Chapter – III

Nostalgia of Homeland
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3.1 Introduction

“Nostos Algos : Nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return”. With its Greek roots Nostos means ‘to return home’ ; Algos means ‘pain’. Nostalgia, thus is a common and recurrent theme that runs through all diasporic writings. Having left their homeland (by choice or by force), the immigrants who form the diaspora, long to return to their homeland. It is the human tendency that invokes the desire to aspire for something that is not there at the present. This tendency of discontentedness at one time, led the people of Africa to move to a place where they could improve their economic status, consequently Africans migrated to America, Europe and other continents, both voluntarily and forcibly.

Displacement from the geographic locales counts for a saga of pain and withdrawal from the new society and the people. Nostalgia for the homeland is often based individual or group memory or desire; the desire to escape to the land of promised freedom and dignity. This is especially true for the Black American Diaspora that was formed due to slave trade in the 18th century. Even after the civil war and abolition of slavery the Blacks who continued to live there faced the problems of racism, marginalization and were not able to integrate into the mainstream of American society. The result was again a feeling of discontent leading to nostalgia. But was more a longing for the past and the concept for the homeland being more utopian than real. These immigrants were mostly the second generation diasporic people whose longing was based on an idea of a time and not real experience.

For the diasporic community the migration from native land to the ‘Newland’ forcibly or voluntarily led to nostalgia for homeland, cultural myths, memories were the mode of
awakening the sense of belongingness “The diasporic communities thought of return to their original homeland because they regarded their ancestral homeland as true home”. (William Safran) But in real sense their return to ancestral homeland hardly became true. In the Newland, the diasporic people had a sense of wonder and adventure rather than the gloom and stillness of the place where they resided earlier. The alien land awakens intense nostalgia of past land and people. As Uma Parmeswaran, a Canadian diasporic writer expresses her views for diasporic people in her diasporic writing.

When one arrives in a new land, one has a sense of wonder and adventures at the sight and feel of a landscape so different from what one has been accustomed to; and intense nostalgia is a buffer to which many retreat. (31)

In this chapter, I will be dealing with the causes and problems of the diasporic people, with regard to Paule Marshall’s novels. My work will be emphasizing on the problematic issues of home.

3.2 The Concept of Home

The concept of ‘home’ amongst diasporic community is an exacerbate issue. No matter where we live the reminiscence of the past, the lost, the love and care and the people frequently makes one nostalgic. The sense of ‘homelessness’ and the unfeasible desire of going back becomes a perpetual issue in the minds of diasporic people. One can never really ‘return’ back but can only ‘reinvent’ the diasporic ‘home’.

In the postcolonial writings, the issue of ‘home’ was a legitimate reason for discontent amongst the dislocated people. As a location of desire, ‘home’ for the diasporic person is his land of birth, the site of childhood and an idealized past which he wants to cling to in order to seize his ethnic identity. The nostalgia of homeland proves to be the outcome of such a
suffering which does not consent the displaced community to return and embrace their old culture. On one hand lay the sweet memories of past and on the other, the experience of loss, suffering and withdrawal in a brutal colonial system. Despite the suffering, hardship and deprivation factors, ‘home’ for the Afro-American, was a place which one could affirm in their minds and hearts – it was a place where one could easily confront the issues of humanization.

Black writers in the America have focused their poems, as well as their fictional and autobiographical text, on rethinking the social, political and economical issues that affected their communities and indeed have often envisioned creative responses and solutions to these issues. African – American and African Caribbean women writers often represent Black struggle in context of the Diaspora. The Black writers through their novels have mentioned the struggle for identity during the period where the Blacks were denied from the rights which the White Americans enjoyed.

3.5 Displacement of the Bajans (Barbadians)

Paule Marshall, the Afro American and Caribbean writer, also a second generation immigrant of America had a great deal of experience from the times, when she was in Brooklyn, Barbados and later in Africa. She had been paying attention to the true facts, stories and to all those good and bitter experiences of the Black slaves who were brought from Africa to America. Since childhood she learnt the characteristics of cultural roots of Barbados from her mother’s Ada’s and her mother’s West Indian friends whom she calls ‘poets of the kitchen’. Her essay ‘From the poets in the kitchen’ is the aesthetic root of the Baijan community. The Barbadian heritage is asserted in her poem, short stories and novels. Eugenia Collier in her novel Black Women Writers says about Marshall’s experience as a child “we see little girl discovering that her New York World is not her only world that her
roots in Barbados – which she is visiting for first time”. Marshall’s novels are most appropriately ‘at home’- within a tradition of Caribbean and Afro – American Literature. Her novels and shorts stories all are published in United States. She is contemporaneous with African American writers like James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ann Petry etc. At the same time her work is distinctly Caribbean in many ways, discussing of the suffered. The description of Baijan women, their words, culture, idioms and myths can be found in Marshall’s writings. She says she has imbibed the cultural folk language from these ‘ordinary women’ who were the kitchen poets. She calls them the ‘foremothers of literary characteristics’ of both Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean. Barbara Christian, considers Marshall as a contemporary black women writer, with the same feministic perspective as Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Sherley Anne Williams, Gloria Naylor. They “… have responded to the stereotypes, both the nineteenth- and twentieth century versions, not so much by creating countertypes as was done in the past but by attempting to create their own definition of woman within the scope of their particular milieu.” (Barbara Christian, 1985a :7)

The peculiar dynamics of a demographic movement from margin to center (or from colony to metropole) that would explain, for example, a wave of “West Indian” immigration to the United States during the years spanning the two World Wars emerges as an implicit historical context for Brown Girl, Brownstones. Mary Helen Washington acknowledges this context when, in her Afterword to the novel, she makes reference to the “small fierce band of Barbadians who migrated to the United States between 1900 and 1940.” In addition, Washington identifies the (post)colonial dimensions’) of the context when she states that these immigrants “came to escape the brutal colonial exploitation of Blacks in the West Indies.” (311)
In addition to signifying in terms of an “exploitation” of indigenous populations within the colonial territories themselves, the intricacies of a complex (post)colonial relation can also account for periodic shifts towards the metropolitan centers that occur, for instance, in response to the demands of a burgeoning wartime economy. It is precisely a demographic shift of this nature that is recalled when the narrative specifies the year 1939--two years before the U.S. entrance into W.W.H--as a temporal marker for the arrival of that “dark sea” of Barbadian immigrants.

In terms of historical event, “The War” impinges on the structure of the novel in the quite literal sense that it is built into the organizational framework of the text--as the title of Book 3, the long central section which, in many ways, constitutes the core of the narrative. The war had become a main thread in the very fabric of the protagonists’ lives, not only in the metaphorical sense that the public, political war paralleled a more private, domestic, familial war for which it serves as a conspicuous symbol and most visible external manifestation, but in an economic and social sense as well in that it formed a part of the material conditions that determined the immigrants’ lives. The economic function that this Caribbean immigrant community served--in terms of meeting the needs of a rapidly growing wartime production, for example--is reflected in the fact that Silla, along with many of her Bajan compatriots, soon finds herself taking “a job in a defense factory,” (78) or as Suggie Skeete refers to it, “one these good war jobs.” (80)

For the immigrants, exiles and other offspring of this colonial history who found themselves living in cities like London and New York, the challenge was often a question of how to reconstitute “home” in a location where one was, in some ways, always already a cultural outsider. The dominant culture, the (post)colonial subject’s already ambiguous position--with respect to both the former colonial and the new metropolitan home--became
even more marked. The commonality of color did not automatically make allies of the Caribbean immigrants and their African American counterparts. A common experience of displacement (imposed, at least partly, on the basis of color) was a more effective link between the two groups but it was also a link that had to be deliberately constructed, precisely because different experiences of (colonial) oppression had in analogous.

The transplanted Bajans in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* exemplify the condition of ambiguous displacement that, in many ways, defines the immigrant subject’s position within the dominant culture. With one foot still planted, at least psychologically, back in Barbados and the other not quite fully established in the U.S., these Barbadian immigrants oscillate between the two locations, often finding themselves in a kind of psychic as well as cultural limbo. Marshall’s narrative explores some of the contradictions inherent in this in-between condition as well as various strategies that have been developed as a response to it.

The Bajans in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* no longer live in Barbados, but as an emotional, spiritual, and cultural “home,” the island nevertheless continues to exert a powerful influence on their lives. The Bajans are still irrevocably tied to “home” in the sense that their memories of “Bimshire”—whether good, bad, or ambivalent—often prove to be decisive in terms of influencing which attitudes, aspirations, and abilities the immigrant subject can or will bring to the new cultural situation.

Although Deighton and Silla Boyce both seem to have particularly strong sentiments concerning Bimshire, their memories of “home” appear diametrically opposed. In addition to reflecting the contrast between the attitudes and strategies that Silla develops and those that are characteristic of Deighton, the juxtaposition of these two differing visions of Barbados within the narrative suggests the necessary ambivalence of the Bajan community as a whole towards their former colonial “home.” Deighton’s vision of Bimshire reflects a nostalgia’
that expresses the immigrant subject’s longing for “home.” For Deighton, Bimshire is associated with. ‘A happy boyhood, simple and spontaneous pleasures, sensuality and enjoyment’.

The memories of Bimshire that he shares with Selina evoke a carefree youth spent playing games like cricket--or at least a version of it involving a “stick and a lime and a big stone’--and also “cork-sticking” and “lick-cork.” (10) When Selina asks him what “home” is like, he replies, “What I must say, nuh? Barbados is poor-poor but sweet enough.” (11)

Deighton’s tendency to idealize the past and to romanticize “home” is most clearly revealed in the dream of “return” that he shares with Selina. He tells her that he plans to go back to Barbados soon I catch my hand here.” (11) His house in the U.S. is, of course, only temporary; he intends to leave as soon as he has made enough money so that he can return in style. (12) The dream house that Deighton describes represents his image of an ideal existence--a life characterized by extravagant luxury, perfect ease, and abundant sensuality. The house will be built “out of good Bajan coral stone,” including a “parlor with ‘nough furnitures,” and “bedrooms with their own bathroom--and every bathroom with a stained-glass window like a church.” (86) The yard around the house will be planted with a “flamboyant tree” whose blossoms are “blood red” and “lathes-of-the-night” which smell only at night. (85)

In contrast to the Deighton’s idealizations, of “home,” Silla’s memories of Bimshire recall a life of demoralizing poverty and deprivation. The images of “home” that she retains hark back, like Deighton’s memories, to her childhood, but the picture that Silla paints for Selina is hardly one of leisure or ease:

A set of little children picking grass in a cane field from the time God sun rise in his heaven till it set. With some woman called a Driver to wash yuh tail in
licks if yuh dare look up, Yes, working harder than a man at the age often...”

Her eyes narrowed as she traveled back to that time arid was that child again, feeling the sun on her back and the whip cutting her legs. (45)

Instead of a “home” that she longs for, Bimshire represents a purgatory that Silla could not wait to escape: “No, I wun let my mother know peace till she borrow the money and send me here.” (48)

If Deighton’s memories reflect his sensual and romantic temperament, Silla’s memories reflect the causes of her tenacious anti ambitious sense of determination. Her vision of Bimshire as a colonial hell serves as the driving force behind Silas unrelenting work ethic and her single-minded pursuit of economic security—which in this case takes the form of an old but much coveted Brooklyn brownstone. Listening to Silla’s account of her childhood, Selina has a fleeting impression of the two images superimposed:

The image of her father swaggering through the town as a boy and bounding on the waves in some rough game slanted across that of the small girl hurrying from the dawn ghosts with the basket on her head. It seemed to Selina that her father carried those gay days in his irresponsible smile, while the mother’s formidable aspect was the culmination of all that she had suffered.” (46)

The disparity between the two visions of “home” implies, at least to some degree, the difference of a particular gendered experience. The male- centered bias of Deighton’s vision is obvious: the games that figure so prominently-in his reminiscences are clearly games that boys would generally play. Likewise, Silla’s recollections reflect an implicitly female experience. Few males, if any, would ever find themselves--as Silla often did--selling mangoes from a basket carried atop their heads. The contrast between these two gendered experiences certainly suggests that male privilege was also the norm in Barbadian society.
The implication is that if there was any freedom or leisure to be had, it would more than likely be the prerogative of a male rather than female child.

“‘You don does dance! You must think I forget how you used to be wucking up yourself every Sat’day night when the Brumlee Band played on the pasture. You must think I forget how I see you dance once till you fall out for dead right there on the grass.’ (144)

If the Bajan immigrants in *Brown Girl. Brownstones* remain tied in an inherently ambivalent relationship to the former colonial “home,” they also find themselves marginalized, in various ways, within the North American society to which they have migrated. The Bajans are still, in some senses, located at the wrong end of an oppressive (post)colonial arrangement, but the conditions of the oppression do differ somewhat. The “agents” of the colonial system are American in this case rather than British; the setting for the immigrant’s economic “exploitation” is an urban, culturally heterogeneous, mechanized environment rather than a rural agricultural one.

Whether as maids or factory workers, it is obvious that the Bajan immigrants are, for the most part, confined to marginal positions within the economic system. The relentless pursuit of middle-class status that consumes many of these Bajans is, in many ways, symptomatic of their desperation to overcome this marginal condition. But, despite any economic advantage that the Bajans might be able to secure--for example, through the relatively low-prestige, low-status, labor-intensive means traditionally available to immigrant entrepreneurs, i.e. shop keeping or renting rooms--they will always be marked, to some extent, as outsiders.

Because “race” constitutes a chief pretext (if not the chief pretext) and mechanism through which oppression is installed within the U.S. “colonial” system, the marginal
location that the immigrant subject occupies often coincides with the marginal position of the African American subject. But because the difference that the Bajan community signals is also a cultural difference--marking an identity apart from African Americans and other “West Indians” as well as from the whites-- an automatic alliance or identification with the African American community cannot be assumed. In fact, the possibility of such an alliance becomes a subject of bitter contention for the Bajan community. This possibility represents a position that Selina deliberately moves toward and that the novel as a whole attempts to consciously (re)construct.

Marginalized by a racial difference that depends on the color of their skin and a cultural difference that signifies in terms of the foods they eat, the customs and rituals they practice, and especially the way they talk, the Bajans in Brown Girl, Brownstones experience what is, in effect, a double displacement. Suspended between Barbados, on one hand, and U.S. society one the other, these Bajans find themselves experiencing the peculiar “placeless” or “homeless” condition that frequently typifies the immigrant subject’s experience.

The Bajan characters in Brown Girl, Brownstones exemplify a range of possible responses and strategies that the immigrant subject can adopt in order to cope with this double displacement or cultural “homelessness,” If Deightons dream of “return” represents one extreme of that range, Silla’s single-minded obsession with “buying house” embodies another. These positions also mirror pervasive attitudes that exist at large in the immigrant community. And finally, Selina’s strategy--and the inclusive vision of community on which it depends--represents the potential for another kind of response altogether, the possibility for “another consciousness” and another vision of “home.”

Deighton’s dream of a grand return epitomizes his tendency to idealize and romanticize experience. Deighton’s talent for dreaming is perhaps what Selina most admires
about her father, but Deighton’s romantic temperament also masks a deep insecurity that can account for his unwillingness or inability to confront the harsh realities of his immigrant (dis)placement. Deighton’s self doubt--according to Silla, he is a man who is “always looking for something big and praying hard not to find it”--is linked in the narrative to several pivotal experiences. In addition to the traumatic and humiliating confrontation between Deighton and the English, these include the feelings of guilt and remorse that can be traced to Deighton’s mistreatment of his mother and to Silla’s allegation that he caused the death of their son.

If Deighton’s hopes for a return to Bimshire are destroyed in the confrontation with Silla, they are resurrected--in an ironic and ultimately tragic way--by his deportation which brings him almost, but not quite, to the shores of his beloved Barbados. But a return to Bimshire--even an ignominious one--remains out of reach for Deighton: a cable informs Silla and her daughters that “Deighton Boyce had either jumped or fallen overboard and drowned at a point within sight of the Barbados coast.” (95) Deighton’s fate certainly suggests that for the immigrant subject, “return” represents an untenable and even impossible strategy.

Deighton’s and Suggie’s nostalgia for “home” and their longing for an ideal Barbadian past puts them at odds with the rigid work ethic and profit-centered values that seem to define the metropolitan society, Silla’s obsession with owning the Brooklyn brownstone reflects her attempt to embrace certain values that seem to be particularly emblematic of the metropolitan culture. More specifically, Silla attempts to emulate the capitalist principles that undergird U.S. society. Her determination to ‘buy house’ emphasizes a strategy of economic advancement. According to Mary Helen Washington, Silla’s “carefully conceived plan” consists of the following formula: “work night and day to buy house; rent out every room, overcharge if’ necessary; sacrifice every penny to maintain property.” (14)
In this case, Selina’s motives have nothing to do with the petty hatred, resentment, bitterness, and even jealousy that fueled her earlier confrontation with the “Young Associates.” Her refusal of the scholarship—and the rejection of the Association’s principles that it implies—is not a repudiation of her natal community quite the contrary, it signals a newfound respect for that community and its struggles. Nevertheless, Selina decides to venture out on her own—a symbolic gesture that reflects her determination to find other potential responses and strategies.

The vision of “home” that Selina (and the novel as a whole)’ tries to imagine includes but also goes beyond the Bajan community. Selina’s vision encompasses Miss Thompson as well as Silla and the earlier generation of Bajan immigrants, African American as well as Caribbean subjects, all the “whores” and “flashy men” she encounters on Fulton Street. This more inclusive vision is, in some ways, the same one that is evoked by Claremont Sealy, another Bajan who suggests—against popular opinion—that the Association should change its name from “Barbadian” to “Negro.”

However, Selina owes her hard-won insights to another pivotal experience—that is, her traumatic encounter with the white racist Mrs. Benton. This experience—and the series of events that it culminates—is crucial to the narrative in other ways as well. The encounter with Mrs. Benton demonstrates how Selina is constructed as a “racial” subject in the (white) hegemonic culture of the U.S. The dramatization of this event in the narrative reflects certain ideological tensions—concerning the efficacy of an assimilationist strategy, for example—that condition and are inscribed within the novel. Furthermore, this strategic construction of Selina as an African American as well as Caribbean subject constitutes a narrative feature that discursively (re)positions Marshall in terms of an African American literary tradition.
3.4 ‘Home’ for the Diasporic People

In her narrative writings, she lays emphasis on the issues of the ‘home’. Marshall consents the protagonist to speak about past memories and the cultural and ancestral home. Her protagonists go ahead on a journey in search of their imagined home Africa. The tendency of the diasporic community is to ‘reconnect’ themselves between the Newland and the Past One. The reconnection is possible only when their journey is setup. Selina, from Brown Gril, Brown Stones and Avey in Praisesong set it up. Their journey begins from a Middle passage of the Newland to their cultural past Africa. The diasporic community was on its way to the native land because they had been displaced geographically, due to various reasons. The original displacement had occurred when the blacks were transplanted as slaves from Africa and to America (and catered for the productions in cotton fields and factories). The Blacks were subjected to severe brutality, dehumanization, denigration and colonial exploitation. Although they had undergone the pain and sorrow, but they never broke their emotional ties with their motherland Africa. The separation from motherland without losing emotional ties and at the same time maintaining their own identity is identical to Kresteria’s thought of ‘abjection’ (Julia Kristeva) “Whereby the child must move away from the mother in order to enter into the world of language, culture, meaning and the social. This realm of language is called symbolic. Therefore the subject rather than arriving at fixed identity is permanently “in process”. (Julia Kristeva, feminist, psychiatrist) (18)

Marshall deals with problems at home and identity which are the traits of postcolonial writings. Her novel Praisesong deals with the problems of home and the quests of identity. The novel projects the cultural continuity of the people of the African descent. Marshall in her novel had focused on the consciousness of Black people and their spiritual integrity.
In *Praisesong* the honest confrontation with past brings the protagonist Avey Johnson to the land of her past, claiming her heritage. *Praisesong* is setup in the United States and the Caribbean and is dedicated to Da-duh, Marshall’s grandmother. Avey’s dreams make her journey ritualistic. Marshall establishes a bridge connecting Avey’s experiences of the past and the present; which include both the good and the bad experiences.

In the novel Avey tried to demolish her Black personality by embracing the White culture. To overcome the grief of her husband’s death, she goes on a tour. When she was on a Caribbean cruise with her daughter and friend, she confronts with a sudden uneasiness in her body; and heart is captured by a mystic and unrealistic dream. She is unable to balance her mind and body together:

“…Her mind in a way wasn’t even in her body, or for that matter, in the room. From the moment she had awakened in a panic less than an hour ago and come to the reckless decision, her mind had left to go and stand down at the embarkation door near the waterline five decks below.” *(Page 10)*

Due to both the mental and the physical pain, Avey has a contrasting thought whether to look forward or yearn backwards. No matter where we live, be it on any corner of the world, it is human tendency to look back. Even if it was an odd or an even experience, one is reminded of his lost moments and the people. This creates a crippled and dislocated mind of oneself and paralyzing him on the centre of two situations. He finds it difficult to choose between his two states of mind. Accordingly, Marshall makes us feel those traumatic conditions of Avey and those horrible and mystifying dreams that had captured her mind. Marshall has interlinked the dreams and memories, giving a way to the subconscious thoughts that kept haunting Avey for reconnection with home land.
It is her dream in which Aunt Cuney, asks her to come back to Tatem, South Carolina- where Avey had spent her childhood. After this dream, Avey is not in her senses, she becomes mentally dislocated which is portrayed in the part of the story where she sweats even though air-conditioner in her background is in a working condition.

Marshall has depicted a terrifying situation through this dream, in order to make Avey realize the loss that until now she wasn’t aware of.

“…She always sounded as if she were wrestling with someone as large as herself on the narrow bed whenever she turned. There quickly followed a sound from the other bed, like the knocking in a radiator as the steam rises…” (Page 12)

“Her tall figure bent almost in two” (9). Avey is stranded between two cultures, language and place. At this juncture the reader hopes that the nostalgia of homeland is hidden in her subconscious mind and it bursts out. Avey is unnaturally disturbed and she stumbles in the darkness.

Wasn’t she in some way to blame? Her dullness, her rampant flesh, her blackness… …Now what kinda sense do that make, will you tell me? She must be out of her mind…Wait, that’s it! She’s done gone and lost her mind…!”

(Page 24)

Here we feel justified by Marshall’s suggestion of making reverse journey for Avey.

Praisesong is a quadrisected book; the first part ‘Rungate’ reminds Avey about her ancestral land and the values which she has forgotten; the second part is the ‘sleeper’s wake’ which updates the reader that Avey is culturally away from her ancestors. It is her Aunt Cuney who play the vital role in making Avey aware of her culture.
In ‘Sleeper’s wake’ the word ‘wake’ symbolizes the contrast situation of the death of American values and the awakening of the African heritage. Avey, who used to claim to the materialistic American values now asserts to the Afro-centric life. This part of the book also comprises of the powerful Negro movements- the Negro Negritude and the Harlem Renaissance. During this period great historical movements took place, the writers were highly motivated by such changes. The third part of the novel, the “Lave Tete” reflects the bitter sixties of the American history and the decline in the colonialism in African countries. The last part of novel, ‘The Beg Pardon’ is about Avey’s completion and rejuvenation.

Dr. Hariharn in *Voices of Black Feminism* comments that Marshall uses flashback technique and stream of consciousness to give readers a constant flow of the story.

The younger generation immigrants i.e. the second generation immigrants are able to locate themselves as black diasporic people, demonstrating that they have a longingness for the unbelonging. They want to go to Africa for attaining spiritual wholeness so that they familiarize to their rituals. Black woman’s journey is to explore her Inner Self. The feminist critics view that the Black women’s life is a journey that deals with a social, political and psychological problems that are related to her. Hence Marshall finds true what McDowell and Tate found. Marshall writes:

“I’m trying to trace history…to take, for example, the infamous triangular route of slavery and to reverse it so that we make the journey back from America to the West Indies, to Africa… to make that trip back. I’m not talking about a psychological and spiritual journey back in order to more forward” *(De Veaux 1979:128; In celebration of our essence to “An interview with PM”)*
3.5 Conclusion

In the fall of 1986 a brief but telling exchange between Paule Marshall and Maryse Conde appeared in SAGE.2 The dialogue between the two women writers was translated by John Williams from an interview that was originally published in the September 1984 issue of Politique Africaine--an issue specifically devoted to “Images of the Black Diaspora” (Images de la diaspora noire).3 Entitled ‘Return of a Native Daughter’ (“L’enfant est de retour” in the French version), the exchange is deeply revealing and suggestive in a number of ways.

The questions that Marshall addresses during the interview focus specifically on the symbolic role that Africa plays in her narratives. In her responses, Marshall invokes certain notions--having to do with African ancestry/heritage and the need for a diasporic “return,” for example--that are clearly central to her narrative project. In addition, the exchange foregrounds certain crucial assumptions about “borne” and “homeland” that undergird all of Marshall’s novels, and especially Praisesong for the Widow. However, what is perhaps most illuminating about the dialogue is Conde’s subtle provocative line of questioning and the potentially fruitful directions that she suggests for a more rigorous problematization of those (diasporic) assumptions. In a more general sense, Conde’s approach provides both a summation and a model for the critical readings that I have enacted in the preceding chapters.

The exchange between Marshall and Conde raises certain questions about what it means to claim an African ancestry/heritage, for example. What emerges from the dialogue--and especially from a problematization of Marshall’s responses--are the complex and sometimes even contradictory combination of affiliations/alliances that are signalled when an African American or Afro-Caribbean subject makes such a claim. It also becomes apparent that the lines of descent, affiliation, and alliance that are implied in a diasporic claim may not
be as clear-cut or unambiguous as they may seem. Since the aim of such diasporic claims are more often than not the affirmation of a specific racial identity, a problematization of these claims can only serve to reveal the constructed nature of all identity formations, including Afrocentric ones.

The strategic questions that Conde poses during the interview are particularly suggestive in terms of complicating the diasporic assumptions that Marshall invokes. For example, Conde initiates the dialogue with the following opening remarks:

The spiritual return of Black women in the U.S. and in the Black diaspora to Africa is a recurring theme in your work. Have you ever been to Africa? Do you have a concrete image of Africa or does it exist as more of a spiritual homeland?

Even as she acknowledges the substantial narrative investment that Marshall has made in notions of “return” and of a diasporic “homeland,” Conde also challenges such notions by implying that representations of the African “homeland” do not necessarily reflect the “concrete” realities of a contemporary Africa. Conde’s question also suggests that representations of a diasporic return may or may not reflect actual possibilities that exist in the “real” world.

Of course, Conde’s question is clearly a loaded one, especially since it presents Marshall with the restrictive choice of an either-or option (concrete image or spiritual homeland). However, Marshall manages, in a sense, to elude this rhetorical trap by responding with a equally bifurcated and deliberately ambiguous answer. She states: “Africa is - simultaneously both at the same time--a concrete destination and a - spiritual homeland.”
Marshall proceeds to cite her various trips to the continent in an attempt to prove that her experience of Africa is indeed “concrete” and not just a dream:

Yes, I was in Africa in 1977 for the Festac Black Arts Festival in Nigeria. This was the first time I had ever been to Africa, and, also was the first time I had ever encountered Black a writers from Africa and the Black diaspora.

Nevertheless, as Marshall continues it becomes increasingly clear that it is the notion of Africa as a diasporic “homeland” that is being emphasized in her description:

What was extraordinary for me was the way Africans adopted me. The Yorubas thought that I was a Yoruba, the Ibos thought that I was an Ibo, and the Ghanians thought that I was from Ghana. In 1980, I also traveled to Kenya and Uganda in East Africa, and there, as in West Africa, I was a adopted as a native daughter. There is an expression of Yoruba or Ibo origin ”Omowale” which roughly translates to mean “a native daughter has returned.” This expression summarizes the experience of my physical return to Africa.

In a sense, the “concrete” experience of Marshall’s African travels only serves to confirm her assumptions about the diasporic “homeland.” In her response, Marshall refuses to recognize the distinction that Conde poses between the symbolic image of the African ‘homeland,” on one hand, and the concrete realities of a contemporary Africa on the other. In fact, one could even say that Marshall’s description conflates the two.

The diasporic assumptions that Marshall rehearses in her account are the same ones that are so centrally inscribed within her narratives. In addition, these assumptions form the basis for an (Afrocentric) ideological position that Marshall clearly wants to defend. The point that I wish to make is that in the attempt to consolidate and reinforce a diasporic
identity, Marshall also deemphasizes certain complexities that would render the notion of a
diasporic “homecoming” a somewhat more problematic one.

To begin with, Marshall’s claim—that she felt equally “at home” with tribes as diverse
as the Ibo and the Yoruba, and in nations as distinct from one another as Ghana, Kenya, and
Uganda, and that they all “adopted” her as a “native” daughter—deemphasizes the many
(regional, political, tribal, and cultural) differences within Africa in favor of a more
homogenous view of the continent as a somewhat unified entity. In addition, her description
of a diasporic “return” glosses the difficult and complex problematics involved in any so-
called recuperation of African ancestry/heritage. Certainly, the gulf that separates any
contemporary daughter or son of the diaspora from her or his African counterpart includes the
space of four hundred and some odd years of history, the geography of an ocean and at least
two continents, the blood of Amerindians, Europeans, and Asians, not to mention the
contemporary politics of a first, second, and third world.

Although Marshall refuses to acknowledge Conde’s distinction between the symbolic
Africa (“spiritual homeland”) and the actual Africa (“concrete image”), it is clear that the
image that she invokes is largely a symbolic one. I have already discussed how African
ancestry—as Marshall construes it during the interview—is conflated with Marcus Garvey’s
back-to-Africa rhetoric and, perhaps more precisely, the “talk” of the Barbadian women who
first exposed Marshall to Garvey and his particular brand of black nationalist ideology. In
fact, Marshall provides a perfect example of how this symbolic Africa functions in her
narratives:

Now, even though it would be difficult to class it, my novels as “African” per
se, I do attempt to constantly make references to Africa through the usage of
images and metaphors. In The Chosen Place, The Timeless People (1969), for
example, in a small village on a mythic Caribbean island, I describe a shopkeeper as a tribal African chief seated behind a counter as he makes libations to the gods. Many of the characters in the book are depicted as though they were wearing masks from Benin. This is how I express my attachment to Africa.

However, Conde subsequently poses a question that clearly attempts to problematize that symbolic gesture. She asks: “Do you find any contradiction in the desire for a spiritual affirmation of that which is - “African” by Black women and the simultaneous desire for an affirmation of that which is “American?” What Conde seems to be pressing for here is a more precise sense of what Marshall means when she invokes notions of Africa and of a diasporic “return.” The adamancy of Marshall’s response can be taken as a measure of the high ideological stakes that she has invested in these diasporic assumptions:

A spiritual return to Africa is absolutely necessary for the reintegration of that which was lost in our collective historical past and the many national pasts which comprise it. The role which Africa plays in determining our historical identity has been systematically de-emphasized. Without the presence of Africa in our lives, we would not be able to feel a sense of unity while at the same time existing as Black people with avatars in Africa, the U.S., The French-Caribbean, and the Hispanic-Caribbean.

The Africa that Marshall invokes in her response does not necessarily reflect the “concrete image” that Conde referred to in her opening remarks. Nor does it necessarily reflect the “burning economic, social, and political problems confronting Africa” that Conde mentions later in the interview. In terms of Marshall’s response, Africa signifies as a symbolic site that embodies both a diasporic loss and a diasporic desire. More specifically, Africa represents
that which the African American / Caribbean subject has been separated from or dispossessed of as a consequence of various displacements. Conversely, Africa also represents that which the African American/Caribbean subject must recover or recuperate in order to reclaim a previously fragmented identity.

Despite Marshall’s categorical insistence on the necessity for a diasporic “return,” Conde continues to press her on this issue. In a sense, she forces Marshall to foreground her ideological position by asking if the “preoccupation with a spiritual return to Africa [is] something [Marshall] shares with other Afro-American writers?” Marshall’s response is, again, very revealing:

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, and 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 at all of this 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.

What Marshall admits is that the diasporic assumptions she espouses and inscribes within her narratives are by no means universally held. Marshall’s response also makes it clear that notions of African ancestry, for example, often have more to do with the ideological project of constructing a pan-diasporic Afrocentric identity than with the implications of a genealogical (dis)connection. In addition, Marshall’s comment about ‘reinventing’ the black
image reveals what usually remains hidden in the totalizing constructs of an Afrocentric position-- namely that one can never really “return’ to but only “reinvent” the diasporic “home.”
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