diaspora: Hattie Carmichael, an African-American, Everett Payne, son of West Indian parents, in Brooklyn, and Cherisse McCullum, whose mother is from a Southern family. These three happily settle in Paris. Sonny, Sonny-Rett's grandson, has an African for his father. Thus, in Sonny different strains of African diaspora are present; he stands as a symbol of Pan-African unity. This is Marshall's Utopian vision of a new black identity. Sonny's presence in Brooklyn eases the tension between his paternal and maternal great-grand mothers; he is the connecting link between the two feuding families. The Fisher King celebrates hybridity and gives the message that to face and overcome the hostile world of racism, all the different branches of African diaspora need to stand together, work together, and show the others that "All o' we is one" (CPTP: 200).

Ideology means all mental frameworks of people, their beliefs, concepts and ways of expressing their relationship to the world. The foregoing analysis of Marshall's novels reveals that African-American performing arts, used as narrative technique, give a glimpse of the ideology and the history of black people. Marshall holds Pan-African ideology to her heart; according to her, collectivism is the key for the marginalized people. Since the existing forms are not adequate for depicting marginality, Marshall has created a new form. This new structure or genre can be viewed as a protest against earlier texts by both white and African-American writers. This creation of a new genre is a mark of "rhetorical
self-definition” (Gates, 1984: 290). The new genre offers the readers new ways of interpretation about race, class and gender and encourages them to read these text with greater flexibility. Marshall has brought together elements of fiction, history, music, song and dance to form, “a new, differently energized novelistic genre” (Waxman 1994: 97). Barbara Frey Waxman calls this new genre “a mythopoetic, fictionalized history of African Americans” (Ibid.). Using this new genre, Marshall sings in praise of her African heritage and passes it on to the generations to come.