CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION
In *The Figure in a Landscape*, Roger Sharrock says that a poet is "not a camera, but a consciousness."\(^1\) This profound observation is very useful in analysing not only poems but all creative writing. Paule Marshall's novels are not photographs of life as it is lived; they are recreation of life as perceived and transformed by her perception and imagination.

Critics have pointed out the centrality in Paule Marshall's fiction of complex heroines who are black women. Talking about women characters in her fiction, Marshall says,

> Women do figure prominently in my books .... And I'm concerned about letting them speak their piece; letting them be central figures, actors, *activists* in fiction rather than just backdrop or background figures. I want them to be central characters. Women in fiction seldom are. Traditionally in most fiction men are the wheelers and dealers. They are the ones in whom power is invested. I wanted women to be the centers of power. My feminism takes its expression through my work. Women are central for me. They can as easily embody the power principles as a man.\(^2\)

When asked about the reasons for her presenting women as strong characters in her books and making them carry on the heritage,
Marshall says, "I don't see them as 'strong' but rather as complex and central, and that's different for me. The other side of strong black women is so often weak black men, and I want to get away from that thinking, because it divides rather than unites."³

As Leela Kapai has observed,

"Quest for identity is a perennial theme in literature. There is no age when a sensitive soul has not been troubled by questions about the meaning of his very own existence and his relation to the world around. The identity crisis assumes even more gravity for the minority groups who were either brought to this land or who came of their own accord in search of greener pastures. Lost in a new cultural environment, such people need more than ordinary effort to recognize and keep their identity alive."⁴

All the four novels of Paule Marshall deal with the protagonists' quests for identity in different epochs of their lives. But, to quote Leela Kapai again, "... such self-questionings are not the prerogative of only the members of a particular group based on race, sex, or age; therefore, Miss Marshall concerns herself with people of all ages, of all races, and of all strata."⁵ As already mentioned, the protagonist in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Selina is an adolescent girl; the protagonist in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, Merle, is a middle-aged
woman; and the protagonist in *Praisesong for the Widow*, Avey, is a sixty-year-old widow. The protagonist in *Daughters*, Ursa-Bea Mackenzie, is in her thirties. An example of an important non-black character in Marshall’s fiction is Saul Amron in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. He is an aging but still active Jewish-American anthropologist. Insofar as the economic status of Marshall’s important characters is concerned, in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Silla Boyce works in a factory and desires to succeed to the American dream; Merle Kinbona, in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, belongs to an economically underdeveloped society; and Avey, in *Praisesong for the Widow*, belongs to the middle class.

Selina in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* stands for a development of consciousness. She learns that as a black woman she does not have a place in white society. Her immigrant perspective enables her to leave Brooklyn in search of her home country, but not without having thoroughly denounced her own adolescent perception of her surroundings. Throughout the novel Selina is placed in hostile and confining environments in order to suggest her confrontation with a lack of space for herself. They range from her mother’s kitchen, the church, and the school to Father Divine’s restaurant and the Association’s hall, all of which force Selina into an initially inner confrontation with her feelings of boundlessness and strength. Until
almost the end of the novel, Selina moves within and through spaces that do not belong to her.

As mentioned earlier, ritual plays an important role in Paule Marshall's fiction, as it does in the lives of black men and women. The two incidents that catalyze Selina's absorption into her community involve song and dance. Her participation in the singing and dancing at the wedding of Gatha Steed's daughter unites her "not only with the Barbadian-Americans in Brooklyn but also with all the sun-warmed people from years back and miles away." The first instance of Selina's immersion into the community – though short lived – occurs without her attempting it. But to begin her search for self, she has to experience complete alienation. She is alienated from her father, mother and sister, her friends, and, later, her boy friend.

The second time Selina dances is as a member of an all white dance group. During her successful performance, she merges herself with the whites and experiences a feeling of togetherness:

The other dancers awaited her in the wings and their extravagant praise was louder, headier, than the applause. They swarmed her and she lost all awareness of herself. The raw milk smell of their heated bodies and breath, the odor of grease paint and power drowned out her mind like an intoxicant. Her happiness erupted in a wild hoot
that cut through the din – and suddenly she wanted to remain with them always in the crowded wing, to shout and never get weary. (282)

But Selina's feeling of triumph is shattered by Margaret's mother, whose firm conviction is that a black man or woman can never become a member of white society whatever may be his or her personal accomplishments. This incident, however, has a positive effect on Selina's life. The white woman's failure to see her as a person throws Selina from the heights of supreme togetherness into the depths of complete alienation, and thus helps her begin to discover herself. When Selina sees the full racist meaning of her black skin reflected in the woman's eyes, she realizes in horror that in addition to her own struggles she must also battle racism – the white illusion of her blackness which she must prevent from "destroying her insight and find a way for her real face to emerge" (291).

Thus her first exposure to racist attitudes forces Selina to see the life around her in a new light. When even Clive fails her, Selina is forced to depend on her own inner strength. She realizes that despite her differences with her mother, she is very much like her. She comes to the conclusion that her people "had bequenthed her a small strength. She had only this to sustain her all the years" (308). When she decides to go to the West Indies to gather more strength from her
roots, she moves a step closer to maturity and thus responds to the song:

Small Island, go back where you come from.
Small Island, go back where you come from.
You come from Trinidad in a fishing boat,
And now you wearing a great big overcoat!
Small Island, go back where you really come from.

You see them Bajans, they're the worse of them all!
You hear them say 'I ain't gwine back at all.'
They come by the one and they come by the two,
And now you see them all over Lenox Avenue.
Small Island, go back where you really come from...

We can say that for Marshall, the self is certainly the first "nation" a girl has to define, and Selina is one of the first women characters in black American literature with a conscious interior life:

"As in Invisible Man – Marshall herself emphasized the influence that Ellison's works had on her first writings – Brown Girl describes the journey of the fragmented self through experience to knowledge and ultimately, though the ending is still ambiguous, to wholeness and being."7

The search for identity of an educated middle-aged black woman seems to be Paule Marshall's concern in her second novel, The Chosen Place, The Timeless People. In fact, the novel chronicles several quests: Vere's, Harriet's, and Allen's, in addition to Saul's and Merle's. But the
main focus of the novel is Merle, within whose single frame the two warring forces of East and West attempt reconciliation.

Merle Kinbona represents the people of Bournehills in the sense that like them she has suffered since very early years. Her mother was shot dead by her white father's lawful wife. She was dispossessed first by her father and later by her husband. Though her father arranged for her schooling, he never acknowledged her; and material comforts never compensated for love and understanding. During her long stay in London she experienced another shock when her marriage with a young African broke on his learning of her past relationship with a white woman. Thus she was discarded by both worlds. Back in her home town, she tries to forget her hurt and misery by indulging in endless chatter and by hiding behind a mask of indifference.

Merle's confrontation with Harriet is vital because it enables her to successfully cast off the cloak of Western civilization and move in the direction of her own rebirth. She discards her old self and feels unburdened, restored to herself. Even the route she takes to Africa attracts our attention:

.....She was not taking the usual route to Africa, first flying north to London via New York and then down. Instead, she was going south to Trinidad, then on to Recife in Brazil, and from Recife, that city where the great arm of the hemisphere reaches
out toward the massive shoulder of Africa as though yearning to be joined to it as it had surely been in the beginning, she would fly across to Dakar and, from there, begin the long cross-continent journey to Kampala. (471)

Thus in *The Choosen Place, The Timeless People* Paule Marshall seems to suggest that the hard ground for development is not in foundation projects, not in tourism and pseudoindustrialization, but in the discovery of one’s self in the life and history of one’s people.

Paule Marshall’s third novel, *Praisesong for the Widow*, is a black woman’s odyssey, a journey to maturity. In this novel there is a reaching back to dead ancestors and a reaching forward to unborn generations. Ebele O. Eko discusses in detail the organic relatedness within the novel’s parts and between them, which linkages culminate in the essence of wholeness.8

On the first level, the plot delineates the archetypal journey into awareness from “Runagate” (running away from); to “Sleeper’s Wake” (awakening to a shocking reality); to “Lave Tete” (washing away false mentalities); to “Beg Pardon” (the reconciliation with one’s heritage). Passing through these different stages, Avey finally understands the significance of her heritage. Her acceptance and participation is conscious and even enthusiastic. The Carriacou Excursion provides

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her with her most intense confrontation with her past, and leaves her restored, rejuvenated, and able to greet her future with joy. Through the excursion, Avey returns to the music, the dance, and the passion of her former life.

On another level, the four parts of the novel represent crucial historical stages in the black experience. "Runagate" reminds us of slavery, that terrible historical wrong which both Africans and Americans wish to forget. "Sleeper's Wake" can be equated to the historic cultural and literary awakening of black Americans through the Harlem Renaissance. "Lave Tete" is a parallel to the angry sixties in the U.S. and the overthrow of colonialism in most African countries, also in the sixties. "Beg Pardon" represents the historic physical and psychological move of black Americans towards their roots in Africa since the 1960s. Thus *Praisesong for the Widow*

...... is not only a chronological continuum of her (Paule Marshall's) exploration of growth and maturity processes, it seems in itself a journeys end, a mission accomplished, a "breaking forth into joy" of the essence of Black soul. The author advocates that the Black writer's burden should be one of recreating Black history in heroic terms with the abundance of folk tradition around them. *Praisesong for the Widow* is in that sense a duty fulfilled. It celebrates the triumph of Africa's indomitable and collective spirit, thus bequeathing
to her Black readers, a new sense of pride and confidence in their heritage. At the same time it raises the consciousness of non-Black readers unto deeper appreciation of a long misunderstood and misrepresented culture.⁹

Though *Daughters* is not part of the trilogy, its theme is similar to that of the earlier three novels, quest, and here in this novel, it is a quest for autonomy:

Little girl of all the daughters,  
You ain' no more slave,  
You's a woman now

This epigraph to an Alvin Ailey Dance that Paule Marshall watched at the City Center Theater on West 55 Street in New York is the seed of the novel that took roots some eight years before she attempted this novel. Though she does not remember the actual performance and the name of the dance, as she says, it is the base of the story:

I remembered that epigraph because suddenly there it was, a kind of James Joyce moment of epiphany when a meaning or a theme that has been eluding you suddenly comes clear... The quote gave me the idea for a story about a group of women who had been living inside my head for years for the longest times there had been this group of four or five women – Black Women – wandering around backstage in my mind like the
lost Souls in Luigi Pirandello's play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* .... And suddenly there it was that night in City Center Theater: the sense of the story I wanted to write about them. I could finally get these women out from back stage, out from the shadows, and onto center stage. Daughters was born that night.10

*Daughters* is a clear picture of a black woman in crisis, and her successful attempts to free herself from the shackles of paternal bondage and create a "free zone" (93). Apart from this, it includes subjects like neo-colonialism, the Black Diaspora, the impact of cross-culturalism, family bonds, the wages of power, and political corruption. In her interview with Daryl Dance, Marshall herself says that "Like most of my novels, *Daughters* is about people, politics, culture, history, race, racism, morality, marriage, children, friendship, love, sex, the triumph and sometimes defeat of the human spirit as well as a few other things."11

The protagonist, Ursa Beatrice Mackenzie, a New Yorker of West Indian and American parentage, is a freelance researcher. Though in the beginning she appears quite an ordinary *daughter*, returning from an abortion clinic to her Upper West Side studio-apartment in New York City, by the end of the novel she is a *woman*. 
Ursa Beatrice, a midthirtish, five feet tall black woman “with the body of a pubescent 10 year old” (15), is also a child of dual heritage like Selina Boyce of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Her father, Primus Mackenzie, called PM since his youth, is a prominent official in a mythical Caribbean island, Triunion. Her mother is American-born Estelle Harrison, a school teacher. Ursa, born after many miscarriages or “Slides” as the people of Triunion call it, was sent back to United States so that she could learn “to talk the talk and Walk the Walk” (58). Most of all, Estella did not want her to grow up to be a Triunion woman who waits hand and foot on her partner with little independence of thought and action.

Having returned from an abortion clinic, Ursa in a paralyzed state, refuses to answer even her phone calls or return messages that her answering machine has collected, including her intimate friend Viney Daniel’s, her mother–friend–sister alter–ego. She feels reluctant to speak to her self-obsessed lover, Lowell Carruthers, whose child she has just aborted. She just waits uselessly for a ring from him, who has no reason to extend their relationship beyond a biweekly routine dinner and a “little male company through the night” (92) since she never even told him she was pregnant. She does not even open the letter that lies among the junk mail, which is from her father, a man she has always loved dearly. Her isolation is complete:
With the lamp off, there's only the ruby-red glow of the clock in the room, each lighted stud on the grid calling to mind those perfectly round, jewellike drops of blood that form when the tip of a finger is pricked. The only sounds to be heard are the noisy radiator and the wind rattling the bay window. An occasional car hurtles by. Sounds that are merely part of the silence of night. Ursa doesn't hear them.

The abortion was not just that of real fetus, but also an attempt to abort the patriarchal order represented by Lowell, her lover, and her charismatic father. Valerie Miner says that "The difficult abortion is a powerful metaphor for Ursa's struggle to cut away from her family." To be more precise, Ursa is struggling hard to free herself from the image these two men have created. Her relationship with Lowell has turned out to be "Statis... meaning stagnation, meaning at a stand still, meaning going away absolutely nowhere as in constipation" (89). Ursa even feels that her love with Lowell "Is like the idiot went and left the wire thing inside me. Forget and left it right up inside me. Pain holding her bent over double, pain blinding her" (126). The hazzle of love characterized by stagnation, sterility, and pain seems to block Ursa's consciousness rendering her confused and powerless.
In the aftermath of the abortion, Ursa finds herself subjected to a virtual storm of memory, in which she summons up everyone who has ever mattered to her; Celestine, the Creole woman who helped raise her; Astral Forde, her father's mistress; Viney, her friend; and Estelle, her mother. As Susan Fromberg Schaeffer says,

Each has something to teach her. From Celestine she learns the futility of living without a sense of self. From Astral Forde she learns the vanity of living only for material gain. From Viney she learns what is to become the moral imperative of Daughters – that to be human, one must be of use. From her own mother she learns that in order to be of use, men and women must work together – and that the relationship between the sexes is far more complicated than she has ever imagined.13

Throughout the novel, Ursa is visited by two images. One is disturbing: the image of her father standing at the edge of a swimming pool watching her:

He used to stand at the edge of the swimming pool everyone said he had installed more for her than for the guests... keeping an eye on her while she made like a little chocolate Esther Williams in the water... His head with the high domed forehead ... would appear larger than the sun. Sometimes, as she glanced up and found she couldn't see the sun
or even a blue patch of sky because of his being in the way, she'd do a sudden flipp, annoyed, pull the water like a blanket over her head and dive to the bottom of the pool and sit there. (9-10)

Ursa's life, it seems, is eclipsed by the dark shadows of her father. She is not sure of what aspect of his personality has incapacitated her and her mother: “Something other than the charm that has seduced them all over the years” (354)

The second image is of her mother lifting her up to touch the great stone toes of the statues of Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe, the two revolutionary heroes of Triunion's rebellion, the two persons who presented themselves as a unified entity and whose commitment to each other was unshakable during the chattel slavery. Ursa remembers her mother saying, “'See if you can touch her toes, Ursa-Bea! ... And make sure to touch Will Cudjoe's toes while you're at it. You can't leave him out.... Warmed by the sun, their toes had felt as alive as her own” (13-14). Presenting these two characters Marshall wants to emphasize black people's need to draw wisdom from past history, where black men and women did not allow the white society to define them, even under the sting of the lash. Marshall writes, “The main point being that slavery, as painful and traumatic as it was, nevertheless was a time when Black women and men worked and
struggled together in a greater spirit of unity, mutual support and equality. It's been referred to as equality under the lash."

Ursa never forgets the great stone couple. Inspired by these two "coleaders, coconspirators, consorts, lovers" (14) and their remarkable unity, she chooses to study the mutually supportive relations that existed between the black men and women and how these relations allowed them to resist slavery. She recollects how the unsympathetic and prejudiced Professor Crowder turned down her thesis. To him, "It was unacceptable ... Her topic, the sources she intended using, her methodology, and most of all her thesis – which he found highly doubtful – all were unacceptable" (11). In spite of her professor's rejection, she continues the project. However, when she actually attempts to write the thesis, she finds herself incapable of doing so. She cannot write her paper not merely because of the racist professor but because of her own father as well. It was because of him that Ursa avoided her childhood home in the island and it is because of him that she has survived a long silence from her mother whom she loves so dearly. Ursa is plagued by the way her father has superimposed his dreams onto hers.

Through Ursa loses the ground temporarily, she soon makes a remarkable recovery. Daryl Pinckey observes, "Paule Marshall does not let the black women in her fiction lose. While they lose friends,
lovers, husbands, homes, or jobs, they always find themselves .... Marshall insists that the woman with enough nerve can win even when the deck is stacked and the other players are hostile.¹⁵ Ursa too possesses such a "nerve" and does ultimately emerge on a triumphant note. She prefers to act out rather than write down what she has learned. She examines the varieties of relationships between black men and women around her. The present state of black man–woman relationship torments her mind, making her fully convinced that ideal relationship can be formed not through psychological dependency on men but through autonomy of women.

In a reflective mood, Ursa wonders about the pathology of relationships between men and women around her. Lowell, her own boy friend, always troubled by his white supervisor and burdened by the father role he plays to his sisters' three sons, whose father was killed in Vietnam, fails to lead a Congo-Cudjoe style of partnership. His self-obsession has brought their relationship to a "statis" (271). Viney's relationship with her boy friend, Willis Jenikins, the father of her only son, Robeson, was also not fruitful. Viney kicked him out when she discovered him sleeping with the white man in the apartment downstairs, but theirs wasn't much of a partnership even before that. And more significantly is Ursa's father, the PM, who could have been a modern Will Cudjoe had he not succumbed to political corruption and power blindness. Except Viney, all the women Ursa
knows orbit around him. Ursa remembers how her father once came close to becoming like the mythic rebel slave in the Triunion and how he once subscribed to the ideology of black unity and racial upliftment. He confessed his honest intentions to Estelle: "We might all finally come together ... all o' we one! so that even Big Brother would have to respect us. It's the dream that keeps me going, Estelle" (144-145). But shortly, caught in the rat race of upward mobility and political power, all his dreams died away. His indifference to his people became noticeable: "While the others are out sweating in the ground he'll be lying up in the house sleeping" (145). His desire to serve them was replaced by his will to dominate them. Thus Pruims Mackenzie is alienated not only from black ideals but also from his most valuable source of reliable support, black women. His wife, Estelle, agonizes at his betrayal of the ideals. In spite of knowing her husband's ever-growing corruption, she lives a compromised life. She finds herself unable to bring her husband to his original idealistic course. Ursa wonders why her mother stays with her father adjusting to island life and why she cannot throw off the psychological dependency and return to America.

Marshall describes how black men, who entered the political and economic arenas earlier than black women, have greater temptations to contend with and how they are likely to be seduced from their ideals. Through Pruims and Estelle, Marshall shows how
most women are run-behind-men creatures. They remain hampered by inevitable facts of life: they love and are sexually attracted to their husbands and fathers, and, unless they free themselves from the spells of men, they are of little use as conscience. That's how Estelle fails to keep him straight and calls Ursa to act upon what she cannot.

Ursa returns to Triunion with a decision to cut off what is useless in the personal and communal contents. She tells herself, “...you need to come out from under certain people. Quit letting them run your life by remote control. You need to say Stop! in the name of love. You need to ...” (268-269). Marshall wants to suggest that Ursa needs to abort her father from her psychic womb.

Ursa does this when her father runs for elections. She throws off his scheme to build an enormous resort on public land, a project that will get profit to her family but misery to the poor of Triunion. She gains ontological power to abort the useless fetus of paternal corruption. Aborting her father's plans brings Ursa great pain. The waves of pain cutting across the well of her stomach are the pains of the abortion that opened the novel. This process of abortion is finally over, and the pain she feels now is worthwhile. Her deeds give her father a chance for a new life, even as she kills his corrupt image within her. And thus Ursa becomes a black woman who is, in every sense, free. This signifies that the "little girl of all daughters" has
become “a woman now” capable of making hard choices which suggests that it is possible not only to lay claim to one’s own self but also redeem others one loves through an act that can be regarded as disloyal. As Susan Fromberg Schaeffer has noted,

Through Ursa, Estelle and Viney, Ursa’s closest friend, Ms. Marshall states her belief that it is time for this new, more fortunate generation to make itself useful to others who are still struggling. They are now able to concentrate on the common good. They can and must afford idealism .... The moral code of Daughters is strict; people who fail to be of use fail as human beings. If they are not of use they must be cut from one’s life, ..... And neither is Ms. Marshall, who relentlessly compares Ursa’s abortion to cutting what is useless from one’s life.16

Thus Daughters seems to imply that the purpose of many unions should now be mutual struggle; struggle, if necessary, against each other but always toward an ideal.

To conclude, Paule Marshall’s female questers achieve energized, articulate identities, with each quester resolving the problems of her particular stage of life. While they lose friends, lovers, husbands, homes, or jobs, they always find themselves. An adolescent, Selina separates from her parents without rejecting them, acknowledges her community while denying its right to determine her
personality. The middle-aged Merle recovers from her disappointments in her own character and her husband's personal rejection. Revitalized, she journeys to Africa to establish a relationship with their child. But neither her self-respect nor the consequent interest in her personal life makes her retreat from her political commitment. An old woman, Avey finds spiritual renewal on a remote island in the Caribbean. Her age and family position grant her the authority to educate the youngest part of her immediate community, her grandchildren. Paule Marshall thus expands the nature and duration of the classical quest pattern:

The quest is no longer an isolated if perhaps lengthy incident in the quester's life but a lifelong commitment and, in her first two novels, a continuous modification of identity. While speaking in her own voice of her own experience, each quester addresses a wider community, until, in the final scene of Praisesong, the empowered woman quester becomes a griot speaking in tribal language of universal concerns.17
REFERENCES:


