CHAPTER I

THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN’S NOVEL
ITS SOCIOCULTURAL MILIEU
African-American writing has a history of more than two hundred years. The earliest came in the form of five slave narratives published between 1760 and 1789. Writing, for these slaves, was an act that proved their humanity. As Charles Davis says, “Awareness of being black is the most powerful and the most fertile single inspiration for black writers in America. It is ironic that blackness, for so long regarded as a handicap socially and culturally, should also be an artistic strength. Consciousness of blackness has brought an especial intensity to the statement of theme as in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man.*”¹

But until the first quarter of the twentieth century the Negro in American literature was depicted by both white and black writers more as a stereotype than as a human being. Both creative and critical writers felt that the Negro “falls into a very special well understood category.”² Sterling A.Brown observes, “The Negro has met with as great injustice in American Literature as he has in American life.”³ According to him the vast bulk of American literature has incarcerated the literary Negro in such tightly restrictive categories as the contented slave, the brute nigger, the comic negro, the tragic mulatto, and the exotic primitive. Critics felt that a black novelist also should present the Negro in his novel as he was presented in the works of white Americans. It was only during the mid-twenties that white as
well as black critics started objecting to this kind of characterization. Clement Wood in his *Nigger* (1922) and Du Bose Heyward in his *Porgy* (1925) destroyed the minstrel stereotype. Thus the first quarter of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of the new Negro replacing the old stereotype. In 1925, Alain Locke announced the emergence of the new Negro, and predicted the end of the old "unjust stereotype": "The days of 'aunties,' 'uncles' and 'mammies' is gone. ... Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on."4

But, black male writers have been no different from their white counterparts in their treatment of black women. African–American male writers, in their treatment of black women, have been aggressively masculine. Black women have been portrayed as sex objects or merely as extensions of the male ego without autonomous individual self.

Along with the male-centred aesthetic, it is their hegemony of the masculine perceptive that is now being challenged in and through the writings of African–American women. Black women, being at once black, poor, and female, have been victimized by racism, sexism, and capitalism, not only from the white world but also from the men of their own black world.

As Barbara Smith observes, these black women are bearers of "geometric oppression."5 Therefore they bear race, gender, and class—a
triple consciousness. This triple consciousness is consistently informed in the works of Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, and Gloria Naylor.

The status of black women writers is no longer below the status of their male counterparts. The literature of black women is more liberating and expansive than, instead of being secondary to, that of black men. According to Cavin C. Hernton, a black writer himself, in the war about whose works will be recognized, "Black men have historically defined themselves as sole interpreters of the Black experience. They have set the priorities, mapped out the strategies and sought to enforce the rules." As he points out, much of the resentment that black male writers feel toward black women writers is due to four circumstances:

1. Black women writers are declaring their independence like never before.
2. Black women writers are causing their existence to be seen and felt in areas of American society and culture which have been heretofore barred to them.
3. Black women writers are gaining autonomous influence over other black women.
4. Black women writers are at last wresting recognition from the white literary powers-that-be.
It is a well-known fact that the women writers of today are popular and recognized in all fields and genres, unlike the women of earlier generations who were supposed to be seen but not heard. Above all, black women are dealing with the political mechanizations of the racial and sexual beliefs, feelings and actions black men writers had thrust on them. Their aesthetic perspective is faithful to the real experiences of black women in America. That is how in their writings we have a woman-to-woman approach rather than a woman-to-man approach. Thus in short, the form, syntax, language, sequence, and metaphoric rendering of experience are markedly different from and more expansive than the male-authored literature. This can be meaningfully witnessed in the works of Marshall.

Paule Marshall stands out as a pioneer of the black women’s renaissance. To her goes the credit of depicting the emotional growth and newly found independence of black women who have accepted and discovered their heritage. Until her arrival on the literary scene, most writers approached major themes like history, colonialism, slavery, and racism from a single, male perspective. She is the first black woman writer who treated these ideas from a black woman’s point of view. Helene Christol writes that Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones* became “the starting point for the contemporary black women writers’ thrust forward to a courageous revision of American history, society and literature from a black feminist perspective.”

8
Considered a champion of the search for individual identity, Paule Marshall is praised by critics for exploring the psychological concerns of African–American women. She began her career as a writer when African–American women’s literature was at major crossroads. After graduating from Brooklyn college in 1953, Marshall worked as a researcher and writer for the magazine *Our World*. This assignment made it possible for her to visit Brazil and the Caribbean, and her experiences there are incorporated into her fiction. And later, her journey to Africa, as she herself says, “increased her awareness of the illiteracy, poverty and repressive dictatorships which still exist in many African nations after years of independence.”

The existence of a universal “African” language is seen in her novels. She herself admits it in an interview by Maryse Conde that “In the West Indian dialect and Black American English I employ in my work, there is a certain African dimension. It comes to me naturally as I grew up around people who were veritable ‘griots’ such as my mother and friends.”

She seeks to produce literature which is irrevocably and indisputably black. But the artistic excellence of Marshall’s fiction lies in achieving a balance between writing a truly black literature and writing what is truly universal literature. As she herself admits, “These oral conversations drew upon folktales, proverbs, metaphors
and images.... I come from a people for whom language is an art form, and for me, this sense of language comes from Africa."11

II

Women writers, who would give a true picture of womanhood in all its density and complexity, took it up as their duty dictated by conscience to discover black women's self entrapped in white society. The important thrust of these novelists is the urge to discover one's self and its relation to the world. As Alexis DeVeaux says, "I see a greater commitment among black women writers to understand self multiplied in terms of the community, the community multiplied in terms of the world."12 Because of the way in which they have been conceptualised by black as well as white society, it has been very difficult for them to achieve such "an overtly self-centered point of view." As Barbara Christian says,

The extent to which Afro-American women writers like Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, Alexis De Veaux in the seventies and eighties have been able to make a commitment to an exploration of self, as central rather than marginal, is a tribute to the insights they have called in a century or so of literary activity.13
Their predecessors were not permitted to agitate on and express their view on their self, as it was not their own but something gravely affected by other complex issues. They had to struggle hard to evolve a self which was deeply inflicted by racism and sexism. They found it even harder to give self-expression to the unheard voice of their self. The struggles fictional women encounter are directly reflective of problems encountered in a society that is in the midst of dramatic changes. Because of a shifting of positions between men and women in modern American society, the space is open for a wider variety of circumstances in which to place women for literary purposes. In an analysis of real women in real crises, Jongeward and Scott have described the modern dilemma for women as follows:

In response to the forces that tug and tear at them, women are often set against not only men, but one another. Some women staunchly defend their traditional roles. Some smolder in anger discontented with their lot. Others turn their backs on women's problems. But probably most feel perplexed and confused. They realize that something significant is happening to women, but the problems remain muddled.¹⁴

Early African–American women novelists like Jessie Fauset, Frances Harper, and Nella Larsen indicate their stated intentions and their primary reasons for writing their works. Through her preface to *Iola Leroy*, Harper makes her purpose clear, saying that "her story's
mission would not be in vain if it awakens in the heart of our
countrymen a strong sense of justice and a more Christian like
humanity." She urges for justice for her race, who, in the 1880s, were
being burned out, raped, lynched, and deprived of their rights as
citizens in the wake of the failure of Reconstruction. By creating a
lady-like version of the heroine, Iola Leroy, she tried to impress and
please the white readers to respect her even though she is black. Even
Jessie Fauset (1884-1961) wrote with a craving for white acceptance.
She attempted to change the impression most whites had about
blacks. In her preface to The China Berry Tree (1931) she says that her
novel is about “those breathing spells in between spaces where
coloured men and women work and live and go their ways in no
thought of the problem.”

Nella Larsen (1893-1963) tried to create heroines who look like
whites and act like whites thinking that the creation of assimilated
women and a new bourgeois class in black community would take the
race closer to power and white acceptance. Helga Crane in Quicksand
(1928), identifying herself with white value community, alienates
herself from the common Negro mass socially and culturally. Ann
Petry followed the same path: Lutie Johnson in The Street (1946) is
frustrated and alienated from self as she tries to live by the female
version of the American dream as pure, protected and well-provided
for.
Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) was, however, one notable exception to this trend in early African-American women's writing. Though published in 1937, the novel and the author are receiving the most serious scholarly attentions now. She was one of the first black women writers who attempted a serious study of the black folklore and folk history. The major themes that emerge are the over-all pattern for healing and wholeness which is of universal importance to women who strive to be self-defined, socially vital, and be represented fairly in literature. Unlike Jessie Fauset or Nella Larsen, she is an “opposition to various forms of repression which are more generally human and sometimes self-manufactured.”¹⁷ Not only rescuing them from the stereotypical upper middle class bourgeois traps, she comes close to probing the dimensions representing the general female condition by presenting them with all the ordinariness of their lives, their aspirations, and their dreams. As Williams has noted, “Janie's (*Their Eyes were Watching God*) individual quest for fulfillment becomes any woman’s tale.”¹⁸ In addition, in its use of language as a means of exploring the self as female and black, *Their Eyes were Watching God* is “a forerunner of fiction of the seventies and eighties.”¹⁹ Thus Zora Neale Hurston's writings signalled that the dawn was not far off and the “new black woman” would soon knock at the doors of African-American literature.
The process of self-definition started with Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* (1953). In spite of the limitations set by her family, race, and class, she managed to be her own creator. Commenting on Brooks' protagonist, Barbara Christian says,

She (Maud Martha) is no Iola Leroy. Nor is she, like Fauset's heroine, merrily conventional. ... Nor is Maud Martha a beautiful Lutie Johnson, tragically destroyed by her environment. ... It is just that she is not reduced to a stereotype either in the grand heroic style or the mean down-trodden mode.²⁰

The novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) by Paule Marshall took a qualitative leap and opened the creative floodgates with a bright vision of the coming age of black women's literary tradition. It not only built upon qualities that characterized earlier African-American women's fiction but it also anticipated key features of the African-American women's novel that would mature in the 1970s and 1980s. Unlike the predecessors who spoke to others, Marshall's women speak to their own self and articulate that self with a great force. Thus a perceptible change occurred in the attitude of the writers.

The works of Alice Walker proved that writers started making conscious attempts to go to the roots and re-link the present with the past. Alice Walker as a womanist is concerned about the liberation of all womankind from the psychology of oppression. In an interview with
John O’ Brien, she made it clear that she is more, “committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women.” She practised everything she professed theoretically. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and *Meridian* (1976) proved it. The protagonist of *Meridian* finally rejects the status of a biological mother, trying to become the community’s mother.

Thus by mid-sixties and seventies some black women writers — Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall, and Alice Walker — of American fiction had written characterizations of winning women. Their characterisations include women who are capable of taking risks, making choices, and taking responsibility for their choices. These winning women are capable of accepting their own successes and failures in a growth enhancing manner. The novels invariably look at ways in which the quality of black women’s lives is affected by the interrelationship of racism, sexism, and classism. Race, gender, and class are not separate entities but closely linked with each other, at least in America. Barbara Christian rightly observes that “like the images of a kaleidoscope, these elements are so organically connected that one must understand their interrelationship in spite of their ever-shifting appearance.”
III

Classism, sexism, and racism signify the traumatic conditions under which African-Americans tired in white America. The societal and psychological restrictions critically affected their lives in general, and black women's in particular. Racism of course was the main problem which affected all the Africans irrespective of the gender. But black women were sexually exploited by both black and white men. Confronted on all sides by racial and sexual discrimination, the black woman was just left out with liabilities and responsibilities. Thus to be black and female was to suffer from the twin disadvantages of racial discrimination and pronounced gender bias. Gloria Wade-Gayles explains racism and sexism as being allied and having a parallel existence. She explains this phenomenon through the imagery of circles:

There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflect degrees of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space, in which black people, regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third, a small, dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation, and
vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks
of black womanhood in white America.23

As already mentioned, "it is ironic that blackness, for so long
regarded as a handicap socially and culturally, should also be an
artistic strength."24 In the days of slavery, the black American writer
was restricted to work in the American tradition. Very few blacks were
granted freedom, but most of them were exploited and systematically
denied education and cultural advantages. As mentioned earlier, the
earliest African–American writing was in the form of slave narratives.
The slave autobiography was not only a useful propaganda tool but
also an art form. The slave narratives consisted of similar elements,
though varied in quality. There was a vivid picture of the escape,
physical exhaustion, and also instances of treachery on the part of
other slaves and outburst of cruelty on the part of vindictive masters.
This mirrored the situations prevalent in those days. Of course racism
exists even today, as a life-threatening, non-nurturing force. It may be
defined, according to Hernton, as

... all of the learned behaviour and learned
emotions on the part of a group of people towards
another group whose physical characteristics are
dissimilar to the former group, behaviour and
emotions that compel one group to .... treat the
other on the basis of its physical characteristics
alone, as if it did not belong to the human race.25
It has been pointed out that "The works of Richard Wright signified a turning point, a transition from the peaceful 'Negro Renaissance' to a period of rebellion and revolution." That was the first step toward breaking the chains of racism instituted by the whites as an inseparable part of white American civilization. But sexism, with its accompanying horrors, damaged the backs and minds of slave women and defiled their sexual beings and scarred them psychologically for all time. The black woman's condition was much worse than the black man's because "To be Black and female was to be in Double Jeopardy."27

Until the 1940s, black women in both Anglo-American and African-American literature had been usually assigned stereotyped roles – their images being a context for some other major dilemma or problem society cannot resolve. Throughout the period of slavery and reconstruction, the black woman was an image intended to further create submission, conflict between the black man and woman. The most prominent black female figure in southern white literature, Mammy figure, Aunt Jemina, is in direct contrast to the ideal white woman, whose identity is mainly derived from a nurturing service. White woman was supposed to be frail, alabaster white, incapable of doing hard work, shimmering with beauty of fragile crystal. Even the other black female image, the conjure woman, is a reservoir for fears – fears of the unknown spiritual world.
The background of much of the work of the black women writers is from the trials they face. They achieve the desired result in the process, with or without appropriate recognition. As they strive for more autonomy in their lives, this social and economic development is reflected in their literature. Many of them write about the conflicts that occur between social expectations and their own experiences as women. Some studies are concerned with examining a society that seems bent on perpetuating a punitive social system for women. One of the most comprehensive and penetrating studies done by Annis Pratt culminated in her book *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*. She sets her premise in her introduction:

> After close readings of more than three hundred women's novels, I discovered, quite contrary to what I had expected, that even the most conservative women authors create narratives manifesting an acute tension between what any normal human being might desire and what a woman must become. Women's fiction reflects an experience radically different from men's because our growth as persons is thwarted by our society's prescriptions concerning gender. Whether women authors are conscious of this feminism or force pro femina in their novels or not, or whether they are overtly concerned with being and writing about women, the tension ... between forces and demanding our submissions and our rebellious
assertions of personhood, characterize far too much of our fiction to be incidental.28

This confusion provides fertile possibilities for new and different circumstances in characterizing women in fiction. In order to bring a social change in their people first and then in the society in which they are alienated, women writers try their best to characterize women with great deal of attention. Thus women in their novels turn out to be strong, self-determined and socially interactive.

But, then, the alternative voices of the oppressed are not those of race and gender alone. Class exploitation is, perhaps, the greatest source of oppression of blacks in white America. There was little improvement in the condition of their lives, after the Civil War, but the First World War again hit them hard as it precipitated a global crisis. Among the millions of sufferers in America, blacks were the worst affected as racial discrimination reached its apex. Though the class struggle has not been a major theme in the history of African–American freedom movement, it cannot be negated. Nor can we agree with critics like Wade-Gayles who see class

... not as urgent as race and sex in black women's reality for class oppression cuts across racial and sexual lines and is, therefore, not unique to black women.29
But there is ample evidence to prove that racism is a by-product of capitalism. As Walter Rodney points out, racism and sexism are not the initial cause of the oppression today. According to him, Africans were enslaved "for economic reasons, so that their labour power could be exploited." Then resulted racism, the doctrine based on the assumption that psychological traits and capacities are determined by biological race. Walter Rodney further says,

(After) having been utterly dependent on African Labour, Europeans at home and abroad found it necessary to rationalise that exploitation in racist terms as well. Oppression follows logically from exploitation so as to guarantee the latter.

Thus the economic system of slavery, an early form of capitalism, was the cause of racism and sexism rather than the result of it. Dr. Kwame Nkrumah confirms Rodney's analysis when he says, "It was only with capitalist economic penetration that the master-servant relationship emerged and with it racism, colour prejudice and aprtheid."

Since these factors are interrelated in the history of America, it is not surprising that when black women published novels, they necessarily reflected on that relationship, whether they intended it or not. That's how right since the beginning a stunning expression of various configurations of social definitions has been dealt with. The
novels have had to react to the elements of race, gender, and class as the factors upon which the societal definition of black women is based.

IV

While Richard Wright is credited with making the Negro a human being, to Paule Marshall goes the credit of depicting the emotional growth and newly found independence of black women who have accepted and discovered their heritage. She is one of the foremost among writers committed basically to black solidarity.

Paul Marshall's first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* ushered in a new period of female characters in African-American literature. It prefigured the major themes of black women's fiction in the 1970s: "The black woman's potential as a full person and necessarily a major actor on the social, cultural and political issues of our times."34

It is not only built upon qualities that characterized earlier African-American women's fiction, but it also anticipated key features of the African-American women's novel that would mature in the 1970s and 1980s. Marshall gave new meaning to black womanhood by transforming abused creatures into self-conscious rebels who meet the challenges of the world and seek to define their identity with the context of their own culture. Her insistence in this novel on the relationship of woman as self and as part of a community reminds us of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) or
Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Maud Martha* (1953), but it also prefigured the major themes of Toni Morrison’s and Alice Walker’s works.

An important aspect of her novels is that although they deal mainly with African-American issues, critics have noted that the power and importance of Marshall’s work transcend race and gender. As Barbara T. Christian has noted, “Marshall’s novels manifest history as a creative and moral process, for she graphically describes how we compose our own experiences in our minds as well in the objective world; how we as individuals and whole cultures decide upon the moral nature of an act, a series of acts, a history.”35 For example, in the *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*,36 we have in addition to the black female protagonist, Merle, two other almost equally important characters, Saul Amron and Harriet Shippen. Saul is a Jew, but it is through his relationship with Merle that he begins to come to terms with himself and recognize what he has tried to blot out of his past. His first wife was a survivor of the Nazi camps. Her death in premature childbirth was a result of Saul’s insistence on doing his field work far from civilization. She used to accuse him of selfishness and Saul could not confront the accusation until his sympathetic sexual relationship with Merle. While Saul succeeds in his search for self, Harriet fails in her attempts at self actualization because of her selfishness and spiritual imperialism.
We often notice the influence of the events and people in a novelist's life on the incidents and characters in his or her novels. Therefore it is not inappropriate to briefly discuss the experiences Paule Marshall underwent which had an impact on her writings.

Paule Marshall was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1929. She was the second of three children born to Barbadian parents, who had immigrated to the United States shortly after the First World War. She began writing at a very tender age of ten. She credits her mother and the other women of New York city's Barbadian community as being the first "poets" with whom she came into contact:

The foundation stone for my development as a writer was established when I was a kid who was forced to be among these women. As a girl child, as they called me. I was with them around the kitchen table when they came back from their day's work out in Flatbush. I was there with my sister waiting on them, serving them cocoa and tea or sitting over in the corner doing my home work, being seen but not heard.

The remarkable thing about them was that while they looked ordinary they were actually poets; they did marvellous things with the English language that they had learned in the schools of Barbados, this tiny island from which they came. They brought to bear the few African words and cadences that they remembered and they infused
and enriched it with all manner of biblical quotes and metaphors and sayings drawn from their life as black women.

For these women who were immigrants and who always felt as if they were strangers in America, the language gave them a sense of home. They talked about everything under the sun ... The political perspective that was so much a part of the way they thought and saw the world became my way of looking at the world. I am indebted to them for that.\textsuperscript{37}

Paule Marshall herself admits that the women of the Barbadian community in her first novel, \textit{Brown Girl, Brownstones}, are modelled on the black women in whose company she spent her childhood. She also pays a tribute to them through the novel because

\ldots{} once I got over my adolescent rebellion against family and community I was able to see the worth, validity and sacredness of that community in which I grew up, and its women especially. I wanted to try to get it down on paper before it was lost. That's why I think it's been easy for me over the years to hold fast to the vision — because of them, these women whom I call the mother poets.\textsuperscript{38}

Paying a tribute to her Barbadian grandmother Da-duh, Paule Marshall says,

[Da, duh]'s an ancestor figure, symbolic for me of the long line of black women and men—African
and New World—who made my being possible, and whose spirit continues to animate my life and work. I wish to acknowledge and celebrate them. I am in a word, an unabashed ancestor worshipper.\textsuperscript{39}

In almost all her novels, at least one elderly woman functions as an ancestor for the main protagonist in the manner of Da-duh. Da-duh appears as the old hairdresser, Mrs. Thompson, in her first novel, \textit{Brown Girl, Brownstones}, as the healer and protector Leesy and Cook Carrington in her second novel, \textit{The Chosen Place, The Timeless People}, and as Avey's Great-aunt Cuney in \textit{Praisesong for the Widow}.

From very early on, Paule Marshall had West Indian English—black English, West Indian style. But, outside her home she used to speak black English, African-American style. She became trilingual when she learned Standard English at school. She considers the reading she did at the Macon Street branch of the Brooklyn Public Library the second phase of her education and preparation as a writer, because "I moved from that great oral tradition which the mother poets represented, to the written tradition, and fell in love with that also."\textsuperscript{40} She was a voracious reader and read, in a disorganized sprawling way, from Jane Austen to Zane Grey. But it was only after reading Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poetry that Marshall realized the existence of a literary forum that, as she says, "validated the black experience."\textsuperscript{41} That was a revelation to her because till then none of
the books she had read were by black writers. Dunbar also instilled in her the secret desire to write. She started reading books by and about black writers. It was then, when she was twelve years old, that she began her education on her own. One of the books that contributed to her education was Gwendolyn Brooks' novel *Maud Martha*. She was impressed by the way Brooks makes the reader privy to the interior landscape of the protagonist's life. Another important influence on her was that of Ralph Ellison, not so much for his *Invisible Man* but for his collection of essays on the craft of writing called *Shadow and Act*, in which he talks about the responsibility of African-American writers to move beyond the sociology of their lives to deal with the individual, the interior person, to treat African-Americans as people rather than statistics.

But it should be noted that Paule Marshall is not in complete agreement with all the views of Ralph Ellison. Asked whether her preoccupation with a spiritual return to Africa is something she shares with other African-American writers, Marshall says,

I am not certain that they share the same concerns as I do. For example, Ralph Ellison, a writer whom I admire immensely, is of the opinion that as blacks in the U.S. originate from a distinctly North American historical, political, cultural experience, this distinguishes their experience from other Black cultures in the diaspora. In his estimation,
as U.S. Blacks issue from a specifically American Matrix, they exist as a completely new race of American Black people. As a result, any undue emphasis upon African ancestry is distasteful to him. I am not all of that opinion. We (as people of African descent) must accept the task of 'reinventing' our own image, and the role which Africa will play in this process will be essential.42

The year 1959 saw Marshall embarking upon her career as a novelist with the publication of Brown Girl, Brownstones. Though it was a commercial failure, it was a critical success. The novel is "a black woman's retrospective rewriting of a transitional phase in the history of the American woman, that is, the 1940's seen with eyes of the late 1950's."43

In fact it can be considered a novel of intersections. Written about a time when Marshall was just beginning to explore the implications of her racial, social and sexual status, the novel reflects uncertainties of a period in which new interpretations of woman's role in terms of race, gender, and society had to be developed. The novel describes the growth of the protagonist, Selina Boyce, who is ten years old when the story begins, in 1939, and eighteen when it ends. The novelist presents the different stages in Selina's development, as she moves from innocence to experience, and through her experiences the various phases, doubts, fears, hopes, and conflicts of an adolescent girl.
It also tells of her parents, who are caught in the conflict between ethnic autonomy and assimilation.

Paule Marshall's second novel, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* appeared in 1969. Rober Bone observes, "Paul Marshall, who is something of a Cuisiniere, specializing in Barbadian dishes, has concocted a novel of West Indian life that will greatly enhance her reputation. Not to mince words, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, in my opinion, is the best novel to be written by an American black woman, one of the two important black novels of the 1960s (the other being William Demby's *The Catacombs*) and one of the four or five most impressive novels ever written by a black American."^44

The main concerns of the novel are with the effects of the colonial condition and experience of a people. The novel has been praised for examining the problems facing many third world countries in their struggle to establish their national identity. As Edward Brathwaite observes, in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless people* Marshall suggest that

... the past predicts our present and that the present is, in the end, what we call home. ... It is in this understanding, within not only the personal dimension but one of space and time, Paule Marshall is suggesting that the hard ground for development lies. 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.\textsuperscript{45}

Paule Marshall's third novel, \textit{Praisesong for the Widow},\textsuperscript{46}
describes the home-coming of a woman who succeeds in making an
awesome physical and spiritual odyssey. Paule Marshall herself says
that a tale about a place in the Sea Islands inspired her to write this
novel:

\ldots \textit{Praisesong for the Widow} began because I came
across a tale about a place in the Sea Islands called
Ibo Landing, with a group of slaves who, when they
were brought over, decided after they took a long
look around that they didn't want to stay because
they knew what their history was going to be in
this republic. So they left. They were in such a
hurry to leave, so the folktale goes, they walked
back across the Atlantic to home.\textsuperscript{47}

Marshall says that the story of the Ibos also answered the question
she had always been putting to herself:

I came to understand that the Ibos spoke to
something deep within me, a question that I'd
always been putting to myself: How do I, as a
woman and a black writer, live in a society that
daily undercuts my sense of self. As I began
writing about the Ibos, they gave me the answer.
In the same way that they put the physical
distance of the Atlantic between this country and home, between themselves and this country, I had to put a psychological and spiritual distance between myself and what I perceived and knew to be some of the demanding aspects of American society. Its racism, its sexism, its class bias.

Paule Marshall's fourth novel is *Daughters.* It examines how relations between men and women affect the formation of the self. The protagonist of the novel, Ursa–Bea Mackenzie, is forced to confront her ambivalent feelings for her father when she returns home from New York to the island of Triunion to participate in his re-election campaign as Prime Minister. Critics have noticed that Marshall's title refers not only to Ursa's relationship with her father but to the relationship between patriarchal society and all women of African descent.

A study of the theme of quest in the novels of Paule Marshall seems to be a pragmatic approach based on the view that "At the centre of any given style lies what can only be called a theme, or a cluster of themes. Theme carries with it a more active, positive and dynamic character than does the word style. Implicit in any theme is at once a question being answered, more or less, and also an ordering of experience and observation in a special focus."
The focus of this study is on three of Paule Marshall’s novels — Brown Girl, Brownstones, The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, and Praisesong for the Widow. The choice of these three novels is based on the fact that Brown Girl, Brownstones is about a young girl; The Chosen Place, The Timeless People is about a middle-aged woman separated from her husband; and Praisesong for the Widow is the story of an elderly widow. Paule Marshall herself says that these three novels form a trilogy:

... when I began to write my first novel, Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959), I experienced a necessity to make a spiritual return to my resources. At the end of the book the heroine, Selina Boyce, leaves the U.S in order to return to the Caribbean. In my second novel, The Chosen Place, The Timeless People (1969), the heroine, Merle Kinbona, completes the Voyage to the Caribbean only to depart later for Africa. These two novels, plus my third, Praisesong for the Widow (1983), in which, my heroine, Avey Avatara Johnson, makes the mythic return to the Caribbean, again, form a trilogy.51

Thus the journey into the past, moving closer to one's cultural background, is a recurring theme in Paule Marshall’s fiction. Discovering the Caribbean or Africa has, for her, the properties of psychic healing, and
the physical return ... is a metaphor for psychological and spiritual return back over history which ... Black people in this part of the world must undertake if we are to have a sense of our total experience and to mould ourselves a more truthful identity ... Exploration of the past is vital in the work of constructing our future.\textsuperscript{52}

All of Marshall's protagonists "participate in the act of recreating a self through a specific ritual that consists of reentering the house of their past, both the personal and historical past, and reinvesting those histories with new meaning."\textsuperscript{53}
REFERENCES


