CHAPTER III

QUEST FOR CLARITY

THE CHOSEN PLACE, THE TIMELESS PEOPLE
A few decades after the Second World War most of the colonies became independent. They began to develop with the aid offered by the developed countries. Though there has been apparent progress, the gap between the developed and the developing countries seems to be on the increase. In *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* Paule Marshall deals with one such colony, Bournehills. It is a small undeveloped island, whose people stick to their customs and history, refusing change. Most of the people who go there in search of green pastures settle there. Gradually, they lose themselves in a new cultural environment, longing to recognize and keep up their identity alive. They refuse to accept modernization.

On one hand the novel deals with the problems of its characters, and on the other hand it traces the history of black-white relationships. So instead of a single central character there are several important characters. As Henriella Buckmaster rightly says, "In *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* she (Paule Marshall) is writing about an island in the Caribbean which is a piece of land but also a state of mind."¹ The "chosen place" is Bournehills, an almost wasteland at the end of the Caribbean islands, and the "timeless people" are the inhabitants of Bournehills. It is a parable of Western civilization and its relations with the underdeveloped world. As the name implies, Bourne Island forms a symbolic boundary between the cultures of Europe and
Africa, the forces of progress and tradition, townsman and countryman, rich and poor, white and black. The study of the problems faced by many third world countries in their struggle to establish a national identity makes the novel praiseworthy.

Barbara Christian argues that in Marshall's second novel, "Marshall creates a microcosm representative not only of Bournehills, but of other underdeveloped societies in the Third World, that are captive both psychologically and economically by the metropolises of the West, yet somehow possessing their own visions of possibility." In the form of Merle Kinbona, Marshall has created a character who is not only a representative of African people in America, but also a Third World revolutionary. She, therefore, must not only contend with her own history, rituals, culture, and communal mores but also engage herself in the struggle against the power of neocolonialism. Marshall says, "What I'm trying to do in [this] book is to take the black woman as character to another level, to give her an added dimension. There is the quest for self, but at the same time... to suggest that [her] search is linked to this larger quest which has to do with the liberation of us as people." As Eugenia Collier has noted,

The novel [The Chosen Place, The Timeless People] ...is the next step in Marshall's ever broadening vision of the relationship of the individual with the community. A vision that links Black culture in the
Western hemisphere with its African past and the promise of future; it sees this black culture as different from European-American, which has been the oppressor...⁴

Marshall, thus, moves from individualistic ethos to collective ethos, "from the way world affects an individual psyche to how many psyches create world."⁵

A benevolent American organization selects Bournehills for a rehabilitation scheme. A team of social scientists are sent to set up a project to help uplift the people from their abject poverty. Saul Amron, an anthropologist and a widower who has married Harriet Shippen, is in charge of the project sponsored by the Center for Applied Social Research. The aims are to obtain a general picture of life in the district, to discover "why a number of other projects previously attempted there had all failed," and to set "long-range programs which hopefully over a period of years would see life in Bournehills vastly improved" (51). The project receives funds from Harriet's family fortunes. Allen Fuso, who develops some sort of liking for the island during his first trip for doing short-term demographic survey, is appointed Saul's assistant. The novel is framed by the arrival and departure of these Americans. It is their presence on Bourne Island that makes apparent the conflict, bringing most of the characters to enlightenment. While they are real people and never one-dimensional symbols, these Americans are nevertheless
products of a particular milieu and thus present on an individual level the characteristics of a culture. As Robert Bone points out.

Allen represents an effete civilization that has pledged its soul to the gods of technology. Harriet embodies the suicidal impulse of the Western psyche: its unyielding racism and will to dominate, despite a superficial liberalism. Saul represents the possibility of transformation and renewal, providing only that fate will overtake him with a blinding vision.6

The protagonist, Merle Kinbona, their hostess and landlady at Bournehills, is not only the challenge and testing ground for the white characters, but also an agent of destruction or catalyst of growth.

As soon as the team arrives, the ruling elite of the island in New Bristol arranges a party:

... nearly all the men there were senior civil servants and high-ranking government officials. The rest were members of the professions, which in Bourne Island were largely taken to mean only medicine and law. And they were very much of a type. They were all, to a man almost, drinking imported whisky, scorning as a matter of status the local rum, which was excellent; all wearing dark-toned, conservative, heavy English suits in spite of the hot night. Some, like the pale, austere permanent secretary, had on matching vests, and a few wore their old school ties. (53)
These people run after status, cutting off themselves from their roots. They identify themselves with everything that is foreign, including clothes, drinks, and education. The New Bristol party episode is not only to bring out the culturally lost black bourgeoisie and their contrasted and conflicted relationship with the Bournehills people but to introduce Saul and Merle Kinbona to each other. Merle’s compulsive talk, “slow, eloquent shrug,” and “the gesture of a Jew” (64) make him feel that “He might have known the people, places, and events of which she was speaking” (67). And further, “Saul studied her face; he listened to the desperate voice, and suddenly... it struck him that this woman who shrugged like a Jew and insisted whenever she glanced his way that he had been here before, had brought the entire spurned and shameless lot with her onto the veranda” (67). Saul observes that in the midst of the gathering at the party which was a melting pot with “all the different bodies, black, brown, white... merged into a single undifferentiated mass, .... The inseparable parts of a whole” (81), Merle is the person who refuses to melt in “the discards of nations” (82), and that she is the only person out there who wants to assert her own cultural angularities, whose allegiance is permanently to the poor but prideful band of Bournehills folks and not to the brainwashed black bourgeois.
At the party, Saul makes a mention of the large amount of money involved in the project. But the representatives, in spite of supporting it, express their views and try to convince him of the futility of the project. A young lawyer named Cecil Hinkson says, "... you don't know that place. There's no changing or improving it. You people could set up a hundred development schemes at a hundred million each and down there would remain the same" (56). The efforts of the government to start the small farmers cooperative were failed by the people. Moreover it caused war and the poor co-operative officer had to run for his life. The scheme of housing colonies the government implemented with the help of a Canadian company was a flop. The islanders refused to occupy the decent houses newly constructed and preferred the old shacks because "its we house and we land" (56). When Lady Stanley, the Governor General's wife, tried to educate them on family planning, they ran her out of the place. When a pottery factory was built to provide work for them they refused to work in it. Though it was free of charge, they refused rediffusion, and broke down the television set gifted by a British firm. They even refused to have anything to do with the independence celebrations. In short, as Henkson puts it, "... Bournehills is like some place out of the Dark Ages... Even when you try to brighten up life a little for them, they don't seem to want it" (58). Lyle Huston, a leading barrister, senator, and businessman doesn't seem to share the
emotions of the people though he is the son of an obscure village tailor. Though he was a radical as a student, once he got married and became a successful lawyer, his enthusiasm died down. He started building his future on the spoils of the past. In his words,

Bournehills .... is the thorn in our sides, the maverick in our midst, the black sheep of the family,... which continues to disgrace us in spite of all our efforts to bring it into the fold. In other words, while we have been making quite considerable progress on this side of the island it has remained a backwater even with the large amounts of money that have been poured into it. The place is really quite unique in that respect. I don't believe you could find another like it in the whole of the West Indies or the world for that matter. In any other place, no matter how formerly backward or remote, one can still, I'm sure, see some small sign of things moving ahead. But hardly in Bournehills. And it's not, you know, that it can't change, but rather, one almost begins to suspect, that it chooses not to, for some perverse reason. (62)

It is the cool and calculated impression of a practical lawyer, whereas the other representatives come out with their emotional outburst. But in reality we see Bournehills as a place that stubbornly resists change. It is a small, cut-off community which, in the days of slavery, conducted a successful slave revolt and never forgot it. It is a community of cane
cutters and fisherfolk who strangely cling to their memory of Africa. They prefer living it, in fact, each day, and resisting all efforts to modernize it.

Leesy, an important character in the novel, remarks, “But I wonder why these people from Away can’t learn, yes,… Every time you look here comes another set of them with a big plan. They’re goin’ do this, they’re goin’ do the other, and they end up not doing a blast…. I tell you they’s some confused and troubled souls you see them there…” (142). Leesy makes clear that it is they and not the people of Bournehills who need change and help. The CASR team arrives in Bournehills with no idea about the natives’ psychology and history. They have no idea that their whole undertaking also means imposition of a new way of life and obliteration of the centuries old system of values. This is one of the reasons why the people of Bournehills refuse to change. The following passage in George Lamming’s famous book *The Pleasures of Exile* echoes their wisdom about how the process of colonization really starts:

The colonizing agent may begin with suggestions for improvement, and improvement is always welcome, for it’s another word for change, with a promise of change for the better as you see better. It may start as a suggestion. Then the suggestion fails and the colonized are alive with complaint. But the colonizing agent has already chosen the future of
this enterprise, the end of which is to get colonized securely into his power. This power will almost certainly be used toward an end of which is to get colonized surely into his power. This power will almost certainly be used toward an end that may have nothing to do with the landscape where they both experience this encounter.7

The people of Bournehills will not allow the history to repeat; will not, therefore, accept “suggestion for improvement” from the outsiders because such a “suggestion for improvement” promises not mutual respect, co-feeling, co-participation but patronization and a masked will for control; making them (the people of Bournehills) economically and psychologically dependent. They want someone who would “participate in their suppression,” some Cuffee Ned who would understand them. Several attempts to modernize their land failed because the Americans never tried to understand them.

Though the elite declares that Bournehills and its people are silent, static, timeless, like ghosts of the slaves, and beyond redemption, Saul decides to help them and see that they come out of their backwardness. Having understood the entire situation, he decides to stay there. We are made to have a measure of respect for Saul because he feels sympathy for the people of Bournehills, whom he has not yet met. His scepticism about the underdeveloped bourgeoisie leads to self-criticism:
But then who, he reminded himself, can speak calmly of the brother who shames him? Because listening to them he had suddenly remembered, to his own shame, how, as a boy, he had fled his brothers, those with the sallow, long-nosed look, sloping shoulders and side curls, whose bodies always appeared to be cowering out of the way of an impending blow. The Ashkenazi look he had called it as an arrogant young man who had taken pride in his large, straight-shouldered build—the look of the long persecuted; and while maintaining his allegiance (for they were his people after all) he had still, at the same time, often been impatient, even angry, with them. (58-59)

From this we can get a glimpse of the complexity of Marshall's writing. Though the novel deals with the people of Bournehills, exploited by a higher society, Marshall does not limit herself to just the black people of the colonies; she is dealing with all exploited peoples including the Jews. Saul is a prototypical wandering Jew who is deeply scarred by his past both racial and personal. Leela Kapai thinks that of all Marshall's men, Saul is "the best creation of her fictional world,... he is a very human character."8 His Jewish heritage links him to all people who have been oppressed and persecuted throughout their history. As Ferguson, one of the minor characters, says, "Ah" Yes! Amram, son of Kohath and father of Aaron and Moses—self (124). Member of Sephardic Jew community, he had wandered the two continents of
America, from South America through the Caribbean to New York. He considers himself "a professional wonderer" (321). Saul still remembers "... he had wandered at age eight, thus committing his first heresy and beginning his life-long apostasy" (164). The story of his ancestors that his mother told him "came to stand in his child's mind for the entire two-thousand-year history of exile and trial, including the Nazi horror which was still to come when he was a boy" (164). He bears an inexplicable burden of his personal guilt and racial suffering. He also bears the symbolic weight of Jewish exilic history. We don't see them as the people affected by history in abstract terms, but as "the real human beings who have real human failings and may or may not have a capacity for self awareness."9

Saul comes into contact with Merle Kinbona, a mulatto, who seems to be the voice of the voiceless people who refuse to be suppressed or forgotten. Regarded primarily as an eccentric woman, she is nonetheless respected by the elite of Bourne Island. Born and brought up in the island, Merle does not forget, and she will not let them forget, the terrible economic plight of the people of Bournehills. She feels guilty about her inheritance. Her mother's mysterious death, suspected to have been the deed of her father's legal wife, fills her with bitterness. Merle doesn't forgive her father Ashton Vaughan as he did not love her despite his acceptance of her as his daughter in the later years. Thus she is a part of two groups but a member of neither. Though betrayed
by her father, she gets her economic independence with his money. However, her independence enables Merle to speak for her community in a way that she would not otherwise be able to do. Though educated in England, her life there further increased her inability to feel competent and independent as she was unprepared for the cultural differences. Confused by her experiences, she returned to Bournehills. She identifies herself with the people there instead of using her education in England as a means of climbing the ladder of “success” held out to the underdeveloped bourgeoisie. We find Marshall linking Merle’s acceptance of her blackness and her refusal to deny Bournehills: “As for the people at the bottom of the heap, the Little Fella, as they’re called in Bournehills, she can do no wrong. Because although she was ‘raised decent,’ as they say, and has lived in England and hobnobs with bigwigs in town like Lyle Hutson, she’s never put on airs with them. They know she’s on their side and really takes their problems to heart” (117). Having won the hearts of the people of Bournehills, and as she has access to everyone up and down the line, she is invaluable to them in terms of the project. She is “the perfect cultural broker” (118). She acts as a bridge between past and present, attitude and action. As Marshall says, “Merle remains the most alive of my characters. Indeed, it seems to me she has escaped the pages of the novel altogether and is abroad in the world. I envision her striding restlessly up and down the hemisphere from Argentina to Canada, and back and forth across the
Atlantic between here and Africa, all the while speaking her mind in the same forthright way as in the book."10

The island is Merle’s bone and breath. But she knows what other worlds are like as she has lived in England. She now runs a guest house and has no illusions. As Allen puts it, “She’s become too much a part of the place. In a way I can’t explain, she somehow is Bournehills” (118). Though she never articulates, her neglected childhood, her mother’s death, father’s ill-treatment, her broken marriage, and separation from her son have untold effect on her. But her inheritance not only saves her from economic dependence, but also helps her become the voice of the voiceless people. For her outspokenness, she had to pay a terrible price: “All right, finish for now, but remember, I’ve had to pay with my sanity for the right to speak my mind so you know I must talk” (11). She is a compulsive talker and her ceaseless talk seems to be an innocent effort to drown her bitter feelings. Marshall skilfully interweaves the general with the individual. Merle’s unceasing voice is not just a voice for the people of Bournehills. Saul, who comes close to her in course of time, recognizes something desperate about her unceasing talk. He feels that the unresolved contradictions in her life would destroy her if she stopped talking. And so “the flow of words continued unchecked, the voice rushing pell-mell down the precipitous slope towards its own destruction.”
Saul somehow feels that he can understand Bournehills only through Merle. But Merle's outspoken comments at times prove unintelligible and Saul strives hard to understand her and Bournehills. He fails in his efforts to understand Merle and the people there and swears to himself that Bournehills is "being withheld, hidden from him. Yet not hidden" (216). What he senses about Bournehills takes on a personal meaning, because he finds himself recalling events from his past. His childhood and youth, his field work experiences in Mexico and Peru, and his first wife begin to surface to his mind "like flotsam from a submerged wreck" (217). Even in his early life, being absorbed in work, he used to subject his first wife year after year to the hardship of life in the field. This resulted in her ill-health and death in a premature childbirth. After coming to Bournehills, he thinks of the past, and realizes his mistakes and faults. Indulging in introspection, he repents and holds himself responsible for all his misfortunes. Sosha, Saul's first wife, died cursing him in the hospital. Haunted by a sense of guilt he often wonders, "Why had she been made to suffer so? What had she done?" (325). He holds himself responsible for the tragedy: "She died like that, screaming the questions at me, cursing me for not being able to give her anything by way of an answer, telling me about myself. And telling me behind it all that it was my fault" (325).

Sir John Stokes, head of the London office of Kingsley and Sons, visits the sugar factory, the only source for many people of Bournehills,
to inspect its functioning. At the factory, Ferguson, who nerved himself to warn the London office director that the rollers need repair, fails agonizingly to speak anything. It must be remembered that Ferguson is a spirited community leader who is an intense devotee of Cufee Ned and can out-talk anyone. He is weighed down with racism and exploitation. He prefers silence, which is the result of racism, slavery and "continuation of the superiority/exploitation principle." Seeing this, Saul realizes that the relationship between the master and the slave can be so paralyzing to the enslaved or the colonized that he can be stripped off of psychic strength and potency. Merle clarifies the things for Saul a few days later: "No, you have no idea what it's like living here, in a place where you sometimes feel everything came to a dead stop donkey's years ago and won't ever move again, can't move for some reason; and where some little shriveled-up man in a safari suit still drops in once a year to remind you who's boss" (228).

Finally, the silent voices of the people of Bournehills bring the inspection to an end with Sir John's condemnation of the project to failure. His comment "Bournehills! Man, you won't be able to do anything with that place" (220) shows his lack of interest. Saul finds his view thoroughly objectionable. He considers Sir John's brief visit particularly depressing and he feels sad as people like Sir John come from outside and are keen on controlling the world without any true intention of helping them. With this, he comes to a conclusion that
what is needed is a complete revolution. Unable to control his fury, he says, "They have to be gotten rid of, the bastards. Thrown out! And in one clean sweep. That's the only way" (225).

Saul unburdens himself before Merle. Being questioned by her about the validity of his development schemes, he accepts, "...setting up a market co-operative here, a clinic or field canteen there, a leadership-training programme somewhere else, all of them fairly small-scale local efforts at improving life in one place can possibly count for much in the face of what really needs doing, the all-out change you and I know is necessary" (226). During their conversation, Merle unravels her heart before Saul. She narrates her disappointments and failures, which freeze her and make her like as though she is under a spell. She bursts out saying, "I am like someone bewitched, turned foolish. It's like my very will's gone. And nothing short of a miracle will bring it back I know. Something has to happen – I don't know what, but something – and apart from me (because it's out of my hands I'm convinced) to bring me back to myself. Something that's been up has to come down" (230). Merle's words about herself sound true in the case of Bournehills too. It occurs to Saul that "perhaps he would have to come to know and understand her, really know her, before he could ever hope to know and understand Bournehills; that she was, in the old Biblical sense, the way" (260).
Two days after the visit of Sir John, the Kingsley office in town sends word that the mill will not accept anymore peasant canes for grinding until the entire estate crop has been completed. Saul goes as a delegate to Cane Vale terribly worried over the unhappiness of the people of Bournehills about their drying canes. He meets Merle in Aunt Tie's house. Merle feels sad and says, "It's important to Bournehills people that they have their own little crop which they can take over to Cane Vale and sell. It makes them feel they're somebody, too" (356). Exchanging their views, they unburden their hearts. For the first time in her life, Merle, who never talks about herself, wants to talk about her past and thinks it will do her good. With a voice charged with bitterness, she speaks at length of Ashton Vaughan, whom she does not accept as her father whole-heartedly. She presents the picture of her father, an inhuman creature who never thought of her upbringing until she was a teenager, when he realized he would have no children to inherit his estate. Ashton Vaughan, who never loved her, sent her to a school in England and made her life more miserable in the company of the half-white children. While Merle's life in England did broaden her experiences, it confused her ability to reconcile the differences in cultures from which each of her parents originated. She couldn't resist the ill-treatment by the half-white children as she was a black and her mother a labourer. As Linda Pannill says, "Not surprisingly, Merle admits to fascination with King Lear, like him, she is a half-mad
monarch without a country, but she is not a father cast out by his daughters: she is a daughter cast out by her fathers." She speaks at length of her mother's murder in cold blood, her life and the ill-treatment she was meted out in the hands of her father. Haunted by her inability to identify her mother's killer, she puts the whole blame on herself:

You would have thought the little idiot of a child would have at least remembered what the face behind the gun looked like... All right, she was only two, but my God, even a child of two has some sense and should've at least been able to point out to the person who shot her mother right before her eyes. That face should have been imprinted forever on her mind. But nothing. Just a blank... She should have remembered something, the little idiot... Something, some little thing, should have struck in my mind. (358)

As we see, in this novel, the mothers or the mother figures, both black and white, fail miserably. Harriet's obsession with life grew out of her mother's passivity. Leesy, the mother substitute for Vere, cannot understand the new, politically conscious, modernized young man. In short, there is no mother who is depicted favourably.

Merle is all anger when she speaks of her African husband, who, on coming to know that she had been a lesbian once, left for Africa with their child without telling her. As Merle says, "The old life was behind
me. I had seen the last of that woman and her money, or so I thought. But she fooled me. She let me know, in no uncertain terms, there's no doing away with the past that easily" (333). Her economic status forced her to accept the checks. But once she started to work she refused them. Furious and feeling betrayed, the English woman sent someone to the university to tell Ketu, Merle's husband, about the past lesbian affair; the evidence included letters Merle had written, pictures of the two women together, and the cancelled checks. Ketu returned home but "I wasn't Merle to him any longer, a person, a wife, the mother of his child, but the very thing he tried to avoid all his years there" (334): the West's corruption of African values. Stunned, shocked and infuriated, Ketu took his daughter, "A perfect little girl" (335) and returned to Kampala without even informing her. Merle's encounter with the West destroyed her marriage and hurled Merle into the dismal abyss of mental gloom and alienation. As a result of her negative experiences, she doubts her own womanhood. Saul's efforts to console her make her feel hopeless about her "damn self" and Saul says that he feels "less hopeless about myself since coming to Bournehills" (359). The way they open themselves to each other proves useful to both of them and they come closer to each other.

As mentioned earlier, another important character in the novel is Harriet Shippens. In the first few pages of the novel Harriet is described as a neat, unruffled, healthful, thirty-eight year old WASP
lady whose "eyes were very blue and clear, with not a trace of their customary gray" (47). Unlike Saul or Merle, Harriet is a very private person who seems reluctant or unable to disclose her innermost feelings: "a true WASP, sure, self-controlled, well organized, unsentimental."13 She is "an essentially solitary person" (172) and believes in control and autonomy. Harriet, a divorcee and heiress to a Philadelphia family fortune, got interested in Saul Amron, a divorcee, one of the early pioneers in the field of research, and it lead to their marriage. Her second marriage to a Jew is in someways an attempt to obtain a reprieve from the past. She persuades Saul to head the project to uplift the poverty of the Bourne Islanders, as most of the funds come from her family fortunes. It is surprising to discover that Harriet's family has made its money through investments in shipping, i.e., the slave trade. Therefore, ironically, they were responsible for creating the very misery she now wants to be put an end to. Her interest in the project leads her to Bournehills. Like Saul, she grows sympathetic to the people of Bournehills. She mixes with them freely and takes a lot of interest in them. She gets information which might be useful to the research. She learns to ignore Merle's smile, her laugh, her voice, and her "disconcerting, ill-mannered habit" (173), which are a source of irritation for her. Her interference sometimes gives rise to certain complications which make Saul find fault with her:
"... there's this thing in you which makes you want to take over and manage everything and everybody on your own terms. It really worries me. And it's not to say you don't mean well most of the time, but it still makes for complications." (180-181)

She feels sad when he tells her about the complications that developed because of what she did to appease the hunger of the starving children in Gwen's house. Saul advises her not to go around ordering other people's lives and trying to change long-standing habits over-night. She learns nothing from such experiences. She refuses Saul's analysis which emphasizes the islanders' right to choice and self-definition.

Harriet finds it hard to take Lyle Hutson, a member of the Bournehills elite. His touch in the hotel bar irritates her, and she cannot forget her fleeting impression, it is "less his hand than some dark and submerged part of herself, painful aspects of herself she denied existed, which had suddenly surfaced" (195-196). Lyle Hutson says that she is a remarkable woman who appears "to have adjusted to life in a place which someone once very appropriately described as being behind God's back" (197). In her letter to Chessie, she makes a mention of her involvement in the life of Bournehills. She says, "Not only do I feel that we've been here much longer than we have, but also – and this is most mysterious – that Bournehills has some claim on me" (235). It is so with Saul too. He says, "... I'm beginning to feel so at home here in
Bournehills. It's as though I've lived in the place for years. And I so like Bournehills people" (183). Harriet and Saul are a part of Marshall's purpose: to comment on the American role in developing countries. There is a lot of publicity but very little activity. In this novel, for instance, there is a great deal of discussion on the project, but very little of it is worked out in practice.

Bourne Island has many celebrations but the most important event for the people of Bournehills is the Carnival, their big fete, their bacchanal: it lasts for two days, the Monday and Tuesday preceding Ash Wednesday. It precedes Lent, which is the period of abstinence from world pleasures and prepares the spirit for the triumph of Easter Sunday which is when Jesus Christ rose from the dead and made a second coming.

The Carnival, a traditional African ritualistic celebration, dates back to the days of slavery and brings into focus a coda of reincarnation of black psyche. V.S.Naipaul explains the Carnival as follows:

The slave... worked by day and lived at night. Then the world of the white plantations fell away; and in its place was a secure, secret world of fantasy, of Negro "kingdoms," "regiments" bands. The people who were slaves by day saw themselves then as kings, queens, dauphins, princesses... At night the Negroes played at being people, mimicking the rites of the upper world.... The carnival ... is a version of
the Lunacy that kept the slave alive. It is the 
original dream of black power, style and prettiness; 
and it always feeds on a private vision of the real 
world.14

Marshall’s Carnival is slightly different from this. As Keith E. Byerman 
describes it, “The ritual for society is the carnival, a ceremony that 
marks the end of winter and also, in traditional cultures, the death of 
the old symbol of power, the king. It is sometimes the occasion for the 
celebration of death of death. Simultaneously, it signifies the advent of 
summer and the new order, the resurrection of life.”15 On Monday, a big 
dance is held in the several districts of the island, and on Tuesday, 
there is a magnificent parade in the main town of New Bristol, which is 
the time for dancing, singing and pageantry. The heart of the Carnival 
is the re-enacting of the islander’s four hundred years of history – their 
slavery and the so called recent “emancipation.” They re-enact Cuffee 
Ned’s revolt, the Pyre Hill revolt. Marshall describes the parade with its 
marching steel bands and people in complete cohesive costumes, and 
solidarity among them as they walk down the New Bristol streets. 
About their preparations for and devotion to the pageant she writes,

All the days, weeks, and months they had spent 
loafing under the tamarind tree, too lazy or caught 
up in their games sometimes to return the waves of 
those passing, might have been a storing up 
strength on their part, a careful preparation for this 
one day when they would parade New Bristol’s
streets spelling out on their converted oil drums the story of Cuffee and the revolt. This was perhaps the only thing they deemed worthy of their energy, the one thing to which they were willing to give themselves. (281)

And the song that accompanies their celebration of victory is a song of unity:

_They had worked together! ... the voices rose to a stunning crescendo that visibly jarred the blue dome of sky. If we had lived selfish, we couldn't have lived at all... Under Cuffee... a man had not lived for himself alone, but for his neighbor also. They had trusted one another, had set aside their differences and stood as one against their enemies. They had been a people!_ (287)

The pageant is given even wider application because "it didn't seem they were singing only of themselves and Bournehills, but of people like them everywhere" (286). This, then, is a celebration of the liberation of all oppressed people. This, in a way, is their psychological and emotional return into the past. This conscious regression brings with itself renewed energy and power. Frantz Fanon writes,

_The colonized people make use of particular incidents in this history of the country to give them a feeling of unity and to keep alive the revolutionary zeal. The instigator of the remembered action, although he may be an outlaw to the established_
power, is a hero to the oppressed people and is capable of inspiring another insurance.\textsuperscript{16}

The yearly dramatization of Cuffee Ned's rebellion allows the island's impoverished and nearly hopeless people to experience a victory against oppression in the chosen place; the drama simultaneously recalls a past event and offers hope for the future. Thus myth becomes a living embodiment of lasting forces rather than the distorted history of a dead past.

Harriet shows interest in the Carnival, when she hears from Dorothy Clough about its democratic spirit, the way all sorts of people mix, dance, and enjoy themselves those two days. She agrees and prepares herself to march in costume in the Bournehills band at the Carnival.

As she enters the Carnival, Harriet gets carried along, caught up in a group of young marchers, a guerrilla band from Harlem Heights. In the beginning she enjoys the sensation of being borne along. But gradually she realizes that she is caught in the midstream of a human river. This is the river which is ominous and has the potential for destruction: "... if heed wasn't taken and provision made [it] would soon burst the walls and levees built to contain it and rushing forth in one dark powerful wave bring everything in its path crashing down" (290). This is actually a foreshadowing of the destruction of Harriet Amron,
the outsider. She will get swept away first by this human sea and then later by the actual sea. As she gets caught up in the human tide, she feels "the sensation of being borne along, almost without a body or will of her own" (292). Her trauma begins now:

They were on her just as she started to make the turn, the first wave of them smacking up against her like one of those powerful Bournehills breakers which give the impression they have been gathering speed and force across the entire stretch of sea. She felt the ground pull away under her, and then as if she were no more than a pebble or a bit of shell caught lying on the foreshore she was being swept down the street in their midst. (293)

Her innocence and romanticized notions of the Carnival have thrust her into such a precarious situation. As Barbara Christian comments, "She does not understand that Carnival is a ritualized outpouring of energy of the life-force common to all human beings so that they might be regenerated."17

Harriet is carried along like a log set adrift on the currents aimlessly. The islanders see in her not an individual but a representative of the white colonial power structure that has oppressed them for centuries together.
The youth's gaze, fixed on the invisible goal,... and he saw her: her white annoyed face, the imperious hand pointing... planting himself in front of her, his arms holding off the crowd moiling and tumbling around them, he moved his body from the waist down in a slow lewd ground. She sprang back and he laughed, his mouth and tongue very pink within the black circle of beard and the lesser blackness of his face. The he was gone... she was seized then by a revulsion and rage that was almost sexual in its force. (295)

She feels suffocated and is flung out of the group with her dress almost torn, in an unconscious state. Later she recollects her frantic efforts to save them from the danger of winding themselves in the bay and her hysterical behaviour when she fails to resource and control the masses. Their carelessness, their chilling disregard fills her with impotent rage that leads to a kind of revulsion against them.

The Carnival dance that "re enacts the heroic feats of slave revolts in the past is not just a dead ritual but a live impetus that provides the timeless people the power and the force needed in the present".18 It becomes, as mentioned earlier, "a ceremony that marks the end of winter and also ... the death of the old symbol of power ... the celebration of the death. Simultaneously, it signifies the advent of summer and the new order, the resurrection of life."19 This annual ceremony justifies their daily hardships and gives meaning to their barren lives. It explains their obstinate resistance to the modern age.
It was an awesome sound – the measured tread of those countless feet in the dust and the loud report of the bracelets, a somber counterpoint to the gay carnival celebration. It conjured up in the bright afternoon sunshine dark alien images of legions marching bound together over a vast tract, iron fitted into dank stone walls, chains – like those to an anchor – rattling in the deep holds of ships, and exile in an unknown inhospitable land – an exile bitter and irreversible in which all memory of the former life and of the self as it had once been had been destroyed. (282)

The people of Bournehills re-enact a past that is still curiously present. “We don’t ever forget anything, and yesterday comes like today to us” (102), comments Merle and this comes true on the occasion.

Harriet, who does everything according to her will, tries to control the lives of their people. She exerted her influence on Saul and saw that he was made in charge of the project. She decided to marry him and succeeded in her attempt. She was the person responsible for bringing him to Bournehills although Saul was full of apprehensions about the project. She tries to command the lives of Bournehills people. As Marshall says, “She [Harriet] remains someone who epitomizes her source… all the things out of which … all of the things that made her … she remains white America.”20 When everything is as per her expectations, she is satisfied and feels happy. She even goes to the
extent of saying that she has begun to feel completely cut off from the world. The world hardly seems to exist for her. She even finds herself wondering if there is a city called Philadelphia for her to return to. All her enthusiasm collapses with the Carnival episode. She loses interest in Bournehills as she is certain that she cannot control the black crowd. In frustration, she realizes that the reign of people like her is over and a new generation is emerging. In Gwen's case, when she fails to comprehend why a woman would sell the eggs to someone else rather than feed her own family, she takes it to be another backward streak of the incorrigibles. This brings a drastic change in her. It makes her feel that she has been staying in Bournehills for a long time, even though it is only six months. Feeling so, she longs to go back to Philadelphia. She demands that her own emotional need for security take precedence over those of her husband Saul and over the economic needs of the people of Bournehills. She says, "This place is to blame. Bournehills seems to have a bad effect on everyone and everything" (372). She feels that she can never recover from the experience of these past six months: "A change, inexplicable but profound, had taken place in her, and, as a consequence, in her feelings toward Bournehills since that Tuesday" (350). She is a reincarnation of the widow Shippen, her forebearer, who made the family fortune in the slave trade.

Vere, an inhabitant of Bournehills, leaves for the U.S. in search of a better life. After three years he comes home...
for machines makes him rebuild a battered old car condemned by the white people. He seems to define his goals not in terms of people but in terms of machines. Being a talented young man, he identifies his goals in terms of machines instead of people in the ex-colonies. He takes part in the race. And it is this love for machines that destroys him. Somehow the people of Bournehills develop a distrust of the car but Vere gives a deaf ear to their forebodings. It is clear that Vere would not have been finally destroyed if he had defined his goals in terms of people.

Vere's tragedy is a tragedy of a person who is psychologically conditioned by Western materialism; a person who believes that white culture is superior to black culture. He identifies his goal not in terms of black cultural validity but in terms of white power symbolized by machines and American made Opel cars. It is the capitalistic world that destroys him. He dies out of ignorance, out of self-destructive impulse, "foolishly allowing himself to be taken in by what he had believed was its promise of power, was simply a hapless victim" (367). As Edward Braithwaite observes,

The correlations and identifications between people and their environment and people and their past weave in and out of the book and give it much of its texture. The eyes of the Bournehills workmen "were the same reddish brown as the aged walls of (Dilbert's)shop, the man Dilbert's skin, and the amber rum in the bottles on the shelves." "The coats
of red paint (Vere) had applied (to his ear) had dried, and the car, standing parked and ready on the sloping dirt road... looked as if it had been washed in the blood of the sow that had recently shared the yard with it.” Later Vere and that same red car were to be covered in blood from another kind of sacrifice.21

This tragic incident shatters Merle's spirit and she becomes a symbol of sorrow. Even before she comes back to normal, the rollers of the sugar machinery breakdown and the owners decide to close down the factory. Thus, as Peter Nazareth point out, “Tragically, history has not changed for the people of Bournehills. As in slave times, they must be subservient to the overseer and the owner, who comes once in a way to signify his rule over his diabetic, economic empire.”22 Merle leads the poor of the district in a near-revolt. Cuffee Ned is, in a sense, subsumed into Merle, who is, after all, a rebel too. Unable to bear the bitterness, she accuses Saul as though he were responsible for the troubles of the blacks. She shouts at him to drop all his million-dollar scheme and fix the machinery. The Cane Vale crisis becomes a testing time for everyone. The feeling of helplessness leads Merle into paralyzing anger and she bursts into a massive explosion and publicly rebukes Saul:

You said you came to help, didn't you? That's the reason you're in Bournehills, isn't it? All right, here's your chance. And you don't have to do anything big. We're not asking for any million-
The Bournehills people's story is no different from that of Merle's own life. Their dependency resembles her dependency on the English woman. Just as the poor people cannot do anything about the broken machinery, Merle could do nothing to save her mother. If the absentee lords have abandoned the people of Bournehills to their fate, if they have refused to care for these machines when these people need them most, then Merle's fate and past history has not been any different either. Likewise, her husband, Ketu, abandoned her, and refused to care for her when she needed him badly.

The double tragedy has a terrible effect on her; her reason gives way and a complete darkness seems to close over her mind. In that state she screams at Saul to take her out of the terrible place. The
silence that follows reminds her of the silence she experienced eight years ago when she returned to her flat to find her husband and child gone. This once again calls her memory back to that scene:

"...The baby's gone. Everything in place but both of them gone. Oh, how could he have done that to me? I see it, you hear, I see it. The whole world up in smoke and not a fire to be seen anywhere!" Her eyes were so filled with that apocalyptic vision, her words ... had made it so vivid, that Saul, struck dumb on the steps, could almost see that flameless fire raging between them on the platform. (391)

Recollecting all this, she sinks into "one of her long, frightening, cataleptic states during which she was more dead than alive" (398). Terribly upset over her plight, Saul fights tooth and nail to see that the machinery is fixed. But his attempts fail. Though he cannot repair the machinery, he organizes transport to take the sugarcane from Bournehills to the factory at Brighton. When he pays a visit to Merle, her room seems to his exhausted mind something apart from Merle:

It roused in him feelings about Bournehills itself. He thought he suddenly saw the district for what it was at its deepest level, the vague thoughts and impressions of months coming slowly to focus. Like the room it, too, was perhaps a kind of museum, a place in which had been stored the relics and remains of the era recorded in the faded prints on the walls, where one not only felt that other time
existing intact, still alive, a palpable presence beneath the every day reality, but saw it as well at every turn, often without realizing it. Bournehills, its shabby woebegone hills and spent land, its odd people who at times seemed other than themselves, might have been selected as the repository of the history which reached beyond it to include the hemisphere north and south. (402)

Merle attracts Saul to a serious commitment to Bournehills. He keeps vigil over Merle until she recovers. Saul's association with Merle and his real interest in the people of Bournehills take him very close to them. The two serve as sounding boards for each other, and help each other to overcome their suffering. As Bell Gale Chevigny says, in the novel, "The cultures line up – the WASP loves the Jew who loves the black. Each race turns to the race of more mystery and suffering .... seeking redemption."23 He realizes that the people of Bournehills are hated and ignored and branded as people who refuse to develop, who, in reality are warm-hearted and hard-working people.

In her descriptions of the people of Bournehills, Marshall makes us see that everywhere we look, the people are exploited just as much as they were in slave times. When Lyle Hutson, for instance, explains the plans his government has for development by turning the country into a vacation paradise and offering long tax-holidays to attract foreign industrialists, Merle says,
Is that the only way we can exist? Well, if so, it's no different now than when they were around here selling us for thirty pounds sterling. Not really. Not when you look deep. Consider. The Kinsleys still hold the purse strings and are allowed to do as they damn please, never mind you chaps are supposed to be in charge. And the Little Fella is still bleeding his life out in a cane field. Come up to Bournehills someday and see him on those hills. Things are no different. The chains are still on. (210)

Saul gets caught up in the spirit of the people. He too realizes that these people are in no way responsible for their backwardness. And far from being a people to be ashamed of, they constantly salvage some human dignity out of all their suffering. The interest that he takes in the lives of people reminds them of the past, Bournehills under Cuffee. As Lyle says, "They're saying he might be the first to actually do something with this place" (418). Saul, who believes in applying the results of his research, really wishes to help the poor and backward people. He longs to bring them up out of their backwardness instead of exploiting them for academic reasons like others.

Harriet, who is disgusted with the rude behaviour of the islanders, is the only person who remains untouched by either the double tragedy or the excitement. Saul recounts the incidents but her profound reluctance keeps her aloof. She does not to help the people in anyway. She feels miserable at their indifference to understand her and
undergo change, and concludes that she does not know what they want. The transformation in her makes her indifferent and she longs to go back to Philadelphia. Saul, too, who cannot convince her, urges her to go back but she refuses though he promises her to join her soon.

Lyle Hutson, one of the elites of Bournehills, opens the eyes of Harriet to the affair between Saul and Merle. Hearing this, she feels hurt, gets wild with Saul, and refuses to listen to his explanation. Harriet represents the attitude that characterizes the whole neo-colonial white American establishment which possesses a masked will to buy the whole world in the name of philanthropic and patronizing aid. The need to be philanthropic is bound by her need to exercise absolute power and manipulate people. Harriet’s act to offer money to Merle also reveals an intense sexual jealousy that the white women in the American South often felt for black women. Merle yells hysterically at her proposal:

Get thee gone, Satan, and here's enough money to stay gone... They feel they can buy the world and its wife with a few raw-mouth dollars. But lemme tell you something m'lady..." I can’t be bought. Or bribed. I'm not like some of those thieving politicians we've got in Legco. And I don't accept handouts. Not any more at least. I used to. (441)

Merle's rejection of Harriet is a final renunciation of the West. It is also an act of liberation from the serpentine coils that had held her psyche in
captivity. While Merle emerges, Harriet sinks. The chasm between Harriet and Saul now widens to an unbridgeable length. She flares up at his suggestion that they might have to delay the trip. Though Saul tells her that he is fond of Merle but their’s is “Neither a grand affair of the heart nor a little wild postholiday fling” (427), she decides to have her sway on him.

Harriet, with all her power, makes Saul he head of the project in order to make him move from Bournehills. Harriet’s need to control people’s lives becomes once more manifest. As Barbara Christian says, “As a woman she has been taught to live for and through her husband, so she has little sense of her own nature and her relationship to him as paramount. Yet as a member of the upper class, she not only feels superior to others, she has access to money and power and thus the capacity to destroy.”24 Her possessive love for Saul and power craze have extended beyond Saul to include the suffering people of Bournehills. Saul, who comes to know that it is Harriet who is responsible for his replacement as the head of the Bournehills project and the suspension of the project, begins to hate her more than ever before. The report that he is now in charge of the entire programme – planning and development section at the centre-consoles him in no way. He lashes out at her and even threatens to leave her if his suspicion proves true. Harriet, as she meets a will (Saul) that thwarts her will, suffers a psychic death, which leads to her physical death. Unable to
face failure and rejection, she drowns herself in the Atlantic, and, in the process, joins the blacks she hated when she was alive. She is swallowed up by the very sea that has kept battering out its ceaseless message of exploitation:

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

As Leela Kapai has noted, “Her death seems to be a symbolic end of all that white America stands for and the ever-mourning waves of the ocean perform the ablution of the old sins of the past. Perhaps a new race of active men like Saul and sympathetic ones like Allen will create better understanding between the races.”

Harriet is destroyed the same way those blacks were destroyed during the infernal Middle Passage Voyage. As it was with those bodies
that went down, Harriet's body is likewise never recovered. The Bournehills sea is no more dark and mourning: "... it was like a new sea. The water, a clear, deep-toned blue that absorbed the sunlight to a depth far below its surface ... cleansing was over" (461). History is reversed and Bournehills is free and triumphant.

Through the encounter with Harriet, Merle compels the deconstructive phase and now sets herself to the task of self-healing. She realizes that the future holds a promise of renewal of her ties to Africa, and a healing of the wounds of separation from her husband, Ketu, and her daughter. Ritualistically, she removes her dangling earnings, symbols of externally imposed values and trappings for over a decade. This act of removing the earnings is a gesture of liberation, a reminder to the whole Western world that she would no more be stripped, seduced, and abandoned. After this, she feels "unburdened, restored to herself.... She looked younger, less scarred, with it that way" (463). She tells Saul, "Nearly everything gone, sold, and my ticket bought... I'm not so hopeless after all, am I" (463).

Merle now decides never to allow life to slip off her hands again: "I'll never get around to do anything with what's left of my life until I go and look for my child" (463). She feels an assurance with a hope that her daughter would certainly want to see "what her mother looks like, what kind of person she is, she might even be happy to see me" (465). Merle equally feels optimistic about her husband:
Part of him might have also drowned, part of him died with Harriet. And in a way, this was how he had come to see his death, as a series of small ones taking place over the course of his life and leading finally to the main event, which would be so anticlimatic, so undramatic ... it would go unnoticed. It was the small deaths occurring over an entire lifetime that took the greater toll. (465)

With this positive attitude, she is prepared to confront Ketu and her daughter. Merle's discovery of her self-worth leaves in her strong nerve to make choices and decisions that she has avoided for years.

Merle's determination to go back to Africa reflects Marshall's own belief that shaping a truthful identity, whether it be for oneself or for all black people collectively, requires a psychological and spiritual return back over history. Marshall argues,

The physical return described in the novel is a metaphor for the psychological and spiritual return back over history, which I am convinced Black people in this part of the world must undertake if we are to have a sense of our total experience and to mold for ourselves a more truthful identity. Moreover, I believe this exploration of the past is vital in the work of constructing our future.... an oppressed people cannot overcome their oppressor and take control of their lives until they have a clear and truthful picture of all that has gone before, until they begin to use their history creatively.26
Merle decides not to take “the usual route to Africa first flying north to London via New York and then down” (471):

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 across-continent journey to Kampala. (471)

The reverse route serves to illustrate Marshall’s artistic tracing of the black feminine experience from the New World to Africa. It reveals Merle’s expressed intention to restore the primal innocence that was lost in the encounter with America and the West. It also means Merle’s commitment to pass on to other women the knowledge she has gained during her sojourn in the West. Marshall writes, Merle “had... already made the transition... and her eyes, her mind were fixed on the other scenes, other faces, on all that awaited her” (471). Thus, Merle, whose “name’s just Merle” (72), becomes a Kinbona, a “good kin” for all those who “awaited her” (471) in the black African Diaspora.

According to Paule Marshall, what has gone wrong with the newly-freed countries is that nothing fundamental has changed ever since independence. Although formally slavery has ended, the same exploitative system has continued in operation, ensuring that real slavery continues. Unless change grows from the masses, until there is
an economic revolution which is at the same time a cultural and 
spiritual revolution growing out of the people, there will be no change.

Marshall seems to suggest that the whole system must be 
changed. The obstacles are formidable. Yet a solid front can be built on 
the basis of alliances of the exploited peoples. This is the significance of 
the relationship between Saul Amron, a Jew, and Merle, a black 
woman, which, of course, is to be an alliance, not a merging. Saul 
returns to the US to find out what he can do among his people to fight 
the system while Merle goes to Uganda to search for her black roots.

Thus *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* is not a novel only 
about flawed individuals coming to terms with themselves in a society 
whose perimeters have to be accepted as given. Instead, Merle's and 
Saul's self-acceptance is linked with their recognition of exploitation 
and what must be done to change society in order to end exploitation. 
We find Marshall creating a Third World novel, with its message to all 
the exploited peoples of the world. According to Marshall, nothing can 
be changed for people at the bottom of the heap if nothing is changed 
from the middle to the top. There must be a complete change. And the 
first step towards such a change is that the people must not forget their 
history: "Remember your history man!" Merle says to Lyle Hutson. 
Thus she realizes that "a person has to go back, really back — to have a 
sense, an understanding of all that's gone to make them — before they 
can go forward" (468).
REFERENCES


