Paule Marshall in her works, and in talks has given about the craft of novel writing, she emphasized her need to create distinct human beings who are affected by culture and society, and who also affect these two important elements. Perhaps her keen insights into the interrelationship between character and culture stems from her own background. As a first-generation American of West Indian descent, she dramatically experienced the merging of, some times, the conflict, of two distinct cultures within the same psyche. That experience is valid not only in itself but also in the subtle shades of light it casts upon the unique drama of Afro-Americans. The Afro–American experience, as W.E.B. Du Bois so elegantly stated, is just that – the interface of two cultures within the same collective body, whether or not each individual within the body consciously knows it.

This concern, the need some how to separate, analyze and then bring together these varying influences, is one of the Marshall’s concentrated thrusts. Coupled with her discussion of this dilemma, particularly in her novels, is her sculpting of woman characters who at first glance might seen to be the stereotypical counters of the black woman. Under her careful, tender yet incisive hands these outlines are transformed into distinct woman. She shows us that if we glance too quickly, we
might see only the outline of the domineering mother, the black prostitute, the martyred mother. But if we follow closely the contours of these forms, we will see how we have not perceived their essences as they move within the space of their culture.

In the novel Praise song for the widow (1983) Marshall uses a woman character to depict the struggles of African Americans against racial oppression. Avey Johnson, the lead role in Praise song for the widow, portrays the liberating experience of going back to one's roots. Marshall spends a great deal of time describing Avey's body as the site for radical transformation, not only of the self but of the community as well. Marshall’s Praise song for the Widow contain literary and rhetorical techniques that depict African American families and communities as sites where power is distributed throughout members regardless of age and gender. Readers will see that the African Diaspora, the dispersion of African people from their respective homelands created by slave trading, and its legacies has influenced contemporary African American family ideologies and their configurations; that as an institution the family is malleable and not fixed. Characters in Praise song for the Widow are profoundly influenced by cultural, historical, and situational ideologies, customs, and beliefs. Marshall divides her characters into two specific groups: those who believe they are a cumulative result of their cultural
and ethnic legacies and continually pay homage to their past, and those who deny their connection to a cultural history, feeling that they broker their own destinies. Marshall tells her praise song in a loosely reverse order punctuated with flashbacks and instances of magic realism, permitting Avey to speak to the dead, re-experience the Middle Passage, and find herself in a parallel world that is at once reassuring in familiarity as it is disconcerting in strangeness as she attempts to find her extended identity. The novel opens with recently widowed Avey on board another cruise she enjoys with her two closest friends. Her three children, Sis, Annawilda, and Marion are adults with families and careers; her leave request with the Division of Motor Vehicles secure, she locks up her house in White Plains, New York, and heads out for this annual cruise with two friends. Through the use of ancillary characters Marshall exemplifies Avey’s lethargy and lack of enthusiasm with her current life. Her traveling companions, Clarice, is a coworker Avey used to enjoy but who now annoys her with “dullness, her rampant flesh, her blackness …” (Marshall 1983:24), and Thomason is a light-skinned woman Avey used to consider a close friend but whose boastfulness and racist anthem, “That’s why if I’ve said it once I’ve said it a thousand times: it… don’t… pay …to …go …no …place …with …niggers! They’ll mess up ever’ time!” angers Avey (Ibidem: 27). Marshall uses Clarice’s
submissiveness and shame and Thomasina’s overt prejudice to symbolize the opposite ends of a spectrum of emotions African American women are familiar with, and these two anger Avey because they not only remind her of the disparate realities she is constantly pressured into choosing but, more importantly, make her aware that she has no feelings or emotions about herself or her life. While on the cruise Avey experiences strange physical feelings of being bloated though she eats very little, and a dream about her Aunt Cuney, someone she has scarcely thought about in years but was quite close to in her youth. In a strange and desperate act to be rid of the discombobulating dream and the thoughts of Cuney, she abruptly departs the cruise in mid passage and begins a convoluted journey back to her home. Through a series of frustrating travel snafus she finds she must stay the night on the island of Grenada while waiting a connecting flight to New York, during which time her husband Jerome, nee Jay, several years dead from presumably working too hard chasing the spoils of money makes a posthumous visit to Avey in the first chapter of the section entitled “Sleepers Wake.” Through the visit and subsequent flashbacks, Marshall permits Avey to piece together her life as a young wife and mother in Harlem to so that we may understand why she has become so lost and culturally disenfranchised. After the long memory-dream, when she rises in the
morning in the extravagant hotel where she has spent the night, Avey takes a long, dream-like walk along the ocean, missing the opportunity to catch the plane home and finding, again seemingly by chance, an old man who will act as her guide for the remainder of the story. She is fainting from heat when she sees Lebert Joseph's small rum shop, stumbles in, and is offered a drink. Eventually she tells him of her dream, and he convinces her to go with him to the celebration on Carriacou. Inexplicably, she agrees. After clarifying Avey’s malaise to underscore the urgency of the remaining action of the novel, that of undertaking a spiritual journey to reunite Avey with those aspects of her African American heritage she once celebrated, Marshall culminates the widow’s journey with the introduction of new people and beliefs that have and will continue shaping her life. The final stage of Avey's spiritual healing includes an embarrassing but transformative purging of her body's waste, a laying on of hands by Lebert's daughter, and finally participation in the "Beg Pardon." This celebration consists of different dances, first the Beg Pardon, the ancestors' yearly tribute to the Old People, then the "nation" dances, different for each of the groups descended from original Africans, and finally a closing group dance. Surprised again, Avey notes the numerous similarities between what's going on here and what happened in her own experience in Tatem,
where she grew up: the method of dancing with the soles of her feet always on the ground, the power of music to bring joy and to heal, the Patois, even a washtub - the last third of the book is really a series of recognitions despite all the apparent cultural differences between her assimilated, past-denying life and this celebratory ritual of connection and memory. After reverse journeying through cultures, the end finds Avey reuniting with her familial heritage, symbolized by taking back her full name, Avatara, and the widow’s promise to perpetuate the lessons she learns to her children, grandchildren, and any interested in honoring a rich African-island-American lineage. The novel's opening chapters Avey Johnson has become so detached from her own heritage that she does not consciously recognize that it has been lost. She is alerted to what is missing in her life in two ways: by her subconscious, through the bodily symbols in a dream; and by her physical reaction to her situation, her body's illness. These two developments precipitate Avey's hurried departure from the cruise ship on which she is traveling, but instead of returning to her home in New York as she anticipated, events conspire to take her on a journey of grieving and discovery. The actual excursion upon which Avey is embarked while her metamorphosis occurs, recalls other culturally significant journeys, which Avey must remember in order to restore her physical and emotional health. At significant
moments during the Caribbean cruise she is taking, and the subsequent journeys she makes to escape it, Avey recollects childhood trips up the Hudson with people from her neighborhood, trips to her family's old home in South Carolina, a legendary journey of Ibo slaves' return to Africa, and the original journey of the slave passage. In all of these journeys the body is of crucial significance. The text conveys the message that there can never be a return to wholeness that erases knowledge of the divisions encountered along the way. The incongruities in the novel, whether presenting Diaspora identity in terms of a mind-body dichotomy or in terms of a state of embodied knowledge, signify that, for a descendent of the African Diaspora, reconciliation with a culturally specific self will forever contain its own contradictions.

In the dream that signals Avey's first steps toward acknowledging her Diaspora heritage, she receives a visit from her great-aunt Cuney, the woman responsible for her naming, and a significant and nurturing figure during Avey's young life. Avey's great-aunt was instrumental in her naming because Cuney's grandmother had come to her in a dream, announcing that the unborn child would be a girl sent by the ancestors. Cuney insisted that the child should be given the grandmother's name: Avatara. As an adult, Avey scorns the name Cuney had given her and also many of the stories she had taught her. It is this rejection that
ultimately causes Avey so much pain, and which the dream enacts. Avey had heard the stories from her aunt when, as a child, she spent a month each summer at Cuney's home in Tatem, one of the South Carolina tidewater islands. Her Great Aunt takes Avey down to the Ibo Landing about twice a week and ceremonially tells her version of the tale as told to her by her grandmother. Cuney always begins, “It was here that they brought 'em. They taken 'em out of the boats right here where we's standing” (Ibidem: 37). In Marshall’s revision of the story, when the Ibos land, they size up their captors, look far into the future and see all about slavery, and the Reconstruction: “those pure-born Africans were peoples my gran said could see in more ways than one” (Ibidem: 37) This omniscient glance tells them all they need to know and they simply turn and march across the water back to Africa: “And they weren’t taking they time no more. They had seen what they had seen and those Ibos was stepping!” (Ibidem: 38). Despite all the iron and chains around their necks and wrists, they don't sink, and they successfully walk on water back to Africa. This is reminiscent of Esteban Montejo's similar story: “There are those who say the Negroes threw themselves into rivers. This is untrue. The truth is they fastened a chain to their waists which was full of magic” (Montejo 1968:44). The chains of slavery transform into the chains of empowerment. Cuney continues,
“But chains didn't stop those Ibos none. Neither iron. The way my gran' tol' it (other folks in Tatem said it wasn't so and that she was crazy but she never paid 'em no mind) 'cording to her they just kept on walking like the water was solid ground. Left the white folks standin' back here with there mouth hung open and they taken off down the river on foot. Stepping.... Those Ibos! Just upped and walked on away not two minutes after getting here!” (Marshall 1983; 39)

Cuney's parenthetical comments bring up the issue of believability and veracity which is such a common aspect of the Flying African legend. Because flying and walking on water are not recognized as humanly possible in a western scientific framework, assertions of their occurrence are met with disbelief. So the teller must affirm the veracity by eyewitness avowals and other strong convictions, or else, like Cuney's grandmother, pay no attention to the naysayer. Marshall pushes the point of what we believe and why, even further when she has a ten-year-old Avey ask, “But how come they didn't drown, Aunt Cuney?” (Ibidem: 39) Cuney responds with a "quietly dangerous note" in her voice: “Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday school book your momma always sends with you? (Ibidem: 40) Marshall
here implicitly posits the story of Ibo Landing as a spiritually empowering legend for African descended people, which in some ways can serve as a companion discourse to the canonical stories of Christianity. She also acknowledges the risk in the telling: those who would pass the tale on may also have to face community censure or scorn. Thus the very act of telling itself can be seen as heroic.

Accepting the stories as a child, Avey becomes skeptical as she grows older. As an adult Avey persists in ignoring the story of the Ibos' rebellion and remains unable to accept the literal translation, or to attach meaning to the story. In this way she is unable to draw emotional support from an account of black resistance to white domination. So in the dream, Cuney appears as someone from whom Avey wishes to escape. Her aunt invites her to go back and acknowledge this story of African cultural dislocation. She pleads with her to repeat once more the rituals of recognizing these ancestors, which she took part in as a child, but in her dream Avey's body enacts her resistance to her aunt's message and refuses to move. As Avey digs in her heels, Cuney attempts to force her into motion: "In seconds a hand with the feel of a manacle had closed around her wrist, and she found herself being dragged in the direction of the Landing" (Ibidem: 43). The image of the manacle here implies Avey's feeling that her aunt wants to chain her to the past, to
prevent her breaking free from memory. She clearly sees an engagement with the past as negative, restricting the body and limiting progress. The manacle also clearly signifies the memory of slavery which she is trying to ignore. Avey's determination either to go back or to remember her past and her aunt's determination that she should results in a physical fight between the two women. With hideous force, Avey tries to beat the old woman down, and as Aunt Cuney fights back, Avey clings desperately and unsuccessfully to the trappings of status which clothe her body and which are torn from her. Equally significant to the dream for Avey is the extreme physical discomfort that she feels the following day. Sitting in the opulent dining room of the cruise ship, she finds herself completely unable to eat a mouthful of the extravagant dessert, to even lift the spoon to her mouth, as she is stricken with a fleeting paralysis. She is startled by this incident and by the stomach upset that accompanies it. Although she has only eaten lightly, she feels that she has gorged herself. She has a "mysterious clogged and swollen feeling" which at its worst feels as though "a huge tumor had suddenly ballooned up in her center" (Ibidem: 52). This physical discomfort is indicative of the layers of accumulated wealth and superficial respectability which have left Avey bloated with false values. Excessive consumption has worked to suppress her connection with her
The dream and the illness powerfully indicate, with bodily experience as a constant point of reference, the barrier between Avey and any association with her complex cultural origins. While troubled by the events, Avey remains unaware of their significance. What has contributed to this situation is the perspective on the world that she and her husband Jerome developed during the years of their marriage. All pleasure in, and acknowledgment of, themselves became subsumed within an attempt to prove themselves on equal terms with white folks, by accruing material possessions. Avey took her first cruise a year after her husband's death, and on that and following trips she both commemorates, and continues to use, the wealth and status that Jerome strove for all his working life. From the beginning Avey loved the cruises, starting with her first sight of the "dazzling white steel" of the Bianca Pride (Ibidem:15), whose color and name perpetuate the same associations as Avey's suburban home in North White Plains. Her emphasis on the importance of material things in life is demonstrated by the excessive luggage she takes, and her perception that whiteness is synonymous with status is revealed by her ardent desire not to behave any differently from the rest of the (mainly white) passengers, even though, to them, she simply does not exist. In order to maintain her
dignity Avey has taken to ignoring anything that challenges her belief that she has gained social parity in the eyes of white society. Yet on this trip reminder of white rejection begin to bother her. Now, four years after her husband's death, Avey's perspective is changing. The dream and the experience at the mealtime, in both of which the body exists as a site of struggle, draw her attention to the process of cultural negotiation and conflict that she is subject to as an African American woman. Finding this unbearable, she determines to leave the ship. Her response to anxiety initially remains one of avoidance and denial, but even before she has managed to leave the ship her changed awareness dramatically affects what she sees in her surroundings. The shuffle board game appears to her to be people "clubbing each other with the murderous sticks," while the quoits game makes the sound of "some blunt instrument repeatedly striking human flesh and bone" (Ibidem: 56). Now that Avey is becoming responsive to her own pain, memories of other people's pain, which she has blocked out, begin to surface. She has ignored the plight of other black Americans, and resisted over the years any knowledge of the developing Civil Rights Movement. Now, suddenly, she remembers watching a black man, innocent of any crime, being beaten by the police. She does not understand why this memory should return so clearly, and feels that her
ears and eyes have become unreliable. She has come to rely on her senses to block out any reminders of the difficulties and conflicts of her life as a black woman in America, but a process of remembering has been set in motion that continues after she leaves the ship and travels to a hotel on the island of Grenada. Waiting in the hotel for a flight back to New York, the return of the extreme discomfort in her belly brings on an interval of violent grieving for what she realizes she and her husband lost in their persistent yearning for wealth and stability. The perceptions that accompany this grieving are consistently framed in relation to her knowledge of her body.

As Avey begins to face up to all that she and her husband have lost, she begins to understand the real value of what is gone: the small personal moments that were, nonetheless, significant rituals and celebrations. She recalls the jazz and blues music which they had loved and to which they had danced together. She remembers fragments of poetry they used to recite, by Paul Laurence Dunbar and Langston Hughes. And she recalls the summer pilgrimages they used to make to Tatem. Thinking back, her awareness reaches down deeper to recognize that their own personal rituals were something that connected them with their own heritage in a valuable and affirming way:
"Something in those small rites, an ethos they held in common, had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay's to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible" (Ibidem:137).

Their celebration of themselves was a celebration of their cultural inheritance, which provided them with a sense of protection and power. Significantly the jazz and blues music that meant so much to Avey and Jerome offers a celebration of hybridism, a demonstration of the positive creative results of cultural interchange. The poetry that speaks to them so vitally is concerned with negotiating spaces for African Americans amongst a population with diverse ethnic origins. The "vast unknown lineage" which Avey wants to avow is a complex lineage of multiple beginnings.

These descendants of the African Diaspora, finding themselves assessed as inherently inferior and subordinate on the basis of their physicality, make psychological shifts in identification that are reflected in how they perceive that physicality. The characters' moves toward the material security they associate with white, middle-class acceptability go hand-in-hand with erasing, or alienating themselves from, blackness. It seems to Avey that Jerome wears a mask over his face: "what almost looked like the vague, pale out-line of another face superimposed on his, as in a
double exposure" (Ibidem: 131). The double exposure suggests Du Bois's concept of the double-consciousness of the African American, but Jerome seems determined not to embrace the duality and complexity of that situation but to position himself within white America. Gubar recognizes the pitfalls inherent in focusing on the speculative, temporary, or subversive aspects of “Race change”, and while keen to acknowledge the processes of agency and self-knowledge, she still observes that

"racial impersonation and masquerading are a destiny imposed on colonized black people who must wear the white mask--of customs and values, of norms and languages, of aesthetic standards and religious ideologies--created and enforced by an alien civilization" (Gubar 1997:38)

This scenario clearly impacts Avey and Jerome as they attempt to move toward acceptance in the eyes of white society, disassociating themselves from any connection with black Americans. After Jerome's death Avey refers to all the financial funds that he left behind as the "whole of his transubstantiated body and blood" (Marshall 1983:88). Since Jerome associated these funds with the achievement of respectability, this suggests that he also experienced a kind of death-in-
life when his body was transubstantiated for an ideal of whiteness. Avey, too, has invested so much in material wealth and superficial status that she has lost the connection with her own body and with blackness. But her race change manifests itself differently. There is no suggestion of physical whiteness, of a paling complexion: Avey sees her reflection as that of "a black woman of above average height with a full-figured yet compact body," but she has ceased recognizing this reflection as her own (Ibidem: 48). The novel stresses the grinding desperation of poverty and the rejection, by the white establishment, of black efforts for improvement that contribute to determined efforts to achieve and acquire at the cost of all else. Marshall also powerfully depicts the sense of loss that Avey feels upon realizing the cost of choices made:

"Too much!" Her sudden outcry caused the darkness on the balcony to fly up for a moment like a flock of startled birds. "Too much!" Loud, wrenching, issuing from her very center, it was a cry designed to make up for the silence of years. (Ibidem: 133)

Avey's refrain of "too much," which is repeated over and over, suggests both the too much which the couple had lost and also the too much which they had acquired, and which smothered them.
With the outburst of grief which Avey experiences in the Grenada hotel room, she realizes that she and Jay had behaved "as if there had been nothing about them worth honoring!" (Ibidem: 139) She comes to question how it would have been possible to acquire the means to provide for themselves and yet safeguard their heritage.

Avey's deliberations lead her to consider whether there was any way that the process of self-denigration could have been avoided or reversed, and whether there is any way forward. Avey feels that "a certain distance of the mind and heart had been absolutely essential" and she thinks of her great-aunt's grandmother, whose body was settled in Tatem but whose mind had gone with the Ibos (Ibidem: 139) This suggests the importance of being spiritually rooted in one's heritage and keeping material gain strictly for the benefit of the material body, a concept which conflicts with the idea of a connection between heritage and physicality that other parts of the novel propose. It is Avey's body that signals that something is wrong, even when her conscious mind is unperceptive, and although she has trouble defining exactly what the inherent qualities were in the rituals of her early married years, "in a way that went beyond words that spoke from the blood she knew" (Ibidem:137). The idea of embodied cultural memory arises again when Avey meets a mentor in the person of Lebert Joseph. He too has
memories of Africa "that had come down to him in the blood" (Ibidem: 178) the novel gives great significance to the idea of rootedness in a cultural identity and to the body as a channel through which to reconnect to this heritage.

Avey, still on Grenada, wakes from a night of grieving feeling that the process has left her cleansed of previous emotional strife. The novel here posits the idea that such regeneration, an opportunity for rebirth, is possible. Avey finds that "her mind had been emptied of the contents of the past thirty years so that she had awakened with it like a slate that had been wiped clean, a tabula rasa upon which a whole new history could be written" (Ibidem: 151). The strength of the imagery is powerful here, indicating the extent to which Avey needs to overcome thirty years of cultural denial in order to recover her sense of self. It is interesting, however, that at the age of sixty-four Avey only needs to shed thirty years of memory in order to return to a state of innocence. This assumes that, at the beginning of her marriage, Avey's Afro-Caribbean/American sense of self was an unobstructed self. This issue is complicated by later developments in the novel which propose that it is also possible for Avey to purge her body and return to a state of uninsurable physicality. Such a situation is a highly debatable one, opening up questions about the extent to which the body can ever exist as a "clean slate." Before
arriving at that state of innocence, however, she undergoes further traumatic experiences of catharsis. After leaving the hotel Avey wanders out into a physical landscape which echoes her mental state. She roams along the beach, a long stretch of sand untouched by human presence. There is an Endemic quality about this landscape which reinforces the implication of a return to innocence. Avey walks for hours until she stumbles on a wooden shelter, a rum shop, where she encounters Lebert Joseph, a charismatic old man whose attitude and questions intrigue and confuse her. Their conversation focuses on the annual excursion of "out-islanders" back to the island of Carriacou for celebrations to honor the ancestors, a trip for which Lebert is preparing. He talks with enthusiasm about those making the trip that can still identify the African nations of their ancestors and recollect remnants of their songs and stories. His identification with this history is echoed in his appearance: He presents a countenance with lines “like the scarification marks of a thousand tribes” (Ibidem:161) Despite her initial indignation and confusion in response to his horror that she lacks knowledge of African stories and rituals, his obvious sorrow at her situation propels Avey to confide in him. Initially, she is resistant to his determined pleas that she accompany him on the excursion, to discover her own ancestral connections, but she agrees to go when thoughts of
returning "home" instead bring back the intense discomfort in her stomach.

On board the schooner, en route to Carriacou, Avey has deviated far from the isolated, stifling luxury of the cruise ship. She is surrounded by women who remind her of the venerable old women of her mother's church, and sitting supported by them her mind wanders back to that time. The sermon Avey remembers is crucially relevant to her current situation, and as the schooner rocks harder, she becomes more and more troubled by the words she remembers. The preacher's admonishment to roll away the stones that have buried the spirit pervades Avey's consciousness, and she becomes seized by a terrifying fit of vomiting, her body contorted and wracked by a series of convulsions. Her sickness is unsparing:

"She vomited in long loud agonizing gushes. As each seizure began her head reared back and her body became stiff and upright on the bench. Then, as her stomach heaved up she would drop forward and the old women holding her would have to tighten their grip as the force of the vomiting sent her straining out over the railing." (Ibidem: 204-05)
To Avey's horror, when she finally finishes the retching the discomfort moves down into her bowels, and she experiences uncontrollable diarrhea. Avey's extreme affliction is clearly a purging of the intense bloatedness she has been suffering, brought about by her swallowing of false values. Lying in the schooner's deckhouse, recovering from her affliction, Avey has an intense sensation that indicates the potential she now possesses to reconnect with her past. Apart from the dirty pallet mattress on a shelf of planks which is Avey's bed, "the rest was darkness, a fetid heat and the airlessness of a hold" (Ibidem: 208). In this environment, floating in and out of consciousness, Avey becomes aware of another presence:

"She had the impression as her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless dark. A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she was" (Ibidem: 209).

This moment of relation with the slaves of the middle passage is pivotal in Avey's transition from disavowal to acceptance. Having purged herself of the violation of false values, and allowed real sensation to breach her barricades of denial, Avey finds that strong, vital
recollections emerge. The first "memory" that surfaces is the earliest possible memory relating to the experience of African Americans. It is a collective rather than individual memory that Avey experiences, initiated by physical experience, and itself a memory of the body. Avey's profoundly disturbing illness conveys the extent of the damage resulting from cultural dislocation created by the forced transition of Africans to America.

When Avey arrives on the island, the earlier depiction of her mind as a clean slate is reinforced by a parallel depiction of her physicality:

"Her body under the sheet covering her had remained motionless. Flat, numb, emptied-out, it had been the same as her mind when she awoke yesterday morning, unable to recognize anything and with the sense of a yawning hole where her life had once been" (Ibidem:214).

In the context of Avey's journey to Carriacou, for a celebration to honor the ancestors, the process of her mind becoming a tabula rasa, and her body, in conjunction, being "emptied out," is situated as a positive process. It is presented as a return to a place of potential and recovery. In Marshall's novel the description of Avey's mind and body as a tabula rasa upon which a new history can be written clearly perpetuates the idea
of the body as a site of un-constructed materiality upon which culture inscribes itself. Avey's experience of purging supposedly wipes clean damaging inscriptions of whiteness, literally the inscriptions of white chalk upon a black slate, and allows her to return to her essential state. Avey's body is not, it seems, a space which can be inscribed upon, but one where embodied memories can resurface. Avey's reconnection with her body, her awakening to physical sensation, triggers a series of memories from throughout her life that help her re-contextualize her experiences. It also triggers, however, the surfacing of collective memories of an African past.

The task of restoring Avey's memory is now taken up by the third in a line of her spiritual mentors, Rosalie Parvay, Lebert's daughter. The theme of the body as a site of memory is elaborated here, for it is through Rosalie's touching of Avey's body, while helping her to bathe, that her sediment memory is shifted, stirred up, and rises to the surface. The cleansing seems like a ceremonial process as Rosalie first washes and then oils one limb at a time, while singing a rhythmic chant. Avey is being attended to as though she is a helpless newborn, perpetuating the idea of rebirth, of beginning again. When Rosalie has finished washing Avey she begins an even more intensified process of massaging her legs. She gives her whole attention to vigorously kneading Avey's thighs," as
if challenged by the sight of the flesh there, which had grown thick and inert" (Ibidem: 223). Gradually, the work that Rosalie is doing begins to take effect and Avey senses the return of feeling in her body, until her whole being is overtaken with an intensely powerful response:

The warmth, the stinging sensation that was both pleasure and pain passed up through the emptiness at her center until finally they reached her heart. And as they encircled her heart and it responded, there was the sense of a chord being struck. All the tendons, nerves and muscles which strung her together had been struck a powerful chord, and the reverberation could be heard in the remotest corners of her body. (Ibidem: 224)

This process of restoring energy to the body, carefully, limb by limb, until the whole body responds, is a highly suggestive play on the process of remembering. It seems that both Avey's body and memory needed reconstructing, piece by piece. The return of connection with the body is directly linked with the return of memory. Significantly, after the cleansing experience Avey tells Lebert, "Your daughter has been putting me back together again" (Ibidem: 229) The memories which surface for
Avey begins to put her experiences in a context that eventually will allow her to tell her own story. At the celebration for the ancestors held that same evening, the sounds of the music and the rhythms of the dancing have a similar effect on Avey as did the bathing: They return to her consciousness memories of personal and community rituals for which she now has a context. Listening to the powerful rhythms of the music at the "Beg Pardon," Avey finds her drawn more and more into the dancing, as her body seems to remember instinctively what to do. At first the movement is simple and slight:

"Her feet of their own accord began to glide forward, but in such a way they scarcely left the ground." The steps she takes recall those of the Ibos walking back to Africa, because she treads cautiously "as if the ground under her was really water" and as if to test whether it would take her weight (Ibidem:248).

She gradually gains confidence with the dance, and as she focuses on the movement the present time fades away and she becomes transported by her memory to a scene in Tatem. She situates herself in a past moment standing with her great-aunt watching a group of worshipers performing a dance, The Ring Shout, in their church. The key element of the dance
at Tatem and at Carriacou is that the soles of the feet do not leave the floor. During the dance the performers must remain grounded, for this is a dance "designed to stay the course of history" (Ibidem: 250). In fact the shuffling steps are not supposed to be a dance, but to Avey, watching as a young child, it had "felt like dancing in her blood, so that under cover of the darkness she performed in place the little rhythmic trudge" (Ibidem:35). She could not enter the church and join the community in their ceremony because her aunt was in voluntary exile after an argument with church members. Carried away with herself, Cuney had once crossed her feet in the dancing and overstepped the significant limits of rooted ness set for the ritual. Indignant at the temporary exclusion that resulted, Cuney refused ever to return to the church. So, although Cuney stands as a recurring symbol of Avey's need to reconnect with her heritage, she also stands as a reminder of Avey's childhood desire to belong within the community. The process of recovering her memories begins even before Rosalie has touched Avey, when, lying in the bed, "emptied out," recollections are initiated by her surroundings. The bare, sparse furniture of the room reminds her of the off-casts her parents had to make do with. She recalls the chagrin that her mother felt upon receiving her possessions second hand from people Avey's father worked for. Yet she also recalls the
comforting associations that became attached to the furniture as they made it their own. When Rosalie arrives in the middle of her reverie, Avey realizes that this same woman had attended to her during the night, but that she had confused her presence with that of other significant women from her life. At various moments Rosalie reminded her of her mother, the nurse at the hospital where she gave birth, and, thirdly, the towering figure of her great-aunt. Recollections of her aunt surface again as Rosalie begins to bathe Avey, because the galvanized wash tub Rosalie is using reminds Avey of the tub that was used for the weekly washing when she stayed in Tatem. The memory becomes so powerful that it becomes Avey's reality once more: "The memory took over, and for long minutes she was the child in the washtub again" (Ibidem: 221).

When Rosalie begins the massage, Avey is reminded not of her own childhood but of her experience as a mother tending babies. She remembers the times in Halsey Street when they were small, massaging their bodies and admiring their perfection. Finally, when Rosalie returns life to the "sluggish flesh" on her thighs, Avey has erotic memories of her early years with Jay before their relationship was brutalized and deadened by their efforts to get ahead. The process of remembering puts Avey in touch with memories that confirm a continuity of nurturing and
support, which she received both from family and community and which she passed on to her children.

As Avey becomes increasingly a part of the dancing group she equates the Tatem Ring Shouters with the out-islanders on Carriacou and, continuing the metaphor of the body, feels that "the elderly Shouters in the person of the out-islanders had reached out their arms like one great arm and drawn her into their midst" (Ibidem:249). In an image that communicates the process of separate elements forming a whole, Avey's sense of joining the body of the community is conveyed. This collectivity is extended further when Avey re-experiences a feeling of connection that has occurred at other important moments in her life. She first experienced the sensation as a young girl, waiting on a wharf with the neighborhood community in New York, and also in Tatem, when she felt linked with those around her by slender but strong threads emanating from their hearts and navels. This was not a sensation of bondage or restriction but of energy, connection, and support. These were significant moments not only because Avey had a powerful feeling of community, but because she felt it in terms of her physicality. This feeling of being joined by these threads had returned when Avey was waiting for the boat trip to Carriacou and returns now during the dancing;
"Suddenly, as if she were that girl again she felt the threads streaming out from the old people around her; from their seared eyes, from their navels and cast-iron hearts. And their brightness as they entered her spoke of possibilities and becoming" (Ibidem: 249)

"This feeling of belonging intensifies, in turn, the exuberance of her dancing. Not only does her body respond to the music, but it seems to contain within it the knowledge of how to dance, an embodied memory of the movements: "Just as her feet of their own accord had discovered the old steps, her hips under the linen shirtdress slowly began to weave from side to side on their own, stiffly at first and then in a smooth wide arc as her body responded more deeply to the music " (Ibidem: 249)

As the dancing continues, Avey experiences the "sudden unleashing of her body," and a strange thing happens. The people in the crowd notice her in a different way, and then start bowing toward her. Lebert begins the action when he offers her "a profound, solemn bow that was like a genuflection," and then one after another people file past her to do the
same (Ibidem: 250). One woman stops to introduce herself and stops to ask Avey her name. For the first time in years Avey gives the name her aunt had chosen, in the way she had taught her to say it: “Avey, short for Avatara” (Ibidem: 251).

Avey's full name suggests the idea of an avatar, meaning the manifestation of a deity or the embodiment of a concept. With her name shortened its signification was obscured, its power abbreviated. Her acknowledgment of her name returns the power to connect with the past. The novel, though, does not propose a literal return to Africa, but rather a return to America with a renewed awareness of African origins. The experience of dancing is the culmination of the process of illness, purging, and cleansing that restores Avey's recognition of her own body and all the implications that it carries for her in contemporary American society. Avey's response to this awareness is not to seek a place in an idealized vision of Africa, but to acknowledge the complex origins of her heritage and to return to America and tell the stories of her history.

Avey comes to understand her own identity through a series of journeys, physical and emotional, literal and symbolic, that help her piece together the elements which contribute to her sense of herself as an African
American in the late twentieth century. Thus the novel exposes a pivotal feature of the Diaspora experience it is concerned with relating.

Marshall’s second book-length publication was Soul Clap Hands and Sing (1961), a collection of four short stories entitled “Barbados”, “Brooklyn”, “British Guiana”, and “Brazil”. Its title is taken from William Butler Yeat’s “Sailing to Byzantium,” This collection continues her theme of personal identity within the frame work of cultural history. By placing most of the novellas in the Caribbean, Marshall makes her characters directly confront their African ancestry. These stories all deal with old men, who have to face the consequences of the denial of their culture and people. The most effective of these is ‘Barbados’, which tells the story of a Barbadian who has spent most of his life in America working so that he can buy house and live like his white colonial oppressors. From an early age his perceptions have been conditioned:

“But because of their whiteness and wealth he had not dared to hate them. Instead his rancor, like a boomerang had rebounded glancing past him to strike all the dark ones like himself…” (Marshall: PP55)

The central characters in each of the four novellas are aged men who have consciously given up genuine human feeling for materialism and greed. The novellas explore the consequences of renouncing one’s
humanity for the seeming quiet and comfort of old age. Each story takes
place in different locations but depicting an ageing man of African
descent. Hardened by their compliance to the western ideal to
accumulate wealth, when these men finally feel the need to develop
meaningful human relationships, they reach out to young women. Still
captured in their selfish motives, these men have to face their individual
failures in having waited too long as well as the tragedy of loneliness.

Each story focused on an elderly man—a “Bajan” who returns home after
years in America, a radical Jewish professor, a middle-class Guyanese,
and a retired comedian in Brazil—who recognized his life has been spent
in the pursuit of goals which leave him empty and unloved as death
approaches.

Marshall contended the confrontation with the “past, both in personal
and historical terms,” was a key theme in all of her works. An equally
important idea was “the necessity of reversing the present order.”

Each of the settings allows Marshall to examine “the complexities of
race, nationality, and gender relationships,” noted Christian, “and in so
doing traces the complexity of black cultures as they reshape themselves
from North to South America.” Christian described the West Indies
setting ‘as the pivotal landscape [Marshall] would use in her future
work.” (Christian 1980:100)
Man is in the center in each of these stories. These men have failed to commit themselves to any one or anything. Their lives are empty and meaning less. Paule Marshall herself comments, “When their long suppressed need for love finally surfaces, they reach out in a desperate last ditch effort to the woman in the stories.” (Marshall 1961:51) Women are not the major characters in these stories. But they act as the foundation of truth for their male counterparts.

In the story “Barbados” Watford’s, an aged man, lives alone in an empty house in Barbados. The house is incomplete and its furniture’s are in disarray like his own life. Watford’s life is very monotonous and slow. He takes pride in his loneliness and wants the common Barbadian people to treat him as a superior being. Watford has been in America for about fifty years and has earned a handsome amount of money to live gorgeously in Barbados. But he forgets that wealth cannot change his identity. He makes a word of pretension and remains happy with it. Goodman, a shopkeeper, starts the chaos by saying, “Here you come rich from big America and built a swell house and plant, enough Coconut trees and boy, still cleaning and cooking and doing thing like some woman?” (Ibidem: 58) He decides to send a servant and says, “I gon send she” (Ibidem: 59) she comes. She is not given any name. Mr. Watford is not bothered about her identity. He tries to send her a. way.
But for some strange reasons she stays there. She cooks his food and cleans her clothes. But Mr. Watford does not treat her as a human being. One day while reading the week old newspaper, he hears groaning. She cannot talk to any one else in that empty house. She desperately desires to have verbal communication with Mr. Watford. And Mr. Watford, “Jerked around, afraid that she would be foolish enough to speak and that ones she did, they would be any thing with positive impact. But when he finds the girls dancing with a young Barbadian boy, he becomes furious. Suddenly the thought of losing her makes him afraid. Now the girl is happy. He needs no verbal communication. It is Mr. Watford who needs her company in that lonely house. So he threatens the girl and approaches boldly demanding an explanation of her relationship with the young man. The girl is not afraid of Mr. Watford any more. She has noticed his emptiness. She now challenges him saying

“But you best move and don’t come holding on to me, you nasty, pissy old man. That’s all you are, despite your big house and fancy furniture and your newspaper from America. You ain’y people Mr. Watford,” (Ibidem: 67)

Mr. Watford has accomplished nothing in his life. He has been a stranger in America. In Barbados too he is stranger. In America he has worked in the boiler room of a hospital. In Barbados he likes to wear the
white uniform of a doctor. He is indifferent to the warmth of life around him. This is a process of self negation or a process of sacrificing one’s own identity. The girl points this out to the old man and leaves the barren house. The rootless man is thus trapped in his own web and he cannot find any way out. It is too late for him.

Heitor Baptista Guimares is a midget Caliban in the story “Brazil”. He is a comedian at a night club. In the final stage of his life, he realizes that he has become a comical character. No body remembers his real name anymore. He wants to strip away the mask of Caliban and tries to bring back his past, his identity. Ultimately he realizes that he is forgotten. Even his wife sometimes fails to recall her real name. The stage where he performs has become the reality. Young age Guimares rejected his origins and accepted illusion has become and illusion at his. Now in his old age reality refuses to take him back to his root...

The story ‘British Guinea’ does not have such a pessimistic tone. The older man Gerald dies leaving a hopeful future for the young man Sidney. Sybil, Gerald’s former mistress, comes as a symbol of life and new hope. In his youth Gerald had the desire to know himself fully. Throughout his life he made an attempt to search her self. He accepted a job in a radio station in the British Caribbean. And thought it was the best chance for him. But the truth which he knew was only a
fragmentary one. He thought his job at the radio station would bring success and satisfaction. He soon realized that he was wrong.... His life was still incomplete... His had left him because of his affair with Sybil. The Sybil left him to confront a challenging life in Jamaica only his job could not help him then to survive happily as a complete man, after twenty years Sybil comes back and offers him a new chance to restart his talent. But he realizes that it is too late for him to begin again. So Gerald gives Sidney the chance to build his life and dies. In Gerald’s end lies the beginning of Sidney. Yet these two men lack the emotional intensity of Guimares and cynical duality of Watford.

In the story ‘Brooklyn’ Paule Marshall has shown her power of handling a proud, apparently powerful, and confident man. A White man, Professor Max Berman, is the victimizer who ultimately becomes the victim of his own plan. Dr Berman, a Jewish professor is always stalked by the investigators for a fling with the communist party. Wherever he goes his past haunts him and destroys his hope for a fruitful future. Like Watford, Berman lives alone. But unlike Watford, he desires company. In his lonely hours he even waits for the investigators to come in search for him. He wants to feel that he exists. And he wants others to be conscious of his existence at such a critical moment, when he is teaching a six week French Literature course in summer evening session
of a college, he meets Miss William as and becomes interested about the girl, “her loneliness instead him. He sensed its depth and his eyes paused. He saw then that she was Negro.” (Ibidem: 32)

Then he feels irritated because she reminds him of his own humiliation as a Jew. He wants to possess her and through her, all black women as “through their suffering which she contained, his own personal suffering would be eased. “(Ibidem 35)

He invites Miss Williams to visit his country place for a day. She accepts his offer after initial hesitation. He then tells her that he has to quit the job after the session because his sinful past has succeeded in destroying his present. She listens quietly. She swims in the dark lake. Berman notices that there is something extraordinary about the woman. She is not possessed easily. He fails to win her. She out does him in some mysterious way. It comes like an epiphany to Berman,

“Berman understood suddenly the profound cleavage between them and the absurdity of his hope. Her white cap was the sign of her purity while the slit darkening the lake was the flotsam of his failures” (Ibidem: 43)

Max Berman touches her arm but seeing hatred in her eyes shrinks away. But the woman grabs him strongly and declares that she feels proud because now she knows that a white man is not different from a
black one. Besides, an aged man is lesser than a man. So she asks, “How could you harm me? You are so old you are like a cup I could break in my hand” (Ibidem: 47) and her hand tightened on his wrist as if to wrench the last of his frail life from him. She no more remains a shy Negro girl. She becomes symbol of energy vitality, courage and life. Berman is totally an outcast now. He does not belong to her vital world. Spiritually he is dead; physically he is crabbed with old age. At the end of the story the black woman moves toward light, leaving the white man in a pit of darkness.

In 1983 Marshall’s published short stories were collected in a book entitled Reena and Other Short stories. Paule Marshall’s To Da-duh, in Memoriam, first published in 1967 and reissued in Reena and Other Stories in 1983, is a story imbued with thematic resonance. The story focuses on a rivalry between grandmother and granddaughter; this conflict is based on several opposing forces, particularly the rural world versus the urban world, tradition verses modernity, and age versus youth. Marshall skillfully draws these disparate elements together, thus illustrating the cycles of time and the enduring nature of family. ‘To Da-duh in memoriam’ is one of Marshall’s most moving short stories. It concerns a nine year old girl’s trip from America back to Barbados to visit her grand mother. The child represents modernity, cold and
technologically superior, and Da-duh embodies the history and culture of black people. The tension of the tale is between these two polarities, as one character tries to show the other how superior their home is. The competition between them heightens, as Da-duh shows her granddaughter the magnificence of her island: abundant fruit, colorful flowers and the majesty of the island’s trees. The young child counters this with Manhattan’s magnificence: electric lights, radios, and skyscrapers. The empire State building completely outdoes the tall, trembling palms and when the first airplanes fly over Da-duh’s village, she dies.

The narration tries to exercise her guilt towards Da-duh by acknowledging her grand mother’s traditions and by doing so, incorporates them into her own life.

“She died and I lived, but always to this day even, within the shadow of her death. For a brief period after I was grown I went to live alone like one doing penance in a lost above a noisy factory... and there painted seas of sugar cane and huge swirling, Van Gogh suns...while the thunderous thread of the machines downstairs jarred the floor beneath my easel mocking my efforts.” (Marshall 1983:106)
“To Da-Duh, In Memoriam” a nine year old Brooklyn girl visits her grandmother on Barbados. The old woman, awed and terrified by rumors of New York, points out breadfruit, mangoes, fields of cane and asks triumphantly, “Tell me, have you got anything like these in that place where you were born? When the child insists that New York has a building taller than the Island’s tallest palm or hill, the old woman and the old world are defeated. These multifaceted themes, along with Marshall’s subtle evocation of Barbadian history and her rich symbolism and metaphor, have made “To Da-duh, in Memoriam” one of the author’s most interesting and discussed works of short fiction. The story also introduces Da-duh, who appears in different forms throughout Marshall’s work.

Marshall openly notes the autobiographical nature of the piece, which she wrote many years after a childhood visit to her grandmother in Barbados. Understanding Da-duh’s influence on Marshall is an important tool for achieving critical understanding of the author’s body of work and her continuing themes. As Marshall describes her grandmother in an introduction to the story published in her 1983,

“She’s an ancestor figure, symbolic for me of the long line of black and men...who made my being possible, and whose
spirit I believe continues to animate my life and work.”

(Ibidem: 14)

It also contains the important essay, “The making of a writer: From the Poets in the Kitchen.” In this piece, Marshall expresses her gratitude to her mother and other Barbadian women for having taught her the power of the word as an instrument of communication as well as survival.

In her autobiographical essay, “From the poets in the kitchen,” novelist Paule Marshall describes the aesthetic roots of her fiction.

“The group of women around the table long ago they taught me my first lessons in the narrative art,” she recalls. “They trained my ear. They set a standard of excellence. This is why the best of my work must be attributed to them; it stands as a testimony to the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me in the word shop of the kitchen.” (Ibidem: 4)
This “legacy of language and culture “forms the matrix of Marshall’s major works of fiction, for, as Barbara Christian observes her novels:

“Present a black woman’s search for personhood within the context of a specific black community rather than in reaction to a hostile society. As such, they acknowledge the existence of a rich black culture.” (Christian 1980: 103)

Marshall writes in “From the poets in the kitchen” an essay about her mother and her friends’ endless talks around the kitchen table that those women were counterparts to the Invisible Man; but

"Given the kind of women they were, they couldn't tolerate the fact of their invisibility, their powerlessness. And they fought back, using the only weapon at their command: the spoken word" (Marshall: 27).

As an

"outlet for the tremendous creative energy they possessed," language became their artistic tool; as artists, her mother and her friends took "the standard English taught them in the primary schools of Barbados and transformed it into an idiom . . . changing around the syntax and imposing their own rhythm and accent so
that the sentences were more pleasing to their ears"
(Ibidem: 26-27).

With language, then, they staked out a territory - literally the kitchen, but more importantly the memories and the imagination that would link the "seen but not heard" Paule in the corner to Barbados. The inseparability of U.S. and Caribbean histories, the tenuousness of the connection, and the tension in people's lives - these are at the heart of all of Paule Marshall's novels, and they rise from the page in varied, mutable language. As she says, the women in the kitchen “taught me my first lessons in the narrative art. They trained my ear. They set a standard of excellence" (Ibidem: 30)

Her first published story, “The Valley Between” (1954), relates the contest between a wife’s wish to return to school to prepare for a career and her husband’s resentment of the apparent departure from a conventional women’s role. The conflict encodes Marshall’s own experience in an early marriage while also restricting its significance through the fact that the fictional characters are white. A later story “Reena” (1962) returns the theme of the unique concerns of female identity to the centre of the narrative, where it remains for all of Marshall’s later work. “Reena” investigates the matrimonial and political choices made by an educated black woman, using the occasion of a wake for Reena’s aunt as opportunity to frame the
matter of self-definition within consideration of the continuities and differences between two generations of women. ‘Reena’ could be a continuation of Brown Girl, brown stones as it explores what Selina might have become in middle age. The story takes place at a wake for Reena’s aunt who had worked as a live –in domestic, to make money to ‘buy house’ but did not live to achieve her goal. Because of this, Reena contemplates her own choices: the disappointment of left wing politics, the restrictions of middle-class marriage, and the problems of an inter-racial and relationship. As she surveys her own life, Reena realizes that the history of the black woman is still a part of her.

“They condemn us... without taking history into account. We are still, most of us, the black woman who had to be almost frighteningly strong in order for all of us to survive.... And we are still, so many of us, living that history.” (Ibidem: 86)

Woman, in Paule Marshall’s writings confront the world courageously as self reliant individuals. They possess the inner strength, the strong sense of perception, the courage to fight the cruelty of real life and desire to swim in the lakes of dreams and hopes. Paule Marshall’s male characters belong to these groups- the oppressions, the dreams and the rejecters. In stories like” The Valley Between” “Reena” and “Merle”, typical husbands and lovers
belonging to the first group are seen. Deighton Boyce in the novel Brown Girls, Brown Stones belong to the second group, while Watford and Berman belong to the third. Watford and Berman refuse to accept the past; they reject the normal codes of life. They refuse to show proper respect to every human being, whether it is a maid servant or a shy Negro girl. And they refuse to accept old age and death. But the two vibrant young women remind them that death is inevitable, that past cannot be ignored, that in their whole life these men have achieved nothing for which they should be proud. The midget wants to get back his past, but reality teaches him that sometimes a mask can become permanent and the real self vanish forever. So men in Paule Marshall’s works are weaker, lonely and empty.