CHAPTER IV

QUEST FOR PURITY

PRAISESONG FOR THE WIDOW
In *Praisesong for the Widow*, Paule Marshall underscores the need to understand one's African heritage for "an integrated African life, especially for relatively successful, assimilated middle-class Blacks...."\(^1\) She feels that a black cannot gain the connected consciousness of African heritage, and cannot establish an authentic cultural identity unless he/she awakens from the cultural death. As Giulia Scarpa says,

> In *Praisesong for the Widow*, the concept of culture – the culture of the people of African ancestry – is indicated as the foundation of black self-identity. Pivotal to Marshall's subtle analysis is how the concept of class (or better, the American myth of class mobility and uplift), in relation to race and gender, can destroy one's sense of identity by imposing upon its victim a gradual self-denial in the name of acquiring a supposedly higher and better status in a culturally homogenized American society.\(^2\)

Set in the U.S. and the Caribbean, *Praisesong for the Widow* dramatizes the links between myths of both Afro-American culture and Afro-Caribbean culture. This helps as the basis for the protagonist's, Avey's, assessment of her life. The title of the novel itself attempts to celebrate cultural transition and African continuity. *Praisesong*

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reminds us of the African origin of the characters and also informs us that ritual is at the novel's core.

The novel is about the diaspora of the scattered African peoples from their past and their communities and from each other. Scattered people are made whole again, through the healing of one of Africa's lost daughters, Avey. It is a praisesong not only for Avey Johnson, but also for the perennial Avey Johnsons in African-American history who succumb to the "shameful stone of false values."

The novel explicitly demonstrates how rituals are necessary for Africans in the New World and how such myth-connected rituals sustain the memory of the Old Parents and Africa. Marshall underscores the need for an Afrocentric ritual process as the most effective mode of cleansing the black psyche of the Western corruption. As Barbara T. Christian has noted,

Marshall's *Praisesong* insists that New World Black rituals are living and functional, and that they contain, whether they are in North or South America, an essential truth: that beyond rationality, the body and spirit must not be split by the "shameful stone of false values," that we must feel, with humility, "the nurturing ground from which (we) have sprung and to which (we) can always turn for sustenance."
A kind of tension is seen between black people's need to survive and develop in America, and their even more important need to sustain themselves.

The very title of the novel reflects the ritual motif. The traditional meaning of a praisesong is a chant or song which dramatizes the achievements of the individual or community. It usually incorporates historical circumstances as well as mythic events and legendary tales. The song becomes a part of the ritual performance on formal occasions. As a well-known African-American feminist critic, Abena P.B.Busia, states,

Praisesongs are traditional African heroic poems, sung in various communities over the entire continent. They embrace all manners of elaborate poetic form, but are always specifically ceremonial, social poems, intended to be recited or sung in public at anniversaries and other celebrations, including the funerals of the great. Praisesongs may embrace the history, myths, and legends of a whole people or their representative [s], and they can be used to celebrate communal triumph, the greatness of rulers, or the nobility of the valiant and brave, whether in life or death. They can also be sung to mark social transition, as part of a rite of passage, they mark the upward movement of a person from one group to the next.4
The title refers to the ritualistic communal song and dance “Beg Pardon” at the end of the novel.

The ritual incorporated in *Praisesong for the Widow* is of symbolic death and rebirth. Victor Turner, in his work *The Ritual Process*, states that there are three phases of the ritual process which lead a person to psychic rebirth. They are: separatism, marginality, and aggregation. Turner writes,

> The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in social structure, from a set of cultural conditions or from both. During the intervening “liminal” period, the characteristics of the ritual subject the (“passenger”) are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the past or coming state. In the third phase (of aggregation), the passage is consumated. The ritual subject, individual... is in a relatively stable state once more.\(^5\)

Avey Johnson is the daughter of Barbadian immigrants. Her journey that starts obviously in the form of a package tour of the islands progressively transforms into a ritual journey. Avey’s artificial self is dispelled through her participation in the Carriacou Excursion, a communal trip to a small Caribbean island. On Carriacou, Avey
discovers her link to the Arada Nation and finally becomes herself, reassuming her true name, Avatara. As Barbara T. Christian points out, "...in African cosmology it is through nommo, through the correct naming of a thing, that it comes into existence. By knowing her proper name Avey becomes herself." Thus Avey's journey is aimed at integration of body and spirit and reaffirmation through identification with her racial heritage. Eugenia Collier aptly sums up the journey: "The movement of the novel is ... the achievement of linkages in time and place, linkages of the disparate elements of the individual self as it merges with the collective self."

The journey is introvert, internal, and committed to the exploration of self. Marshall states,

I'm trying to trace history... to take, for example, the infamous triangular route of slavery and to reverse it so that we make the journey back from America to the West Indies, to Africa... to make that trip back. I'm not talking about in actual terms. I'm talking about a psychological and spiritual journey back in order to move forward. You have to psychologically go through chaos in order to overcome it.

The novel is divided into four architectural blocks: "Rungate" (running away from); "Sleeper's Wake" (awakening to a shocking reality); "Lave Tete" (Washing away false values); and "Beg Pardon" (the reconciliation
with one's own heritage). The first book, "Rungate," uses memory and dreams as an opening of the avenue to the world of "ancient properties" that Avey Johnson had long forgotten during her sojourn in the New World. "Sleeper's Wake," "Wake" is both a ritual of death and of awakening. "Lave Tete" is both a ritual of cleansing and of being clothed in the raiments of a different world view. And "Beg Pardon" is both a ritual of the letting go of the shameful false values and reclaiming of an older collective legacy. Marshall with the help of the flashback technique develops a subplot, which centers on episodes in the past experience of Avey Johnson.

"Rungate," the title of the first book, is taken from Robert Hayden's famous poem of that name, a poem which stresses the slave past of the New World blacks and their fugitive escape from bondage.

Run falls rises stumbles in from darkness into dark
and the darkness thicketed with shapes of terror
the hunters pursuing and the hounds pursuing and
the night cold and the night long and the river to
cross and the jack-muh-lanterns beckoning and
blackness ahead and when shall I reach that
somewhere morning and keep on going and never
turn back and keep on going..."9

Avey Johnson resembles the archetypal slave figure in the poem.
In an effort to heal herself of her grief over the death of her husband, Jerome, Avey along with her two friends, Thomasina Moore and Clarice, embarks Binaca Pride— a name which symbolizes white pride— a luxury cruise. But suddenly she becomes a victim of inexplicable unease and restlessness. She behaves in a strange and funny way. As her friend Thomasina Moore comments,

Keeping to herself all day. Not showing up till dinner and then scarcely touching the food on her plate. Hardly talking to anybody. I should've known somethin' was up. And now come this morning here she is dressed back, ready to walk off the ship for good. All of a sudden like this! And without a word as to why! 'It's nothin' I can put my finger on.' Who she thinks she's kiddin'? A person would have to have a reason for doing a thing like this. No, somethin's behind this mess....(23)

A mystifying dream grips her mind that Avey just cannot explain. It is a dream in which her ancestral figure, great-aunt Cuney, the woman with whom little Avey spent her childhood summers in Tatern, South Carolina, issues her “Patient summons” (41). It is a technique through which Marshall takes her back to Avey's childhood days. Great-aunt Cuney, appears before her in her dream, and invites her to take a good look at herself. When Avey dreams of her Aunt Cuney, she does not understand her gestures toward the landing and
considers them "ridiculous business" (43). However, Aunt Cuney continues to beg Avey to accompany her to enact the ritual of their common heritage and listen to the stories of Ibos. In spite of Avey's refusal "to take even a single step forward" (41), Aunt Cuney continues to wave her forward exhibiting "a patience and restraint that was unlike her" (41). The old woman changes her tactics. "Her hand dropped and, reaching out with her arms, she began coaxing her forward, gently urging her, the way a mother would a one-year-old who hangs back from walking on its own" (41). A victim of "imposed innocence,"10 Avey is struck by the opposed behaviour of Aunt Cuney: "Avey Johnson stood there mystified, and then was all the more annoyed. She swung away her face, telling herself, hoping, that when she looked back, she would find that the old woman had given up and gone on the walk alone; or better yet had returned to her grave in Tatem's colored cemetery" (41).

Avey, troubled by her dreams and discomfort, decides to return to the security of her suburban home in White Plains, New York. Unable to come out of the discomfort, she expresses her desire to spend the rest of her vacation at home. Though Avey's body is on a luxury liner, her soul is in the keeping of great-aunt Cuney and the Ibos. In her struggle to prosper and progress, her conscious life moved towards Western cosmos. But we see that her unconscious life is guided by the rules and forces of African ontology. When her dream doors open, they reveal to her just how much she has changed. Caught in the riptide of her anger,
Thomasina Moore, a woman who tries to overcome race restrictions with class values, cries out, "That's why if I've said it once I've said it a thousand times: it ... don't ... pay ... to ... go ... no ... place ... with ... niggers! They'll mess us ever' time!" (27). Avey fails to give the reason for her quitting as "it was just that something—she couldn't say what—had come over her the past couple of days. She couldn't explain it. She could make no sense of it" (28). Thomasina, who understands that there must be "somethin' deep" (28) behind her decision, refuses to search for an explanation with the fear of having to dig into her own concealed anxiety.

Since the mid-sixties, dreams have been a regular feature of Avey's nights. With the first nudging of her dreams, Avey finally comes to an awareness that she can still change who and what she is. As a child, Avatara was pulled out of her apparently comfortable existence with her family by her great-aunt, Aunt Cuney, to learn about her African heritage and her womanhood. During the dream, Avey admits that she has wanted to erase Aunt Cuney from her life: "...in instilling the story of the Ibos in her child's mind, the old woman had entrusted her with a mission she couldn't even name yet had felt duty-bound to fulfill. It had taken her years to rid herself of the notion" (42). Aunt Cuney was a rebellious figure in her family history who was caught doing a forbidden African dance step, "Crossing her feet" (33), in a Ring Shout dance at the Christian Church in Tatem. Ordered out of the
circle, she protested and claimed that "it had been the Spirit moving powerfully in her" (33). Because of this, she was physically removed and was banned from the circle for one night. In a rage, she decided to stay away from the Ring shouts and stopped attending regular church service as well. Thus she signified her identification with the Ibos' acts and time, thereby becoming the author of her own history and the high priestess of her own cult: "People in Tatem said she had made the Landing her religion after that" (34). She "resembled the trees in her straight, large-boned mass and height" (32). Her conduct represents her cultural ties to the South and to Africa.

This legendary figure appears to Avey in her dream and disturbs her sleep. Great-aunt Cuney's ritual, expressed in Avey's dream, ironically startles her from long unnatural sleep. It reminds Avey of the summers she spent with her and she recollects the tale Aunt Cuney frequently told her of the Landing, where the Ibos were brought as slaves to the Carolina coast:

It was here that they brought 'em. They taken 'em out of the boats right here where we's standing. No body remembers how many of 'em it was, but they was a good few' cording to my gran' who was a little girl no bigger than you when it happened... And the minute those Ibos was brought on shore they just stopped, my gran' said, and taken a look around...
And they see things that day you and me don’t have the power to see. ‘Cause those pure-born Africans was peoples my gran’ said could see in more ways than one. The kind can tell you ‘bout things happened long before they was born and things to come long after they’s dead. Well, they seem everything that was to happen ’round here that day. The slavery time and the war—my gran’ always talked about, the ‘emancipation and everything after that right on up to the hard times today...

They just turned, ... all of ‘em ... and walked on back down to the edge of the river here. Every las’ man, woman and chile. And they wasn’t talking they time no more. They had seen what they had seen and those Ibos was stepping.’ And they didn’t bother getting back into the small boats drawed up here – boats take too much time. They just kept walking right on out over the river. (37-38)

As Barbara Christian has observed, the story of the Ibos “emphasized their own power to determine their freedom though their bodies might be enslaved.” Horrified by what they foresaw as the future of the enslaved Africans, they moved towards the edge of the river and decided to walk back to Africa: “When they realized there wasn’t nothing between them and home but some water and that wasn’t giving ‘em no trouble they got so tickled they started in to singing “... chains didn’t stop those Ibos none ... they just kept on walking like the water
was solid ground” .... Those Ibos! Just upped and walked on away not
two minutes after getting here” (39). Aunt Cuney’s grandmother’s
constant narration of the story of the Ibos to Cuney had such an effect
on her that she was for preservation of her cultural heritage. Aunt
Cuney was a powerful force in Avey’s childhood. Expecting the same
commitment from Avey, Aunt Cuney narrated it a number of times.
Aunt Cuney represents the mother image. She considered it her duty to
keep the story of Ibo Landing alive by telling it to Avey.

Avey resists her great-aunt in the dream fearing damage to her
clothes, especially to the “open-toed patent-leather (which) ... would
never survive that mud flat which had once been a rice field” (40).
Refusing to take a single step forward, “...she dug her shoe heels into
the dirt and loose stones at her feet” (41). In their final confrontation,
Aunt Cuney rains blows on Avey and tears at “the spring suit, the silk
blouse, the gloves” (44-45). Thus she reveals Avey’s feelings of exposure
and vulnerability. As Avey awakens, she refuses to analyze her dream.
She is haunted by Aunt Cuney and the story of the Negroes who staged
their determination to go back to Africa. Avey tries to ignore it. Aunt
Cuney, who is strong in her determination, coaxes her, urges her, and
finally fights with Avey to turn her to her side. She succeeds to pull out
Avatara from Avey to learn about her African heritage and her
womanhood. After experiencing a lot of turbulence, she decides to quit
the cruise. She is not aware of the significance of her dreams at the time
of quitting the cruise. But the jolting effect of the dreams and memories of Aunt Cuney’s enactment of the ritual dance step compel Avey to enact “her own personal ritual of cleansing, healing, and empowerment.”

Avey feels that “Even now her left wrist retained something of the pressure of the old woman’s iron grip” (47). She begins to experience a “swollen feeling... like a huge tumor had suddenly ballooned up at the center... the vaguely bloated feeling she could in no way account for” (52). The pain, repression, and frustration of her past life become localized in Avey’s physical centre: “Oddly enough there was no nausea or pain, nothing to suggest sea-sickness or-the terrifying thought had instantly crossed her mind – the first signs of a heart attack. She felt perfectly all right otherwise. There was only the mysterious clogged and swollen feeling which differed in intensity and came and went at will” (51-52). Her condition becomes worse. On the deck, she experiences “bewilderment, and other bizzare things... happening” (55). Watching the crowd on the sport deck, she feels “exposed and vulnerable, as fated even” (56).

Avey’s decision to disembark causes sheer puzzlement to her two companions, who ask her, “Gonna forfeit the fifteen hundred dollars... Cruise and then turn around and spend more money to take a plane home! Now what kind sense do that make, will you tell me? She must
be out of her mind... She's done gone and lost her mind” (24). Avey’s decision to disembark at Grenada, a place which “won’t have a decent hotel to its name... where mosquitoes ‘ll eat her alive and the food... won’t be fit for hogs” (25), further reinforces her state of mind. Her decision seems an act of madness and absurdity. But, as Michel Foucault thinks, even “madness has something to do with the strange paths of knowledge.”12 Marshall comes close to the wisdom contained in Foucault’s statement when she says, “You have to psychologically go through chaos in order to overcome it.”13 Avey’s decision to come out of the ship, Bianca Pride, testifies to her decision to make an exit from the middle class codes of hegemonizing white American culture. She becomes conscious that there is “something that had dramatically expanded her vision, offering her a glimpse of things that were beyond her comprehension” (59). She is, at this stage, about to undergo a major transition and transformation.

Feeling insecure, Avey disembarks and decides to go back to New York when the ship docks for a few hours on the Caribbean Island of Grenada, confident that getting a flight to New York that day or the next will be no problem at all. She discovers that even finding a taxi is a problem, not only because of a holiday on the wharf but also because people do not feel her as a stranger, and hence do not realize her predicament. As she wanders around the deserted streets of Grenada, Avey feels estranged from the people and wants to distance and
distinguish herself from them. But the Carriacou islanders insist on
greeting her in their native French Patois, signifying their inability to
discern in her any essential difference from themselves. They refuse to
recognize her as a stranger and a tourist. The ultimate experience is a
hand on her elbow and a man’s voice saying, “Ida, doux-doux, qu’est-ce
qu’il y a? Ma’-che’! Ma’che’!” (Ida, my dear, what’s the matter? Hurry!
Hurry!”) (71) and his eventual apologetic comment, “Don’t ever let
anybody tell you, my lady, that you ain’ got a twin in this world!” (72).
When she does get a taxi, the driver explains the excessive crowd and
their over friendliness. She comes to know that all the people on the
wharf are natives of Carriacou, an out-island off the coast of Grenada,
returning home from an annual ritual boat trip: “They don’ miss a year.
No matter how long they been living over this side, even when they’s
born here, come time for the excursion they gone” (75). They are “out
islanders” making their yearly pilgrimage to their homeland. Having no
“homeland” to identify with, Avey stands waiting to be hauled off to
some decent hotel. Marshall describes their response to Avey as she
(Avey) remains stranded there: “But from the way they were acting she
could have been simply one of them there on the wharf. Some in passing
even gave her a quizzical look along with their smiles, as if questioning
why she was standing in the one spot and not moving with them toward
the boats” (69). None of them seem to be aware of the fact that “she was
a stranger, a visitor, a tourist” (69) willing to return by the earliest
possible flight back to New York. Avey, watching the islanders, feels the strong current of people moving to and fro on the deck and an "absurd" thought comes to her that perhaps this crowd movement was deliberate, and they were trying "... to take her along with them" (70).

Just as Bournehills people cannot forget their slave hero Cuffee Ned and his Pyre Hill revolt, these out-islanders cannot forget Carriacou and their ritualistic excursion to it. "Only the out islanders still bother" (76). Though they can speak English well, "... the minute they set foot on the wharf for the excursion is only Patois crossing their lips" (76). She comes to know from the cab-driver that these are "Serious people... They has a business in mind... They's a people sticks together and helps out the one another... That they're proud" (78). All these acts are signs of integration and incorporation and denials of individualization. With this the pure time of childhood is restored, and the reintegrative power of the Ibo myth begins to redeem Avey into its cyclic movement.

Missing the plane, she gets stranded in a Granadian hotel. In the second book, the "wake" is both a ritual of death and of awakening. It is "Wake for the past, as well as awaking from the past."14 Avey dies for the world of materialistic American past and awakens to the values of Afrocentric life. The action of the book takes place totally in Avey's mind as she remains stranded in a Grenadian hotel. Through her
dreams, Avey recollects her past marital life with Jerome, then referred to as Jay Johnson. In this, Marshall demonstrates how America's materialism causes "the slow blurring of the self, the steady attrition of the soul..." She dreams of her dead husband, who expresses his anger at her for forfeiting fifteen hundred dollars by walking away from the ship. His appearance makes her reassess the past thirty years of her life. She thinks of Halsey Street, where they lived before shifting to North White plains, in strangely positive tones. She remembers the rituals which revolved around the jazz, the blues, and the poems of black American life. But her warm thoughts are soon clouded by the reality of what Halsey street was - the poverty, the hunger, the despair. As time passed, the family found they had no time for the rituals and stories of their heritage; the children were solemn, and the trips to Tatem were cancelled. Recollecting the past, she estimates what has been lost. As Barbara Prey Waxman has noted, "The second major component of Avey's self-purification and return to her heritage involves her confrontation with her dead husband Jay/Jerome and her assessment of her married life from the distancing, clarifying perspective of widowhood."

Jay (Jerome) and Avey (Avatara) were a happy, loving couple in the early years of their marital life. Jay was a hard working, dependable husband, whose witty nature kept the candle of love burn bright. Jay was proud of his father and his people and culture. He was
fond of jazz and blues, which seemed to refresh both husband and wife at the end of each day's exhaustion. His belief in the heroes of the Ibo Landing made him take a yearly trip South with his family. Avey shared Jay's love for music, dance, and poetry. Her regular visit to Aunt Cuney, since the age of seven, had taken her to the roots of their culture and heritage. Aunt Cuney's annual narration of the Ibo Landing made Avey develop love for their culture. The Ring Shout in Tatem she had watched every year as a child had profound influence on her. Thus similar interests and values held the husband and wife together. His unquestioning belief in the heroes of the Ibo Landing and their courageous spirit, and his family's yearly trip South, all these further linked him securely to his roots.

Their craving for financial stability brought a slow but steady change. Because of their fear of economic and racial oppression, they worked compulsively so that they can lead a middle-class life. Jay's desire to get his family from the five-floor walk-up in Halsey Street to a house and garden in North White Plains made him a tireless worker. It not only made changes in his physical appearance that would please white managers, but also forced him to give up his interest in music. It deprived him of the participation in Sunday rituals dear to him and his children. The shaving off of his mustache, which he modelled after his father's, is symbolic of the change that came over him: "It was also, Avey sensed, a shield as well, because planted in a thick bush above his
mouth, it subtly drew attention away from the intelligence of his gaze and the assertive, even somewhat arrogant arch to his nostrils, thus protecting him. And it also served to screen his private self: the man he was away from the job” (93). Avery remained unreconciled to the change and she felt that “With the mustache no longer there it seemed that the last trace of everything that was distinctive and special about him had vanished also”(130-131). Avey likewise changed, from the young woman that her aunt would have admired and appreciated to the stale but respectable woman that her friends thought she was. Forgetting old friends and values, they developed new links with the Masons and the Elks, the white folks of North White Plains.

In their attempt to identify with the white community, they cut themselves off from their roots. In accepting and achieving the American dream, they dishonoured themselves, as blacks, as woman and man. This new way of living created distance between the wife and husband and caused misunderstandings. In fine, they were no more the loving couple of the early years. Avey grew suspicious of her husband and nagged him. As he was “fed up with the complaints and criticism and suspicions” (105), he ceased to reason with her. Devoid of music and dance, rites and rituals, their life took a lamentable turn. Jay became Jerome, and Avatara, Avey Johnson. In thoughts, words, and deeds they became very formal. After years of hard work and fighting racial prejudice, they became rich and claimed a status of their own.
But they were no more the loving couple. There was no place for informal chat in their lives and they became more and more artificial.

Avey opens her eyes to the fact that, carried away by the tide of time in her busy schedule as a wife, a mother, and a working woman, she completely cut herself off from cultural links. Preoccupied with her responsibilities, she remained blind to the fact that she was slowly getting alienated from the ethnic heritage. Once Avey’s address changed from the struggling black community to the safely middle-class White Plains, she functioned at a socially safe level, but she stagnated internally. After thirty years, she wakes up to the truth, and reviews her marital life with Jay. She recollects the happy moments in their life, the rituals of their early marital life, and feels sorry for their unconscious loss of interest in them. They forgot themselves and their roots, the sacred rituals of the past, in pursuit of the American dream of affluence. She reflects on what she has lost, and is unable to judge whether the price paid for their material success and security was truly necessary. She mourns the loss of essential spirit even in small things:

They were things which would have counted for little in the world’s eye. To an outsider, some of them would even appear ridiculous, childish, cullud. Two grown people holding a pretend dance in their living room! And spending their Sunday mornings listening to gospels and reciting fragments of old poems while eating coffee cake! A ride on a Jim
Crow bus each summer to visit the site of an unrecorded, uncanonized miracle! (136)

Avey, grief stricken, realizes the value of what she has lost. Though these matter little to the world, they are of utmost importance to her: “Not important in themselves so much as in the larger meaning they held and in the qualities which imbued them .... Something vivid and affirming and charged with feeling had been present in the small rituals that had once shaped their lives” (137). They stopped their yearly trips South to their heritage and stopped observing the small rituals that might look insignificant to others. She remembers their value:

Moreover ... something in those small rites, an ethos they held in common, had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay’s to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible. And this link, these connections, heard in the music and in the praisesongs of a Sunday: “.... I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were/young...” had both protected them and put them in possession of a kind of power. (137)

These rituals of ethnic music, their routine dance to the music and their listening to African praisesongs every Sunday morning, added meaning to their life on Halsey street and also connected them to their cultural
heritage. As long as they observed their rituals and remained faithful to their customs, their life was a sweet song of love. Once they were blinded by false values, they could not see their past, their ancestry, and their heritage. As a result, they lost their real selves and true happiness. The yearly vacation trip to the old house at Tatem and the regular return to their old neighbourhood in Harlem were both discontinued. In fact, it may be said that an effective race-conscious life died during those years. Love was to become painful and burdensome, holding Jay back "like a leg-iron" which slowed him in his headlong drive for success (129).

When, as an old widow with plenty of leisure, Avey reviews her life and feels that "Jay's death had taken place long before Jerome Johnson's" (135), she faces a crucial question:

Would it have been possible to have done both? That is, to have wrested, as they had done over all those years, the means needed to rescue them from Halsey Street and to see the children through, while preserving, safe-guarding, treasuring those things that had come down to them over the generations, which had defined them in a particular way. The most vivid, the most valuable part of themselves! (139)

This confuses her and she probes deep into their past to find answer. She regrets the way "They had behaved, she and Jay, as if there had
been nothing about themselves worth honoring!” (139). She realizes that in spite of a certain distance between the mind and heart, one can preserve, safeguard and treasure the things that have come down to him/her over generations. This wisdom dawns on her rather late, when she gets acquainted with Lebert Joseph.

The questions Avey never asked in the past now “flooded her mind.” (139) Here is the first moment of illumination when she realizes that “They could have done both, it suddenly seemed to her, bowed over in tears there on the hotel balcony. She and Jay could have managed both” (139). She feels that they could have struck a balance in life through awareness. “It would have called for an awareness of the worth of what they possessed. Vigilance. The vigilance needed to safeguard it. To hold it like a jewel high out of the envious reach of those who would either destroy it or claim it as their own” (139).

In “Lave Tete,” as the epigram “Oh, Bars of my ... body, open, open!” (Randall Jarrell) suggests, the bars of Avery’s body begin to open, as her mind wipes itself clean. The title “Lave Tete” refers to the Haitian voodoo ceremony in which one is washed clean. Avey discovers that, in the process of reviewing and assessing her past, her mind “had been emptied of the contents of the past thirty years during the night, so that she had awakened with it like a slate that had been wiped clean, a tabula rasa upon which a whole new history could be written” (151).
In a trance-like state she walks down the Grenadean beach, surveys the sea, sand, and trees with a child’s curiosity. All these infantile perceptions signify Avey’s symbolic return to the embryonic stage, a return to the womb. Mirces Eliade says, "Attaining to another mode of being – that of spirit – is equivalent to being born a second time... The most striking expression of newness is rebirth. The discovery of spirit is homologized to the appearance of life."17

As Avey walks aimlessly down the beach, she feels terribly thirsty and dizzy. With no shelter nearby, she feels lost in sheer wilderness. But amazingly, she sights a tiny, thatch-roofed, broken shelter in the midst of the wilderness and “For a moment she held back, distrusting her eyes: it might be nothing more than an illusion created by the moving curtain of heat and the dizziness that had come over her” (156). Pulled as if by some invisible force, Avey draws herself toward the hut and surprisingly enough, she feels “cool dark current of air like a hand extended in welcome” (157), and she comes to know that it is the Rock Haven Bar. She imagines that the place possesses “the hushed tone of a temple or church” (159), and there is an “almost sacred light that filled the place” (168). Finding none around there, her sense of mystery becomes even stronger.

Fully exhausted, she enters the run-down rum shop where she meets Lebert Joseph, who asks her about her nation and nationality.
When, in a confused state, she asserts her identity as an American, a New Yorker, "His 'laser beam' gaze searches her clothes and her chemically straightened hair until he seems to arrive quietly at his own diagnosis that the woman before him is an estranged, tormented soul whose emotional and spiritual disarray must surely have been occasioned by some transgression against the long-time people." 18

Though her first impression of Joseph is not a good one, she feels that he is 

... one of those old people who give the impression of having undergone a lifetime trial by fire which they somehow managed to turn to their own good in the end; using the fire to burn away everything in them that could possibly decay, everything mortal. So that what remains finally are only their cast-iron hearts, the few muscles and bones tempered to the consistency of steel needed to move them about, the black skin annealed long ago by the sun's blaze and thus impervious to all other fires; and hidden deep within, out of harm's way, the indestructible will: old people who have the essentials to go on forever. (161)

It is altogether appropriate that such a figure should be the embodiment of great-aunt Cuney.
Somehow Avey confides her unease to the stranger. She tells him of her dream, the appearance of Aunt Cuney, their bruising fight, and the peculiar sensation in her stomach following the dinner with the parfait. Joseph, who "possessed ways of seeing that went beyond mere sight and ways of knowing that outstripped ordinary intelligence (Liguain connaissance) and thus had no need for words" (172), interprets and diagnoses her dream in no time. He says, "It have quite a few like you. People who can't call their nation. For one reason or another they just don' know. Is a hard thing. I don' ever like to think about it. But you comes across them all the time here in Grenada. You ask people in this place what nation they is and they look at you like you's a madman. No, you's not the only one...." (174-175)

Inversely put, Lebert Joseph refers to Avey's own madness characterized by the mistaken choices she made over the years. Knowing her cultural needs, the means for her redemption, he exhorts her to accompany him on the annual excursion to Carriacou and engage in the ritual dances: "You must come, oui. On the excursion... Uou must come today-self so you can see the Juba done proper" (180). He further tells Avey that "In Carriacou is mainly the women dances the Juba ... They does it in pairs, facing each other and holding the long skirt to their dresses up off the ground..." (178). Marshall here refers to a ritual that reflects a univocal discourse between man and woman that characterizes Afrocentric vision. Lebert performs the Juba dance
"holding the long skirt... with one hand he delicately lifted an imaginary hem off the floor... 'we di la wen Juba'... he sang, and his voice also sounded more youthful. Moreover, it had taken on a noticeably feminine tone. The same was true of his gestures... all were the movements of a woman" (178-179). Lebert's androgynous ritual dance offers Avey a promise of totality and wholeness.

The very first encounter with Lebert Joseph produces in Avey's mind the same fighting sensations which she experienced during her encounter with Aunt Cuney: "She felt as exhausted as if she and the old man had been fighting — actually, physically fighting, knocking over the tables and chairs in the room as they battled with each other over the dirt-floor-and that for all his appearance of frailty he had proven the stronger of the two" (184). It is a fight between the mythical world of the past and the Western world of the present, between Eurocentric pull and Afrocentric power, a fight in which the mythical, the Afrocentric, and the initiatory powers always prevail. Avey feels that Aunt Cuney and Lebert are notoriously one. After the encounter with Lebert, a new realm of consciousness replaces her prior sense of estrangement from the world around. She now feels that Lebert is an embodiment of spiritual power. Walking down the beach, Lebert appears at the dock "wearing a tie and what looked like a clergyman's discarded black hat" (186), and in the distance she notices "a sound like the summoning of a church bell only they could hear
distinctly" (187). This is the effect of initiation, which, as Mircea Eliade says, is “equivalent to an ontological mutation of the existential condition. The novice emerges from his ordeal a totally different being: he has become another...”

Thus Joseph “becomes the messenger, the interpreter, leading Avey further along her journey and finally to the threshold of the spirit world, in order to rebirth to the world of the living.” He is the fictional reincarnation of the West-African and diasporic deity, Legba, popularly known as Papa Legba, guardian of the crossroads. Ruby Barry says, “Legba is one of the most popular spirits ... an old, poor, lame, beggar, of ancient (Bahomean) origin who is guardian of the crossroads, gates and entrances. Legba is, because of his age, wise but a soft, gentle and naïve personality who can be hoodwinked by other spirits waiting to pass.”

Robert D. Pelton, in his comprehensive study of the West-African trickster gods, discusses the deity, Legba, who in many ways, resembles Marshall’s Lebert Joseph. According to Pelton, Legba is not the creator of consciousness but the expander of consciousness, not the maker but shaper of human life. Commenting on Legba as the shaping agent, Pelton says,

Legba, then, is a creative agent, not the creator - a shaper, not a maker... (who) reveals possibilities

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hidden within the existent world... in becoming the personal guardian of each man and woman, Legba penetrates human consciousness itself. He reveals the most hidden and dangerous limen of all – the one inside each person. His ubiquity is synonymous with human life because he is identified with the inmost processes of that life... Legba is a deceiver, self-serving and capricious, but his caprice relentlessly enlarges the scope of the human... He neither destroys the structures of life nor stoically accepts them, but inwardly enlarges them by the gleeful disclosure of their further possibilities...

Thus, through Legba, men and women are able to know the inwardness of their social identities and the outward shapes and the courses of their secret selves... [He] is intimately involved in the beginning and the end of each lives.22

Papa Legba is also claimed as a Haitian god epitomizing the qualities of baptismal fire. Maya Dorean, in her study of the living gods, writes,

... Legba is the link between the visible, mortal world and the invisible, immoral realms... Legba, then is the guardian of the sacred gateway of the Grand Chemin, the great road leading from the mortal to the divine world... (He) was life and destiny, (He) was the sun, itself destined to descend from the noon of each year, from the zenith of its ardent fire, (he) has become an old tattered man shuffling down the road... It is as if coming
westwards, the Africans had left behind the morning and noon of their own destiny, the promise and power of their own history.23

Thus, Marshall's old, limping Lebert acts as the mediator between Africa and the diaspora, between the present and the past, between those living and the yet unborn. It is essentially because of Lebert/Legba, the spiritual messenger, that Avey comes to an understanding of her great-aunt's presence in her consciousness. As an interpreter, Lebert/Legba knows that Avey Johnson has lost sight of her spiritual "nation" and needs to be reincorporated. He tells Avey of the huge crowd in a festive mood on the Grenada wharf. At first, Avey does not understand Joseph's reasons for the excursion to Carriacou nor can she see in it any relationship to her own life. He explains to her that besides the fun and family reunions, the excursion is for "the Old Parents, Oui, ... The long-time people. Each year this time they does look for us to come and give them their remembrance" (165). Mirroring her dream fight with Aunt Cuney, he warns her not to forget her ancestors: "I tell you, you best remember them! ... If not they'll get vex and cause you nothing but trouble .... All of a sudden everything start gon' wrong and you don know the reason" (165). He tells that the out-islanders, people of a small island, Carriacou, who live and work in Grenada, make an annual excursion to Carriacou. It is not "just to loll on the grass and eat fried chicken and potato salad and to nap or play
bid whist during the afternoon heat. But to lay claim: *we gon' put on our robes and shout all over God's heaven!* Boat rides up the Hudson were always about something that momentous and global" (192). Lebert tells her that they go there to relax, “To bathe in Carriacou water and visit ‘bout with friends. And to fete-dance, drink rum, run ‘bout after women” (164) and that, “They can speak the king's English good as me and you but the minute they set foot on the wharf for the excursion is only Patois you hearing” (187). When asked if he too is from the island, Joseph proudly says, “Where else I could be from with the name Joseph? You din' see the sign outside the door when you came in: ‘Rock Haven Bar. Lebert Joseph, Proprietor?’ Well, that's me ... All is Carriacou people. Just because we live over this side don' mean we's from this place, you know. Even when we's born here we remain Carriacou people” (163-164). He says that each time he goes home, he goes to give them their remembrance and to feed both present and absent. These supplications to the ancestors are to ensure the safe return of the loved ones and to celebrate and give thanks for their safe arrival where the ancestors and the gods comply. Thus Joseph plays the role of an ancestor in making Avey know where she belongs.

Joseph is an apt parent for the bloated Avey, who has lost her footing on the nurturing ground. Like Aunt Cuney, he revers the Old Parents, and is concerned with identity and its relationship to continuity and regeneration. As Aunt Cuney is her spiritual mother, so
this old man is her spiritual father. His encouragement and the real feeling for the native land makes her prepare herself for the trip. As Barbara T. Christian has noted, "Joseph's insistence draws her into the annual festival in Carriacou, which for the island people is their annual excursion of spiritual rejuvenation." The dance itself undoubtedly acts as both spiritual rejuvenation and necessary relief from the everyday struggle of economic survival. Perhaps that is why they ritually return to Carriacou. It prevents their alienation. As Angelita Reyes says, "...the dance is a touchstone of their cultural sensibilities and spiritual needs.... They make the annual return to the past — to their native land — in order to live the present and future. Therefore, the Big Drum rite of passage is their spiritual affirmation rather than part of a spiritual quest as it is for Avey Johnson."25

This proves an eye-opener to Avey. The surging crowd and the rapidly filling boats remind her of her annual boat ride in the Hudson River to Bear Mountain Park in Robert Fulton. She remembers the strange sensation she experienced watching the elderly folk perform Ring Shout:

... she would feel what seemed to be hundreds of slender threads streaming out from her navel and from the place where her heart was to enter those around her. And the threats went out not only to people she recognized from the neighbourhood but
to those she didn't know as well, such as the roomers just up from the South and the small group of West Indians whose odd accent called to mind Gullah talk and who it was said were as passionate about their rice as her father. (190)

Avey begins to unburden herself of her thirty years of suppression in stages. Her flight from the cruise is her first step. Her second is her decision to go on the yearly excursion where the people of Carriacou celebrate their racial heritage. As the journey progresses, strange things start happening to Avey. Millions of ancestral figures whom she betrayed seem to spring forth from their submerged places in the Atlantic and, holding a circular dance around Avey, seem to remind her, in the choral admonitions, of the pathology of her existence. Everybody seem to inform her that cleansing and purging is necessary because “the stones” of artificialities inherent in the American style of living have sealed up her spirits, her soul, “from the light of redemption”. (200). Avey sits there in agony, looking wildly around her for help. The old women on the Emmanuell C, help her in her crossing over. They appear as though “They were—she could have sworn it!—the presiding mothers of Mount Olivet Baptist (her own mother's church long ago) – the Mother Caldwells and Mother Powes and Mother Greens, all those whose great age and long service to the church had earned them a title even more distinguished than 'sister' and a place of honor in the pews
up front” (194). They are also the historic culture bearers—the primary interpreters of culture and spirituality. Their “soothing, litting words full of maternal solicitude” (197) divert her from the troubling thoughts.

Avey takes ill during the crossing. As she crosses the channel, she physically regurgitates all those undigested particles that have bloated her. She crosses the barrier that she has erected as protection. As she spews out the old, she makes room for the new:

She vomited in long loud agonizing gushes. As each seizure began her head reared back and her body became stiff and upright on the bench. She would remain like this for a second or two, her contorted face giving the impression she was cursing the sky,... the old women holding her would have to tighten their grip as the force of the vomiting sent her straining out over the railing, dangerously close to the water.

... Their lips close to her ears they spoke to her, soothing, low-pitched words which not only sought to comfort and reassure her, but which from their tone even seemed to approve of what was happening. (204-205)

The women’s acceptance of Avey and what is happening to her is a necessary step in her liberation of herself. Even Avey discovers her own
body refusing to be artificially controlled by her any longer. Metaphorically, she begins to empty herself for genuine enrichment:

“As if there was actually something there, some mass of overly rich, undigestible food that had lodged itself like an alien organ beneath her heart and needed to be expelled, all of her body’s fury was suddenly concentrated there” (207). Her body’s fury is reminiscent of her aunt’s fury in her (Avey’s) dream. She has to face the humiliation of vomiting in the presence of a boat load of strangers, and when she loses control of her bowels, she is more helpless than an infant. Circumstances overwhelm her and with this she not only experiences physical purging but also a sense of mental numbness: “Flat, numb, emptied-out, it had been the same as her mind when she awoke yesterday morning, unable to recognize anything and with the sense of a yawning hole where her life had once been” (214).

During this crossing to Carriacou, Avey regains her connections to a defining element of her ancestral history, the Middle Passage:

She was alone in the deck-house. That much she was certain of. Yet she had the impression as her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless dark. A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she was. Their moans, rising and falling with each rise and plunge of the schooner, enlarged upon the one filling
her head. Their suffering – the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space – made hers of no consequence. (209)

Avey now is capable of grasping her relationship to those around her through history, experience and memory. It is a "return of the native," as Wilfred D. Samuels puts it. Completing the circle, she comes back to the source:

... on her spiritual journey from the New World back to Africa, she reverses the middle passage and very specifically relives the original journey from Africa to the Americas. In doing this, she also, in meaning, reverses the location of the promised land, which now, rather than being the United States as represented in the prosperity of the plantations or, today, the Fulton Street of Jerome's success, becomes Africa as represented by Carriacou.

Avey is now the soiled baby. Now she can be washed clean in mind and body and pass on to the final and deepest level of the ritual, "The Beg Pardon." The last book is related to the rituals of the bath and the "Beg Pardon" ceremony.

The members of Joseph's family welcome Avey as one restored to them. Rosalie Parvay, Lebert Joseph's daughter and a stranger to Avey, serves as Avey's mentor. She tells Avey to respect herself by
demonstrating her own personal dignity. Avey tries to apologize for her violent illness and the trouble she has caused a stranger: "'But I kept you up all night, I'm afraid.' She spoke with her eyes averted. 'You were back and forth the whole night. Forgive me.' ... she suddenly remembered the slight figure of a woman who had repeatedly come to stand like a votary beside the bed all during her restive half-sleep" (216-217). But Rosalie doesn't expect, in fact doesn't want, any apology from Avey.

The bathing ritual is both practical and metaphorical. A limited social process begins when Rosalie Parvay establishes trust between herself and Avey: "'Come, oui,' Rosalie Parvay was saying, 'is time now to have your skin bathe. And this time I gon' give you a proper wash-down'" (217). She becomes "any number of different people over the course of the night: her mother ... the nurse in the hospital where she had had her children... her great-aunt beckoning to her in the dream" (217). Like her father, Rosalie is a follower of their customs and traditions and is proud of her heritage.

Rosalie looks like a mother out to wash the new-born baby: "she washed a hand, an arm, a shoulder, a breast, bathing only one side of her at a time" (220). And further:

she not only oiled and kneaded them thoroughly, but afterwards proceeded to stretch them by
repeatedly running her hands down from a shoulder to a wrist or from a knee to an ankle, gently yet firmly pulling and stretching the limb... It was the way Avey Johnson used to stretch the limbs of her children after giving them their baths when they were infants. To see to it that their bones grew straight. Putting them to lie on the kitchen table in Halsey Street, she would first rub them down with the baby oil, and afterwards taking puffy little arm in her hands, then the legs that were still partly curled to fit inside her, she would be... stretching, straightening the small limbs. (222-223)

According to Victor Turner, such a ritualistic process involving bodily cleansing "... has ontological value, it refashions the very being of the neophyte ... the neophyte in liminality must be of tabula rasa, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group in those respects that pertain to the new status"28. In some Afrocentric way, the cleansing of body is connected with the cleansing of the spirit too. As Barbara Christian says, "Central to African ritual is the concept that the body and spirit are one. Thus sensuality is essential to the process of healing and rebirth of the spirit."29 Avey's physical rejuvenation leads her to spiritual awakening also.

...under the vigorous kneading and pummeling, Avey Johnson became aware of a faint stinging as
happens in a limb that's fallen asleep once it's roused, and warmth could be felt as if the blood there had been at a standstill, but was now tentatively getting under way again ... The warmth, the stinging sensation that was both pleasure and pain passed up through the emptiness at her center .... and it responded, there was the sense of a chord being struck. All the tendons, nerves and muscles which strung her together had been struck a powerful chord, and the reverberation could be heard in the remotest corners of her body. (223-224)

The bathing ritual establishes respect for the body and its functions. Rosalie washes Avey the first time for practical purposes. When she bathes her the second time, it provides Avey with a conscious link to herself and establishes a bond between Avey and her mentor. On both occasions she is helped by Milda, the servant maid. Handling Avey's body with reverence and dignity, Rosalie assures the woman who has been a stranger to herself. After touch, Avey is even more confirmed by sight: "And the gaze which met hers from under the Madras head-tie was ... far-seeing, knowing, compassionate ... he (Lebert Joseph) had also passed on to her his special powers of seeing and knowing" (218). With respect and care, Rosalie performs the bathing ritual which cleanses, renews, and bonds Avey to herself. The simplicity and intensity of the bathing rituals and massage provide
Avey with feelings of health. Renewed and refreshed, she wishes to begin a more social challenge.

Even the food rituals on the excursion remind Avey of her racial heritage and food rituals in Tatem: “the first thing I do the minute I reach home is to roast an ear of corn and put it on a plate for them. And next to the plate I puts a lighted candle. Everybody does the same” (224). Such respect for ancestors recalls to Avey’s mind the food rituals from Tatem where a plate of food is placed beside the coffin at funerals. Disconnected all these years from her cultural/racial heritage, she begins to reconnect to the strong supportive aspects that such rituals provide.

With a mind washed of all thoughts, and the body purified and rejuvenated by the oiling and massage of Rosalie, Avey totally recovers from sickness. She is ready for the “Big Drum,” saying, “I’m going! That’s what I took the trip for!” (229). She attends the ritual dances—the “Big Drum,” and the “Beg Pardon.” The “Beg Pardon” song is an expression of the blacks’ sorrow for neglecting and ignoring their community and heritage all through the year and an apology they render to their ancestors. It is Lebert Joseph “the house-hold head” who initiates the ceremony: “And in the silence, the stillness, Lebert Joseph slowly opened his arms, raised his tremulous head to the sky and, abruptly, like a shock wave on the air: ‘Pa’ done’ mue’... (236). Like an
imitative child, Avey follows Milda’s example, bows her head, and repeats ‘Pa’ don’ mwe.’ The “Beg Pardon” ceremony has diasporic implications:

Arms opened, faces lifted to the darkness, the small band of supplicants 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)

Thus Joseph prays for all including people like Avey who have lost their nation. Soon after the song Avey sees “her great-aunt standing there beside her” (237) as though she is there to accept her apology.

As she watches the “Big Drum,” Avey becomes conscious of the ancientness of the bodies of those who conduct the “Beg Pardon.” The thoughts about the commitment of these old ones inevitably lead to a deeper understanding of herself and her people:

It was the essence of something rather than the thing itself she was witnessing.... All that was left were a few names of what they called nations which they could no longer even pronounce properly, the fragments of a dozen or so songs, the shadowy forms
of long-ago dances and rum kegs for drums ... And they clung to them with a tenacity she suddenly loved in them and longed for in herself. Thoughts – new thoughts – vague and half-formed slowly beginning to fill the emptiness. (240)

Feeling "the reverberation of their (dancer's) powerful tread in the ground under her, and the heat from their bodies" (247), she joins the dance and unconsciously performs the "Carriacou Tramp". The ritualistic dance has immense instructive value for Avey Johnson and by extension for all the African-Americans who are culturally lost. To the blacks, dance "is a touchstone of their cultural sensibilities and spiritual needs. As a collective group, the people are not possessed by conquest and materialism... The people do not have to search for an identity since they already know who they are."30 Martin Haberman and Tobie-Garth Meisel also hold a similar view: "One main function of dance, no matter how radical its aim, is to reinforce the principal continuities of the culture from which it comes. Thus the expressive role of the individual dance creator is to discover the neglected potential in or needs of his culture. This novel perspective on his culture is what he discovers in himself."31 But the music accompanying the dance evokes in Avey a strong sense of lamentation. When Lebert Joseph moves his thumb across the goatskin at an angle, the single dark and plangent note it produces sounds "like the distillation of a thousand sorrow songs" (244):
The theme of separation and loss the note embodied, the unacknowledged longing it conveyed summed up feelings that were beyond words, feelings and a host of subliminal memories that over the years had proven more durable and trustworthy than the history with its trauma and pain out of which they had come. 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. (244-245)

The painful bleeding of their "collective" heart leads Avey to introspection. She begins to mourn this loss though she remained blind to it for several years. The dance thus stirs Avey's consciousness. The self-imposed middle-class shackles fall off and avenues of cultural connections now are fully open to Avey's mind. She now joins the dancing and drumming crescendo as her feet begin to widen and open to a greater space like a willing, receptive human heart. She moves on unconsciously performing the "Carricaou Tramp" in a trance as she relives in a stroke her summers with great-aunt Cuney and the Ring Shout dance.

Dance reconnects Avey to an important part of her personal past. In her early years of marriage, she used to dance barefoot on her apartment floor which was painted to look like earth. Tatem's ring
dance was an important early ritual she observed as a child. In each case, cultural heritage is connected to personal and group expression:

Finally, just as the moving wall of bodies was almost upon her, she too moved – a single declarative step forward. At the same moment, what seemed an arm made up of many arms reached out from the circle to draw her in, and she found herself walking amid the elderly folk on the periphery, in their counterclockwise direction. (247)

Avey was marked by her great-aunt Cuney as a child. The people of Carriacou recognize her roots even when she does not recognize them herself. The rhythm of the dance becomes irresistible: “Her feet of their own accord began to glide forward, but in such a way they scarcely left the ground” (248). And in spite of all the intervening years, “She had finally after all these decades made it across. The elderly Shouters in the person of the out-islanders had reached out their arms like one great arm and drawn her into their midst” (248-249). The recognition of the origins of the “Ring Shout” and its role in her private life as well as in the life of the communities provides the link across waters and boundaries of generation and time. The out-islanders pay her the homage of recognition. Avey’s initial dance step is like the Ibos’ walk across the water: “She moved cautiously at first, each foot edging forward as if the ground under her was really water – muddy river
water – and she was testing it to see if it would hold her weight” (248).

By her acceptance of their dance, she connects her racial heritage, bestowed by her great aunt Cuney, to the present. She feels as though she is performing the “Ring Shout” dance with Cuney:

Now, suddenly, as if she were that girl again, with her entire life yet to live, she felt 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. And their brightness as they entered her spoke of possibilities and becoming even in the face of the bare bones and the burnt-out ends. (249)

Their songs and dances stir her memories which work a sea-change in her. With this she unconsciously says her name is “Avey, short for Avatara” (251). This is a smile of triumph, of one who has lost and found a treasure, of a prodigal daughter finally come home. With her self introduction as Avatara, her initiation is complete and she is ready to become a transmitter of heritage to her grandchildren and other children as well. The community celebrates the return of a lost daughter to its fold.

The islanders and their way of life provide a living example to Avey and she finds answer to the later part of her question: Economic
progress should not be at the cost of losing spirituality. She realizes that it is possible to manage both. If only Jay and she had an awareness of what they possessed, vigilance to safeguard it and strength to "withstand the glitter and the excess" (139), they would have managed both. She understands why her great-grandmother always used to say that "Her body ... might be in Tatem, but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos" (139). Thus, "By assuming a balance between Euro-American culture and African-American heritage, the community can better attempt to keep its feet on the nurturing ground."32

Disturbed by dreams, Avey finds the notion of the mission that has been at the bottom of her mind since her childhood come to the surface. Her ancestor, great-aunt Cuney, provides archetypal guidance by returning to Avey through dreams. She rekindles cultural and spiritual values in Avey. Avey finally understands the significance of her heritage. Her acceptance of and participation in the dance is conscious and even enthusiastic. She finds herself in a position to make a self-conscious decision in favour of her "real place" : Tatem, the site of her childhood. Coming out from North White Plains, she discovers that her body and her mind are one again. After the painful sojourn, her personality is centered on truer ground:
Tatem, Avey Johnson found herself thinking of the house her great-aunt had left her. By the time the plane touched down in Grenada she had made up her mind to fix it up. Or if it was beyond repair to build a new one in its place. Sell the house in North White Plains as Marion [Avey’s daughter] had been urging her to do for years and use the money to build in Tatem. (256)

Inspired by Carriacou people, she comes out of her own bondage to middle class white values and commits herself to fulfilling the mission entrusted to her by Aunt Cuney. Avey finally learns from the “Old Parents” that

the healing
of all our wounds
is forgiveness
that permits a promise
of our return
at the end.33

She resolves to renew her ties with her own ancestral and spiritual home. Her final resolution to repair and rebuild great-aunt Cuney’s Tatem house and invite her own grandchildren to spend the summers there represents the consummation of her rites and her conscious assumption of the shared life inherited from her Ibo ancestry. Thus,
With self reaffirmed and energized Avey at sixty-four takes on a new, consuming mission in life: she will be a "myth extender," a passionate witness to her ancestry and a reporter of it both to her own children and to strangers' children. Atoning for her sin of assimilation into White American, she will, like the Ancient Mariner, keep retelling the mythic stories of the yearly excursions to Carriacou and of the Ibos at the Landing in Tatem, thereby helping to keep alive the ties between American blacks and their Caribbean and African kinfolk.34
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