Chapter II

Reclaiming the Past: History, Memory and Identity

W. E. B. Du Bois spoke of the identity crisis of every black American as being the consequence of the internal struggle of the two antithetical selves, one Negro, and the other American:

two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body. . . . The history of the American Negro is the history of strife--this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the other selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America. . . . He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism. . . . He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American. (10-11)

But unfortunately for the Blacks, the colonizers and slave owners effaced every aspect of African culture in the New World by what Fanon termed, the “perverted logic” of colonization “that turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts and disfigures and destroys it” (Wretched 169). Coupled with this is the willful alienation on the part of the assimilated African-American “who turns away from himself, his race, in his total identification with the positivity of whiteness . . .” (Bhabha, “The Other Question” 46). Their identity crisis gets aggravated due to certain
other factors. In the context of internal colonization and apartheid that constitute the historical experience of African-Americans, despite claims to equality, liberty and justice in the founding narratives of the United States, the African-Americans face the problem of living with a consciousness split between a positive sense of black identity and the negative image constructed by a white dominated society. They experience what Du Bois has characterized as “double consciousness”--“the sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (10). The resultant loss of identity has to be combated. They are to claim identities as Black people by self identifying as Black. Marshall’s novels seem to illustrate Robert Gooding-Williams’s recent formulation of black identity--“being racially classified as black is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of being a black person” (qtd. in Alcoff 339). People of African origin, he says, cannot escape the third-person interpellation, the public identity as black, for one cannot negate the modes and norms of description in the social world or reinvent new ones at will. Besides the public inscription as black, “one becomes a black person only if one begins to identify (to classify) oneself as black and one begins to make choices, to formulate plans, to express concerns etc. in the light of one’s identification of oneself as black” (339). Central to the process of self-identifying as Black is the understanding of the importance of history and the particular ways in which it is made to articulate identity. To self-identify even by a racial or sexed designation is
not merely to accept the sad fact of oppression but to understand one’s relationship to a historical community, to understand one’s objective social location, and to participate in the negotiation of the meaning and implications of one’s identity. Hence it becomes imperative for them to take a “journey back” through history and retrieve it in order to come to terms with their past as an explanation of the present and as guiding post for the future. Marshall demonstrates that anti-historical postures, wiping history clean from the beginning as if it had never happened and disavowal of the black cultural past that displays New World repression of history can create predicaments detrimental to one’s sense of self. Retrieving history and culture in Marshall is linked to ‘identity politics’ that can bring power to the oppressed.

To read literature by Black women writers as history, it is necessary to take account of the ways in which dominant discourses make distinctions between historical and literary texts. These distinctions are generally based on the assumption that history is factual and therefore authoritative, while literature is fictional. But the realization in the postmodern context, that history and reality are textual, makes one think about parallels between history writing and fiction writing. Linda Hutcheon recognizes the element of subjectivity when she underlines the similarities: in both cases truth is being told with facts to back it up. The teller “constructs the truth and chooses the facts.” The teller of the story/history interprets facts and events and gives them a particular meaning. “Facts do not speak for themselves as
story or history; the tellers speak for them, making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole” (56). When the “literary” uses these fragments of the past, the novels become “the historical source for knowing what past lives were ‘really… like’ rather perhaps than the history of the academic historian” (Widdowson 154). Writers are to be seen, as Toni Morrison sees them, --as “true historians” with a commitment to the private, the undocumented and the everyday in the construction of the race’s history. Writers realize that the imaginative retrieval of the past through fiction and the process of coming to terms with it are for the Blacks important psychologically, philosophically and culturally. Marshall is interested in re-appropriating for the Blacks their past rooted in Africa in an effort to transform their understanding of themselves. The exercise is “. . . critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic”, says Toni Morrison (“Site of Memory” 302). Postcolonial retrieval of the past opens up as a means for the oppressed Black cultures to oppose and subvert the dominant culture’s repression of their history and erasure of their memory, precluding their ability to map continuity. The reclamation of the historical past turns out to be a commitment to the past as the necessary foundation of change. It is a throwing back, a self-reflexivity, for the affirmation of progress and culture. Marshall is shown to assert a communally oriented identity that insists upon
continuity between the past and the present that can alone sustain the changes of the future.

Black women writers proceed with the realization that for those of the oppressed cultures, historicity is “encoded in cultural imperatives, remembered in collective rather than individual terms” (Wilentz, Binding Cultures 116). The reconstitution of history has, in the words of Gay Wilentz, “been involved with an uncovering of heritage, a laying bare of original material of culture as well as a layering of emerging cultural traditions which oppose Eurocentric hegemony” (117). Sometimes history may be in the form of “fragments” that contain traces of a coherent system, which need to be “reassembled” (Gates xxiv) and reconnected to the source. The assemblage would help to “render the implicit as explicit, and at times to imagine the whole from the part” (xxiv).

While exploring the interplay of history and developing identities, Marshall creates the notion that the Blacks do have a common identity and a common experience which may be related to cultural origins. This is done not to minimize the obvious distinctions between Black peoples of the diaspora, but to indicate that an acceptance of group based identities is important for mobilizing solidarity. Her imaginative return to the culture of Africa is critical to her uncovering “hidden continuities” between the people of African descent, who as a “people dragged into slavery, transportation, colonization, migration” (Hall 113) shared the experience of a profound discontinuity. As a spokesperson of a diasporal race subjected to the
legacies of slavery and colonial exploitation, Marshall moves beyond the recognition of the consciousness of DuBois’ “twoness” to awareness of what Dorothy Hamer Denniston refers to as “three-ness” of those who are African and American and Caribbean (Reconstructions xiii). She projects the notion that for meaningful living the Caribbean-American has to reclaim his/her history both as African and Caribbean and reconcile the three-part existence without compromising any part of it. She inserts Caribbean into African-American because in addition to being brought as slaves from Africa, the Caribbeans were subjected to European Imperialists’ domination which imposed on them alien thought patterns, altered the structure of their culture, subordinated and marginalized them. The impact of the region’s colonial history would have to figure in any consideration of the identity of African-Americans of Caribbean heritage. Marshall’s novels manifest the view that a return to African consciousness is clearly visualized in the Caribbean where, stronger ties to ancestors have remained. The Caribbean, as Wilentz observes, is a step closer to the African past because slavery in the Caribbean, not as devastating as it was in North America, ended earlier in the West Indies (by 1833) and African family and societal systems remained fairly intact. On the other hand, in the United States, the slave owners had destroyed all vestiges of African culture (“Middle Passage” 9-10). That history was further compounded by the “melting pot” desire for assimilation. Marshall demonstrates how the recognition of a person’s
ethnic community is as important as the recognition of his/her racial
community for self-definitions to emerge.

Memory, the oral trace of the past, Marshall believes, gives access to
histories. Vico spoke of the connection of memory to history. “History,”
Vico said, “issues from the mind and what is mind but historical memory
capable of infinite articulation, modulation and change.” However, Vico
distinguishes memory from nostalgia which is a longing for things as they
used to be. Memory according to him “restrains the mind; . . . memory is all
about an actuality that … remains essentially a human actuality” (qtd. in
Said, World 115). Marshall proceeds with the project of reclaiming history
and memory in full acknowledgment of ideological distortions that have
colored official versions of Black history. In a Booklist interview, Marshall
stated that the focus on the importance of understanding the past in her
novels is due to a kind of longing, a desire to know her history--not the kind
of “distorted, unflattering, truncated version of black history that’s offered
in texts and so on, but what it was really like. . . . I am trying to set the
record straight” (410). In another interview given to Daryl Cumber Dance,
she spoke about a feeling that the little bit of history taught to her about
Black people was far from truth-- “ Somebody was lying through their teeth
to me, trying to undermine my spirit and my sense of self” (Southern
Review 5). Referring to how Black people were denigrated at every turn,
Marshall said, “History was an Africa without civilization and art, was
West Indians as monkey chasers and African-Americans as mammys . . .”
History written from the perspective of the Blacks is for her an antidote to lies, something that would make her unearth positive and inspiring aspects of Black experience, something that would help them declare all the negative and unflattering portrayals null and void. She looks at knowing and understanding history as an essential part of the endeavor to fashion a self that is more truthful and complex (5-6). While establishing history as an important site of ideological struggle for all Blacks, Marshall opens up spaces for a more overtly feminist recuperative project. The history of a people is explored through stories of individual women. Gilbert and Tompkins explain how the emphasis on female experience can also act “counter-discursively,” challenging the notion that history is necessarily the “record of signal events initiated by prominent men.” The insertion of women’s history into the larger discourse of the past broadens the “ambit of their history to dismantle further the authoritarian and imperialistic claims of a univocal historical record” (126). Marshall’s attempt has been to restore to the historical past something vital that was missing. Black women had been hidden from history and hence there was the need to redress the balance between men and women in history. Hence the search for one’s heritage/history is shown to be a woman’s search.

In the words of Greg Dening, “History is not the past: it is consciousness of the past used for present purpose” (qtd. in Gilbert and Tompkins 106). History “entails an ongoing reassessment of the past that facilitates a perception of the present and the future” (106). Abena P. Busia mentions
that the past is reclaimed not for its own sake, but without recognition of it, there can be no understanding of the present and no future. She detects a determination to find “a ‘usable past’ which is “neither glorified nor defiled to create an atmosphere of liberation, negating inscribed racism and sexism” (qtd. in Wilentz 117). Citing a statement repeated through the Freedom Charter-- “Our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting,” bell hooks states that this effort to remember “is expressive of the need to create spaces where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering and triumph in ways that transform present reality” (Yearning 147). She views these fragments of memory not as flat documentary but as constructed to give “a new take” on the old, constructed to move them into a different mode of articulation”. She sees in the struggle of memory against forgetting “a politicization of memory that distinguishes nostalgia, that longing for something to be as once it was from that remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present” (147). In his comments on Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin White Masks, Homi Bhabha observes that memory is the necessary and hazardous bridge between colonialism and the question of cultural identity -- “Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (Location of Culture 63). Bhabha’s account of the therapeutic agency of remembering, according to Leela Gandhi, is built on the idea that memory is the submerged and constitutive bedrock of conscious existence.
Some memories, which remain “blocked and banned,” and hence are inaccessible to the consciousness, “perambulate the unconscious in dangerous ways causing inexplicable symptoms in everyday life.” Such offending memories need to be released from their captivity (Gandhi 9).

Marshall’s fiction affirms the need to confront such oppressive memories, if one is to move into the future. In their introduction to *Memory, Narrative and Identity*, Amritjith Singh, Joseph Skerrett, and Robert Hogan discuss a non-dominant culture’s interest in the past and deal with how the re-storying of the past can provide subversive power in the struggle against dominant culture. They explain that an interest in the past is a means of alternative cultures to oppose and subvert the dominant culture that has historically both repressed and assimilated them. Emphasizing the role of memory, they continue:

> Ethnic writers valorize the subjectivity of narratives and underline the very nature of hegemonic constructions of history and culture. Memory in this context, shapes narrative forms and strategies toward redeeming a suppressed past and helps the process of re-visioning that is essential to gaining control over one’s life and future. (18-19)

It is worthwhile noting what Liam Kennedy has to say about self-conscious efforts to “recover” the past. According to him, “a willed remembering set against diverse forces of historical amnesia” creates “sites of memory” where a sense of historical continuity exists. Sites of memory are “products of the interaction of history and memory, unstable signs of the
past which are invested with cultural significance in the present” (104). People, places, events become such sites of memory in Marshall.

Marshall’s fiction evokes the power of memory and asserts the need to recall and decipher emotionally, creatively and rationally the past as a means of understanding the present and controlling the future. In *Shaping the World of my Art* she underlines the exploration of the past as vital to the work of constructing the future. Interpreting Carlos Fuentes’ statement that historical progression is inseparable from cultural roots, she says,

an oppressed people cannot overcome their oppressors and take control over their lives until they have a clear and truthful picture of all that has gone before, until they begin to use their history creatively. This knowledge of one’s culture, one’s history, serves as an ideological underpinning for political economic social battles they must wage. It is the base upon which they must build. (107)

Marshall’s concern for the role of the past--both personal and historical, is linked to the question of identity. To be denied history is to be denied identity. Marshall brings into focus all facets of history identified by Carole Boyce Davies--“personal history, family history, people’s history and culture” (123) in definitions of the self. She is concerned with personal experience as it illuminates external history. For her, “personal histories and extended cultural metaphors become paradigms of African-American history” (Reyes 242). What is presented is an understanding of heritage reached through a reverse Middle Passage in the Caribbean and through the
guidance of the ancestors. Marshall attributes the development of the diaspora consciousness in her, to the “Great Circuit” of slave trading which connected North America and the Caribbean with Africa. Speaking about her first three novels, she said, “taken together the three books . . . constitute a trilogy describing in reverse the slave trades triangular route back to the motherland, to the source” (“Shaping”107). She seems to imply that African-Americans need to reconnect to what Morrison refers to as their “ancient properties,” (Tar Baby 308) specifically to those aspects that are psychologically empowering for a sense of what constitutes their self.

*Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Marshall’s first novel, highlights identity issues raised by migration and displacement. Migration demands a redefinition of identity for, along with heritage, sense of place also defines identity. Marshall records the immigrant experience and attempts at self-definition of the West Indian Blacks who had migrated to America, the land of plenty mainly in search of opportunity and as an escape from the racism, colonial feudalism and poverty under the British system in the Caribbean. R. M. Lacovia finds in the novel a juxtaposing of the focus on the past with a desire for transmutation, showing an intense future orientation. He notes that the Caribbean exhibits maximum “horizontal mobility,’ geographical shifting, which creates the feeling that to be free means to have the right to movement and that movement is essential to self-realization. Geographical motion is related to the possibility of “alchemical change and aspiration to a transmutation of the self which may indicate a functioning but distorted
relic of the African heritage” (440). Horizontal geographical movement to
America was supposed to ensure “vertical social mobility” (441). America
is conceived of as a land of opportunity, as an “alchemical forge” based on
false images of material transformation (441). Caribbean immigrants had
come to the U.S. after World War 1, followed by a second influx in 1940.
The West Indians “slowly edged their way in. Like the dark sea nudging its
way into a white beach and staining the sand, they came,” notes the narrator
(BGBS 8). By 1939, when Brown Girl Brownstones begins, the white
exodus is almost complete and the New York neighborhoods once occupied
by the Jews and Italians have acquired a distinctively African-Caribbean
dimension. In fact the West Indies had never been truly their land. The
place seemed to be their land just because the Black people, who were
originally brought as slaves, now constituted the majority culture. They
have had to develop a culture shaped both by their African origins and
contact with the European systems in the Caribbean. Marshall depicts the
Barbadians, the Bajans as a community that does not merge into the
African-American social fabric but remains committed to maintaining its
specificity as a distinct community with its own beliefs and rituals--
dedicated to the common goal of owning property as “a bulwark against
poverty, racism and failure” (Christian, Novelists 82). Having embraced the
materialistic ethic of America, they band together in tightly knit
neighborhoods to form a formidable social, economic power of their own.
“Theyir brand of materialism is an extension of Middle Passage denials and
attempts to legitimize their worth” (Reyes 243). Referring to the emphasis in Euro-American values on acquisition of wealth as it was for the founding conquerors of America, Angelita Reyes says,

El Dorado now translates into a modern quest for owning things even if it continues to mean the preemption of place property and people. Displacement and preemption are not only economic--there is psychological and spiritual preemption as well. In the metaphoric of El Dorado, people have a sense of worth only when they can own through conquest. (243)

While the acquisition of brownstones is an ethnic goal, Susan Willis shows how this “oppositional materialism” is at the same time a move towards assimilation, and integration into American capitalism (Specifying 74). The acquisitiveness of the Bajans is thus often attributed to American influence. The U.S. influence comes in an “ethnically mediated form” through the members of the Barbadian Home Owner’s Association (Japtok 312). Joyce Pettis attributes a mediator’s role to the association, a role adopted to assist the Barbadians in their transformation from recent immigrants to property owners (cited in Japtok 312).

It is against the background of the Barbadian-American community, caught in the web of “this White man country,” “a prim, pious, pretentious pack,” (BGBS 187) wedded to the American ideal of wealth and the power that wealth brings, that American born Selina Boyce has to develop an identity of her own. She is faced with the problem of responding to
conflicting demands of identification. Marshall places her in a position in which the groups to which she belongs do not provide her with a sense of who she is. Selina finds it difficult to come to terms with her filiations—“she is part of her Bajan group, yet at odds with it; part of her feminine community, yet at odds with it; part of the white world, yet at odds with it” (Christol 249). She finds it almost impossible to form a self-concept or arrive at a self-definition in terms of the defining categories of the groups to which she belongs. She cannot fit into the mold community has set for her, neither does she wish to fulfill her community’s expectations, for ethnic norms as she understands, are nothing but a conformity to materialism. Japtok observes that Selina demands a space outside the parameters prescribed by the community (309). She, at this point is alienated from her community and is not in a position to evaluate the ‘in-group’ positively; in order to be able to do this, she has to move into other worlds and have a fuller experience of the world outside the home and outside the community, specifically into the white world. Selina resists the identity that is hers by virtue of belonging to the Barbadian community and derives a deviating self-definition from those like her father, her lover Clive and Suggie who do not subscribe to the tenets of the community.

The conversations of her Bajan mother and her domestic friends, migration figures who survive in servile racist conditions, give her their history in the Caribbean as colonial subjects and as immigrants in the white man’s world in the U.S. These women, modeled on Marshall’s mother and
her friends, suffered “triple invisibility” being black, female and foreigners. In the white man’s world they were valued only as source of cheap labor which “undermined their sense of self.” They resisted their invisibility using the spoken word, “the only weapon at their command.” Their talk had a therapeutic effect and restored them to a sense of themselves and reaffirmed their self-worth (“Poets” 26-27). Patricia Hill Collins notes that the act of using one’s voice requires a listener and establishes a connection. For African-American women “the listener most able to pierce the invisibility created by the Black women’s objectification is another Black woman” (BFT 2000 104). Yet Selina cannot appreciate their fierce devotion to buying houses even at the cost of their family, in their aspiration for white-defined respectability. Sabine Brock interprets the women’s obsession with buying house as originating from their need for “a safe place in life for themselves and their families” in racially oppressive American society, for, “to control some space of your own means to have power to control your own existence” (85). “House” for them signifies “purposeful living versus mere survival” (Dickerson 3).

White American society though in the background, is ever present as a socially, economically and personally repressive factor limiting opportunities, creating conditions detrimental to a sense of the self for the Blacks. Within the family Selina is torn between her father, Deighton Boyce who identifies himself with Barbados and her mother, the American-identified Silla Boyce. At this point she envisions diametrically opposite
ways of being--either you are like your father or your mother. Silla and
Deighton provide conflicting models on which Selina has to shape her
identity both through acts of alliance and rejection. She has to define herself
in terms of her role as daughter to her father and daughter to her mother.
For this she has to recover their past, which is by extension her own past.
Barbados, the island to which her parents belong, is figured as memory. For
Deighton Boyce, Barbados is the source of fantasies of restful ease. He had
been a person living in town, with plenty to do--cricket, football, swimming
in the sea and diving after coins thrown by rich American tourists at
Carlisle Bay. Heidi Macpherson observes that Deighton’s memories “do not
admit any resemblance between his childish actions and the performance
expected of him in America”; only when he attempts to gain a job in New
York, is he able to connect his discriminatory treatment by the whites in
America to his treatment by the “benign” whites back in Bimshire
(Perceptions 76). Only then is he able to read behind paternalistic gestures
from the whites. Selina gathers from the talk of the women that Deighton
had dashed the hopes of his mother who wanted him to be a teacher by
“always putting himself up in the face of the big white people asking for
some big job” (BGBS 32) and always dressing up like the whites. His bitter
experiences, hunting for a job makes him come to the realization, “Here and
in Bimshire they’s the same. They does scorn yuh because yuh skin black”
(71) Deighton refuses to connect his childhood scrambling for coins thrown
by white tourists and his adult scrambling for a job in America--“a means of
keeping Bimshire pure and unsullied” (*Perceptions* 76) and hence Barbados remains configured as ““poor-poors but sweet enough” (*BGBS* 14). In contrast, Silla’s recollections are those of Barbados as a site of childhood suffering, a source of adult ignorance and passivity, where “the rum shop and the church join together to keep we pacify and in ignorance” (60). Her memories speak of hard times in Bimshire. She belonged to the third class, which is “a set of 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 of ten . . .” (42). The picture of the slave driver suggests that the exploitation of the plantation worker in the Caribbean parallels that of the slaves in North America. The narrator notes that as Silla narrated her childhood experiences, she became “the collective voice of all Bajan women, the vehicle through which their former suffering found utterance” (42). Silla too, does not connect her childhood labor to adult labor in New York. Macpherson sees this as an effort “to create in New York the haven that her husband finds in Barbados” (76). Silla’s recollections of her past provide the clue to an understanding of the history behind the tough-minded determination of the Association and the women to “make it” in the white man’s world. Unlike her parents, Selina has not experienced Barbados, yet she is expected by family and community to show loyalty to ‘Barbadianness.’ Significant is her reaction when Silla asks her after narrating her sufferings as a child in Barbados,
“Yuh still think Bimshire is so nice now?”

“I still think I’d like it.” *(BGBS 43)*

Although Selina thought of her mother’s voice as “a net flung wide, ensnaring all within its reach” *(43)* and felt herself swaying helpless within its hold, she attempts to break free of her influence. She would experience Barbados for herself, as becomes evident later in her decision to leave for the island. An impression gets fixed in her mind—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” *(43)*. Their memories, she understands, are selective. Her father underplays his experience of racism in Barbados, while the mother highlights her suffering, forgetting the good times in Barbados. Selina had heard the old man at the wedding of Gatha Steed’s daughter reminisce about the Silla he had known in Bimshire, as a girl who danced on the pastures, a girl who danced till once she fainted.

Then onwards Selina yearned to know her mother “in her innocence” *(122)* and of the world that had been when she was not born, of the “time behind and beyond her small life” *(122)*. Selina concludes that she would never really understand any thing until she tried to know her mother. She joins the Barbadian association spurred by the accusation of Miss Thompson that she was keeping herself aloof from the association because she was terribly scared that it would make her go soft on her mother and her friends and the Barbadian community.
Selina has experienced America with its lure of the paradigm of progress. She is yet to experience personally its racism. The first inkling of the meaning of her color comes when she becomes a member of the dance club. She confesses to a feeling of unease when she noted the “subtle disturbance in their eyes” (*BGBS* 208) on entering the hall. She tells Clive, her lover, that a sudden awareness of danger made her scan the room; she had a momentary desire to leave the room and spare them her “unsettling dark presence” along with a strong determination to remain (208). This almost echoes her earlier feeling of being “something vulgar in a holy place,” (9) almost internalizing the image of the Negro projected by the whites. The issue of invisibility is also introduced--“the funny feeling you get is that they don’t really see you…. I felt I didn’t exist but was only the projection of someone or something else in their mind’s eye” (*BGBS* 209). Describing the color black as “a hell of a powerful symbol”, Clive expatiates on the unreal image the whites have superimposed on the Blacks—the image of the “black moor tupping their white ewe” the image of “a legendary beast coming out of the night to maraud and rape. Caliban” (209). He gets to the psychological root of racism; the archetypal fear of blackness at the center of the white psyche—the whites are expressing their race’s fears—being reminded of all that is dark and terrifying within themselves. Analyzing the interpersonal dynamics of racism, Patricia Hill Collins points out that “Whites fear in Blacks those qualities they project on to Blacks that they most fear in themselves.” By stereotyping Blacks as sexually
animalistic, the Whites aim “to repress these dimensions of their own inner being” (*BFT 2000* 171). This, in fact, is a strategy of seeking absolution by projecting on to the “Other” qualities they do not predicate for themselves. After the much applauded dance of the ‘life to death cycle’ performance Selina gets treated with “cold, racist condescension” (*Japtok* 311) by Margaret’s mother who shows Selina her place in American society whatever be her accomplishments. Selina learns from her participation in the western dance ritual, that no effort, no accomplishment can make her part of the white world. More shocking was the comparison the white woman drew between Selina and Ettie, their honest West Indian “girl” who was just like “one of the family,” the one who kept their house spotless. Exhibiting paternalistic sentiments she concludes -- “... you can’t help your color ... you don’t even act colored .... Your race needs more smart young people like you. ..” (*BGBS* 237). For the first time Selina sees “with sharp, shattering clarity the full meaning of her black skin” (238). “And knowing was like dying,” (238) notes the narrator. She is perceptive enough to see that the remarks meant as a compliment to her, actually insulted her race; the woman had made her out to be a “blurred black figure with an accent” (*Christian Novelists* 103) while differentiating her from other African-Americans. Selina is framed through the gaze of the white woman, the usual patronizing objectifying gaze that holds her in a position of subservience, the kind of gaze that Bhabha characterizes as “looking relations” between the colonizer and the colonized, the imperial gaze that
marks out the colonizable subject, as “a fixed reality which is at once an “Other” and yet entirely knowable and visible” (“The Other Question” 41). Selina comes to the shattering knowledge that everybody, including Rachael,—all sinister figures, sought to rob her of her substance and her self and to an awareness of the “part of her which had long hated her blackness” (BGBS 238). Selina’s flight back to Bajan Brooklyn was “a journey not only through the underside of the city but also through the very basis of her being” (Collier, “Closing” 303). The scene in which Selina confronts her own reflection on the glass shop window is significant. She sees for herself clearly the image superimposed by the white racists—her dark face distorted into a symbol of their ancient fears. She must now “create the uncreated features of her own face” (Jones 602). She sees for herself the truth of what Clive had said: the woman had associated her with the “night . . . which seethed with sin and harbored violence . . . with the heart of darkness within” had become aware of “the arid place within herself and had sought absolution in cruelty” (BGBS 239). Perhaps like the night she was to be “feared, spurned, purified—and always reminded of her darkness . . .” (239). Having discovered that denigration by white Americans corresponds to their need to purify the darkness within, she is also aware that their idea of her, though an illusion, would stalk her down to every corner of her life, tainting her small triumphs; so she would have to battle illusions for her real face to emerge. Selina witnesses in the image, her own dark depths too; her “sins” now loom large—her planned betrayal of the Association which is
almost a reflection of her mother’s betrayal of her father, and the mosaic of deceit and lies she had built to delude the mother. This personal and direct exposure to racism makes Selina one with Miss Thompson and the festering wound she sustained during an assault by a white man,

She was one with the whores, the flashy men and the blues rising sacredly above the plain neon lights. . . . She paused across from the darkened association building, where the draped American and association flags billowed from the cornice. And she was one with them: the mother and the Bajan women who lived each day what she had come to know. (BGBS 240)

She wonders how her mother and the women had endured the daily humiliations and the racial slurs flung at them and at the same time contained their rage. She wonders how Silla could have restrained herself from killing the ones who drove her to that abuse every day--her children whose small faces reflected her own despised color. She understands Silla’s abhorrence of the poor, bedridden, exploited white woman Miss Mary staying upstairs. She runs to Clive seeking emotional support to assuage her sorrow, but fails to get the expected response because he was one who had gone through as much and more, both as an army man and as an artist. Clive, encumbered as he is with his own conflicts, is unable to meet her emotional needs. Selina breaks ties with him. It is now that she understands what it means to be clubbed to a partner who cannot share one’s anxieties and aspirations, She now understands her mother’s outbursts
of rage and the motive behind her sale of Deighton’s land in Barbados
behind his back. The reason lay in her being aligned to a “man who cannot
give himself faithfully to a career, to reality, or in marriage . . .” (Dickerson
11), one who cannot share the pain of a racial oppression that would have a
woman forever scrub the floors she does not own. Selina finds the situation
replicated in her relations with Clive but is perceptive enough to withdraw
before it is too late in order to be on her own. Selina now reconnects to the
community, specifically to the Bajan women, with the realization dawning
on her that others too have the right to harbor attitudes that differ from hers.

Marshall depicts the painful process the protagonist has to go through to
reach a stage in which she understands and can judge positively her ethnic
community, a stage in which she senses no sharp conflict between group
identity and personal identity. Seeking the source of the acquisitiveness of
the community necessitated an imaginative reconstruction of its past,
arrived at through experience that is personal. She comes to the knowledge
that acquisitiveness is a defense against racism, an attempt both to fight
invisibility and exclusion, and to protect the younger generation against the
hostile western world. Selina is described as witnessing “myriad reflections
and variations of her own dark face” in the people gathered at the function
for the award of the scholarship; now “it was not only admiration but love
she felt” (BGBS 248). Japtok sees her rejection of the scholarship, coming
at the very moment she feels solidarity with the community, not as a
breaking away, or a standing in opposition, but as an assertion of her
individualism which is an expression of her American-ness. She moves to
the realization that ethnicity is after all not incompatible with individualism-
-what she had sought was to establish her independence from the “coercive
aspect” (Japtok 309) of her community. She would not have her life run by
others though she senses solidarity with them. Her confrontation with her
mother affirms that she has always been her mother’s child though people
called her Deighton’s Selina. Selina detects even the source of her
individualism in her mother who at the age of eighteen, despite opposition
from parents, boarded ship to the U.S.A. Selina’s progressive self-discovery
does not constitute a decisive linear departure from the past, but is located
within the generational frame. She cuts out a path and makes a conscious
political choice that is an affirmation of both her ethnicity and her
individuality. She decides to leave for Barbados “from whence issued the
primal forces of her life” (Collier Journey 18) to search out the lost
meaning of her homeland. She is finally in harmony with her mother, and
hence with her community and her history, for the mother, in the words of
Mary Helen Washington, “is the community, symbolizing its power,
reflecting its values and embodying its history” (224). Selina has to
reconstruct the past of her parents, of her community and her people, of the
Bajan women, for she has to discover her self in the life and history of her
people. Marshall deliberately leaves the resolution of the novel open-ended-
-the journey Selina is to embark upon can be seen as a continuation of her
search. Her final gesture of tossing over the shoulder one of her silver
bangles she has worn from her childhood as a symbol of her Caribbean heritage while retaining the other, is emblematic of a self that requires a two-way allegiance—allegiance to the part of her that is American and to the part of her that is Barbadian with cultural roots in Africa. For her to develop her sense of self, she has to recognize her self in the varied communities she belongs to. She needs to traffic between her identities as Bajan, as black, as American, as woman—identities, each with a history of its own. No wonder she conceptualizes her self as a pivoted crystal reflecting her multiple identities.

The fundamentally important role of memory for a healthy existence both as an individual and as a member of a specific community finds a comprehensive treatment in Marshall’s second novel, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*. Reclaiming the past through memory and coming to terms with it, Marshall suggests, is as essential for the oppressor as it is for the downtrodden who are the “metaphorical Out-islanders of the World,” (Meyer) for restoring a sense of the self. The epigraph of the novel, a quotation taken from Tiv of Africa -- “Once a great wrong has been done, it never dies. People speak words of peace, but their hearts do not forgive. Generations perform ceremonies of reconciliation, but there is no end,” evokes the immutable African memory of exploitation and violation under slavery and colonialism. The making of history is shown to be “a unity of the personal and the political,” projecting the idea that true transformation comes only when persons take responsibility for the course of history.
(Christian, *Novelists* 248). All efforts, whether from the outside or the inside, to bring in true transformation to the wronged, should be guided by knowledge of history, leading to an understanding of the people. “Read your history man!” (*CPTP* 210) is what the protagonist Merle reminds Lyle Hutson, the assimilated politician as he speaks of change.

Marshall’s setting is an ex-colonial territory—a Caribbean island and its most backward and inassimilable region called Bournehills. To this island, the “Chosen Place,” comes a team of social scientists from an American research and development foundation, the CASR, funded by the Shippen family that had derived its wealth from triangular slave trade. Saul Amron, Jewish Anthropologist, heads the team. Allan Fuso an Irish-Italian catholic and Saul’s second wife Harriet Shippen, a quintessential WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) assist him. Located closer to Africa than any other West Indian island, Bourne Island, with its long and painful history of slavery and colonialism, forms “a symbolic boundary between the cultures of Europe and Africa, between the forces of progress and tradition, between town and country man, rich and poor, white and black” (Bone 309). Bournehills, the real protagonist of the novel, is a “microcosm in which can be seen in sharp relief many of the basic conflicts that beset oppressed people everywhere” (Marshall “Shaping” 111), a “paradigm of the whole Third World” (Nazreth 114) held captive psychologically and economically by the West. The novel is “a parable of Western civilization and its relation with the underdeveloped world” (Bone 309). Henrietta Buckmaster
observes that the island, which is a piece of land, is also a state of mind (310). The sea provokes both the dwellers and the visitors to confront their past, their histories, or else be destroyed in the process. The narrator identifies the voice of the sea in its loud and unceasing lament over “an ancient wrong it could neither forget nor forgive” (*CPTP 110*), as the voice of history, the voice of the nine million and more who died in the Middle Passage. The focus in this novel is on collective memory and history, which the Bournehillians hold on to with fierce pride and tenacity and which makes them a “timeless people”. They take a perverse pride in their backwardness and refuse to change, much to the disgust of assimilated Bourne Islanders. They are an oppressed people engaging their history, facing up to colonial oppression, moving to control their own lives and refusing to be dominated by the materialism of the Western World. They are and have always been at one with their collective memory and their historical past and at the same time hold the key to the present and the future. They are “empowered with a two-fold vision of not only being able to see backward in time so that unlike most people they have a clear memory of events long past, but by some extraordinary prescience forward also” (*CPTP 385*). They hold on to the past, to the memory of a time when they as “a people” resisted the colonizer with vehemence, and keep alive the memory through the annual re-enactment of the Cuffee Ned rebellion during Carnival. At Carnival, “their collective act is living history, an acknowledgement that their past and present are fused” (Christian, *Novelists*)
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112). Theirs is a “willed remembering” set against diverse forces of “historical amnesia,” creating carnival as a “site of memory” (Kennedy 103). The pageant is an act of memory, a remembering of past actions that define the participants in the present. They remain wedded to their past, strangely clinging to Africa, shunning and resisting all half-measures from outside to change their condition, for they believe that there has been no change for centuries. They are a memorial of the great wrong done in the past which mere ceremonies of reconciliation cannot expiate—what they need is radical change on their own terms which they would themselves effect. Such is the change that perhaps people like Merle Kinbona, who embody the qualities instilled by their hero Cuffee Ned, could effect.

Merle, the daughter of a black woman and a mulatto, descendent of the prolific white planter Duncan Vaughan, is a cross-roads figure, the link between the visitors and the Bournehillians. Having been educated in England, she is part of two worlds, “literate in both the tribe’s and the dominant culture’s world” (Kubitchek, Quest 58). She is ambiguously positioned between the colonizers and the islanders. She rejects the typical role assumed by the assimilated Islanders but at same time cannot be a commoner. Merle, though of mixed blood, identifies herself with the Blacks and is privileged by class in the island. The narrator draws attention to her somewhat bizarre outfit -- a dress that looks as if it had been purchased from some West African market, pendent silver earrings carved in the form of saints that were a gift from her English benefactress and silver bracelets
indicative of her Caribbean heritage. Her dark face dusted over lightly with
talcum powder that gave it a whitish cast, has been “despoiled . . . in much
the same way as the worn hills to be seen piled around her.” The
disjointedness of her appearance, the narrator observes, is an attempt to
reconcile the opposing parts, to make of them a whole” (CPTP 4-5). The
battered car she drives has been “deliberately abused, willfully desecrated”
(4). Through the car that once belonged to a colonial governor, Merle is
connected in some way both to positions of present and past authority
(Macpherson 79). Merle is shown to embody the history of Bourne Island.
Macpherson sees her as “an objective correlative” for the island as a whole-
-by driving an ex-colonial car, she suggests the island’s historical past; by
suggesting that the car has been misused, the narrator indicates that the land
had been battered by the colonial powers (79). And by positioning Merle at
the wheel of the car when we first meet her, Macpherson observes, the
narrator suggests that Merle’s ambiguous relationship to the various aspects
of herself and her past is “emblematic of Bourne Islands’ own uncertain
position” (79). Geta LeSeur observes that elements of Merle’s personal life
story--her illegitimate birth, marginalization by race and class despite her
father’s status, her proper British education, her flirtation with upper class
privilege, her desire for a family of her own and to be useful to her society,
“recapitulate racial and cultural experiences from the slave and colonial
past”( 95). Ashton Vaughan’s “rape” of young black woman, the disavowal
of responsibility for the child Merle after the mother’s murder, repeats the
pattern of the ancestral white planter who wanted to people the island with his progeny, without taking responsibility for the black women he had violated. In the absence of another issue, Merle’s father granted her the favor of foreign education and access to status in the island’s hierarchy in the expectation that she assimilate the values of the whites (95). In the exploitative lesbian relationship with an English lady into which she is drawn, Marshall depicts parallels with the relationship of the colonizers to the colonized Bournehillsians. The woman came to her help when Merle’s father Ashton Vaughan stopped sending her money. Before long she realized that she was one among the woman’s “collection of exotica.” We have clear echoes of the British colonization in Marshall’s depiction of the situation: there she met people from “every corner of the globe: India, Asia, Africa, Canada, Australia, Gibraltar, all over the place. The sun you might say, never set on the little empire she had in her drawing room” (CPTP 328). Merle finally realized that the woman’s “generosity” was meant to keep her “dependent and grateful” and that though she always appeared to be “giving”, the woman was “draining” her very substance. The woman went on providing her with money even after Merle decided to be independent, for she knew that Merle would be terribly frightened of being on her own. The narrator observes: “When someone like that knows how weak and dependent on them you once were they want to keep you that way. They need to feel they still own you” (330). And in such a situation, as Collins puts it, the black underclass end up as those who are “given”
what they enjoy and whose sole life activity is “taking” (BFT 2000 73). In the affair, Merle learns the “convoluted lesson of being a colonial subject” (LeSeur 95); she had failed to see the dynamics of power and the inequities underlying the relationship. Clear echoes of the situation, point to the fact that Merle embodies the history of Bournehills of the colonial past and the neocolonial present. The woman finally demonstrates her power to destroy by ruining Merle’s marriage to an African idealist by revealing the hidden secret of Merle’s past affair with her. The short-lived marriage represents Merle’s search for identity and for relationships that will satisfy her ethnic and sexual needs in the West. While the Bournehillsians re-live their historical past, Merle seeks to shut off her painful personal past--the results of her positioning in the intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender and sexuality. She “restricted herself to a moment in the past” (Christian, Novelists 131), a past that renders her dysfunctional, consciously refusing to confront the dark secret and come to terms with it. Her constant banter is seen as a defense mechanism to hold behind her history. She continuously “discusses communal history, almost interminably, to forestall examination of her personal history” (Buckmaster 310). The suppression of memories that perambulate her consciousness, leads to fits of catatonia.

The desire to control others’ life is replicated in Harriet who has access to money and power and the capacity to destroy. Harriet too, like the English woman, wanted to be useful on her own terms. She had a perfect sense of self as long as she was able with her money, her family
connections, her love and support to help shape the life of the men associated with her – Andrew Waterman her first husband, a nuclear scientist, and Saul Amron her second husband, a Jewish anthropologist. She goes as far as to pull the strings to have Saul withdrawn from the project after she finds out that he has an affair with Merle. Once again she wants Bournehills in her own image, her own order. She chooses to disavow responsibility for her family’s part in the historic slave trade and their present economic exploitation of the third world, by marrying a Jew devoted to social work in underdeveloped lands. Saul detects a “desire on her part to blot out her past, to treat it as though it had never happened” (CPTP 46). She tries to break away from imperialism’s historical hegemony, determines to do charitable work, but soon discovers that the community of Bournehillians will not respond as she expects and that she cannot overcome her mortal fear of Blackness. When at the Carnival, the mob refuses to be guided by her directives, she can only exhibit her racist rage and withdraw--“I tried telling them they were going the wrong way, but they refused to listen . . . . They didn’t seem to see me” (351). Their recalcitrance subverts her authority and leaves her bewildered and uncertain of herself. Their refusal to “see” her is, in the words of LeSeur, “a telling reversal of the invisibility suffered for centuries” by the Blacks (101). She comes to realize that people like her are part of their problem and not a solution. This uncomfortable realization challenges her sense of personal identity and she becomes aware of her status as oppressor. She repeats the
same pattern with Saul who, suspecting Harriet’s involvement in his being withdrawn from the project, warns her—“. . . I won’t have you running my life, Harriet You’re not going to shape and direct my career . . . I run my show (CPTP 453). Merle too turns down her offer of financial assistance to leave for Africa saying, “I don’t like people ordering me about like I’m still the little colonial” (442) and declares cancelled, her plan to leave. Harriet’s sins loom large as she is forced to examine her self. Unable to face reality, she kills herself, walking into the sea. Symbolically, Merle’s English benefactress and Harriet represent the attempt of colonial and neocolonial powers of the first World to assert authority and domination over the third world. Again Merle’s stance in relation to the English woman is a personal act of resistance representative of Bournehillsian’s resistance to poverty alleviation measures from outside. Past experiences have made Merle and Bournehills sensitive to the strings attached to such paternalistic gestures.

*The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* is a novel about resistance to domination. Merle embodies resistance to the entire history of colonialism. Susan Willis sees in her, a “frenzied desire for real confrontation” (81). At the very beginning we are made aware that Merle had been dismissed from her job for teaching resistance--Cuffee Ned’s history against official history, which she felt told only about the English and made it look as if the Black people never fought back. On a later occasion she is shown to share the popular Anancy tales from African oral tradition with the almshouse children--the tales of a wily spider, who in spite of being small manages to
“outwit the larger and stronger creatures in the world, including man by his 

twit and cunning,” (CPTP 224) evidently infusing into the children a sense 
of their power. She often projects her African husband Ketu as an ideal, one 
among the truly committed, one who had not been taken in by the glamour 
of the West, one who took from the West technical information needed to 

improve the lot of the “little fella” in Uganda and “wasn’t interested in their 
gods, their ways or their women” (331). Merle derives her identity also 

from a culture that nurtures a healthy respect for the unscientific as opposed 
to the West that makes a god of technology. She jokingly refers to herself as 
a juju woman, an obeah woman. Her confrontation with Harriet jolts her out 
of her cataleptic state; she gets rejuvenated. When Harriet calmly tries to 

buy her off after she came to know of her affair with Saul, she is quick to 
respond, returning the objectifying gaze – “Merle’s gaze had the power to 

penetrate a person’s innermost being and read his life at a glance, read deep 
into Harriet . . .” (436). “She openly, brazenly, peered into her face as 
though she spied someone she knew lurking there. . . looking intently for 
the other face in hiding behind hers” (439). The face that emerges visible is 
undoubtedly that of her English benefactress, and by extension, that of the 
colonizer. The gaze therefore becomes a site of resistance, a strategy that in 

Bhabha’s words “turns the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of 
power” (cited in Gilbert and Tompkins 250). Merle rebuffs the offer, 

venturing into her memories of exploitation, drawing lessons from her 
personal history. The act of resistance makes her defeat the purpose of the
colonizer and helps her make amends for her earlier foolish capitulation to the power of the white colonizer. She thus exorcises “the face which had attached itself like an incubus on her mind, sapping her strength and purpose over the years, debauching her will” (*CPTP* 440). She too, like the sea, undergoes ritual cleaning after Saul and she share their long suppressed mutual histories. She finds her sense of self when at her angry instigation, Saul who is white, is spurred to activity. When the mills in Cane valley breakdown Saul leads the Bournehillsians to the final victory in which despite incredible odds, they haul their own cane to the neighboring town of Brighton. One witnesses Bournehillsians acting as “a people”--a return to the spirit of Cuffee Ned’s time. Merle decides to confront the conflicts of her personal past. She decides to reconnect with her husband and child, and it is significant that she sells her earrings, the colonial car, and all things she inherited from the Vaughans to make money for the trip to Africa. She stops using the talcum powder that “seemed to mute her darkness and like the sea she is “unburdened, restored to herself” (463). In effect Merle used “the symbols of colonization (talcum powder, saint earrings) in an attempt to resist her colonization; in divesting herself of them she has un-colonized herself” (Olmstead). Having transcended the guilt and suffering of the past, she passes from the state of being the object of her scorn to an agent of her transformation. She has sifted through the events of the past, gone back and explored the reasons, personal and historical, for the breakup of her family and moved out from the “museum of her past” to an active confrontation
with the present. She decides to leave for Uganda to reconnect with her family. Her itinerary would take her south to Rio, then to Dakar, “a direct reversal of the diaspora’s trajectory,” rejecting the route through London (Schenck 57). Still more important is the activist’s role she prescribes for herself in future on returning from Africa; she will go into politics and start a strictly radical party that will become a source of power, effecting the much needed change from within in Bournehills. Being in Africa will, she hopes, provide her with the strength to get moving again, for a person has to go back, really back, to get a sense of all that has gone to make him/her before he/she can go forward. Saul’s memories are racial memories of persecuted Jews passed on to him by his Sephardic mother. His memories are also those of personal failure and of the guilt of being responsible for the deaths of his first wife, and now, of Harriet. Merle’s intervention makes him act against his own--Harriet and the Kingsleys. He acts for and with the Bournehillsians and proves to himself that he has not failed everybody associated with him. In presenting Merle as agentive in the transformation of Saul, Marshall has shown how power, as the capacity to do what is good, can flow in the reverse direction--from the Blacks to the whites, from woman to man.

Marshall’s exploration of identity moves from the social and political arena to the cultural and psychological realms in her *Praisesong for the Widow*. The novel explores the cultural pressures that African-Americans experience--the cultural dominance of America and the filter of Africa. The
theme of transformation and regeneration through reclamation of the past is centralized on the widow of the title, Avey Johnson. Marshall shifts the locale from North America to Carriacou the most easterly of the Caribbean islands, physically closest to the home continent of Africa. Abena P. Busia sees this physical closeness as “a physical representation of the spiritual proximity that the widow is to see manifest” (238). The vital role of memory in one’s life finds its most streamlined and paradigmatic treatment in the novel. In considering the role of personal and collective memory in the novel, G. Thomas Couser emphasizes that for certain ethnic groups, history may have been suppressed or sanitized to the extent that “the only history is memory” (106). Interestingly, memory is understood here in terms of the mind-body separation: “Insofar as to remember is to have one’s body in one place and one’s mind in another, the novel’s narrative line, which is determined by Avey’s newly activated, volcanic memory, dramatizes the complex dynamics of African-American consciousness” (111). Like the African praise song acknowledged in the title, the novel draws on memories of tribulation and lost pleasure, of anguish endured and transformed. Marshall employs the stream of consciousness technique and inter-weaves spontaneous associations of the moment with memories of a past reality to show how the past, if not confronted, slips into the present often paralyzing one’s life in the present. Denniston observes how memory and dream become the media through which Marshall captures the history of an African-American woman and thereby the “ongoing history of another
timeless people, the Ibos” (Reconstructions 128). We are presented with a series of “embedded flashbacks” (Reyes 246) fusing memories of the immediate past of Avey’s childhood with those of the distant past of her ancestors. Avey, sixty-four, is very secure in her middle class life on the White Plains, but having capitulated to false values of materialism, has sealed herself from her “true self.” As the novel begins, she is on an expensive cruise, quite against the objections of her daughter Marion who questioned the wisdom of a cruise with a bunch of white folks. She has become so detached from her heritage that she does not consciously recognize that it has been lost. She is alerted to what is missing in two ways: “by her subconscious, through bodily symbols in a dream; and by her physical reaction to her situation, her body’s illness” (Rogers). Avey’s body “communicates” to her what she has taught her conscious mind to ignore. She becomes aware of the body as “a repository of memory” and “a site of cultural expression and memory” (Rogers). The self-doubt triggered by Marion’s criticism escalates into hallucinations of the long dead Aunt Cuney forcing her to face a past, her roots and her heritage. Avey’s memories take her back to her annual visits to Tatem as a child when Aunt Cuney took her to the Landing and fed her with the story of the Ibos handed down to her by her grandmother Avatara. The Ibos, “pure-born Africans” (PSW 37) brought from Africa to be slaves in the New World disembarked at the Landing, looked around, as “technicians of the unseen,” (Reyes 245) looked down into history, saw the atrocities and miseries awaiting them and
walked across the water back to Africa. The magnitude of their defiance is communicated in “mythical terms” of “corporeal transcendence” (Rogers). Cuney had quelled her disbelief with just a question: “Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on water in that Sunday school book . . .” (PSW 40). In lending the authority of religion to the legend and instilling it into Avey’s mind, Aunt Cuney had entrusted her with a mission she could not even name yet and felt duty bound to fulfill it. She is named after Avtara, Cuney’s grandmother who interpreted the legend as describing spiritual release and whose mind is said to have gone back to Africa with the Ibos. The annual visit to Aunt Cuney since the age of seven, had linked her securely to an eyewitness account of a legend, that is central to Tatem’s history and to a ritual retelling of the miracle. Cuney represents the force of memory coaxing Avey out of her middle class complacency.

Avey’s awakening to the reality of the present wedded to materialistic gains, and the spiritually debilitating effects of such a life, is facilitated by a journey into her personal history. Her early days with Jay, were marked by an acceptance of the self and cultural roots, the best of jazz and blues providing a “nurturing ground” for the culture from which they had sprung and which they could turn to for sustenance (PSW 12). They had been securely linked to their roots by their unquestioning faith in the legend of the Ibo Landing and their yearly visits South. Their balanced sense of identity had sources in their cultural roots. One fatal Tuesday, life changed drastically for them. Feeling trapped by motherhood, confined to madness
by her unwanted pregnancy, she confronted Jay with his inability to fulfill her growing needs and even threatened him--“Goddamn you, nigger, I’ll take my babies and go!” (110). Then onwards Jay was a different man-- Jay became Jerome--he was done in by poverty and racism and the constant pressure to succeed. Succeed he did, but got so alienated from his culture and his people that he began speaking of his own in the harsh voice that treated them as “a race apart” (140). She too had been no better. This distancing is symbolized in her inability to recognize and identify her own mirror image. Now that she is becoming responsive to her own pain, memories of other people’s pain that she had blocked out, begin to surface. She had ignored the plight of the black Americans, resisted over the years any knowledge of the developing Civil Rights Movement. She had so far come to rely on her senses to block out any reminders of her experiences as a Black woman. But as a process of re-membering sets in, she mourns the loss of “something vivid and affirming and charged with feeling” (PSW136) that had been present in the small rituals that had once shaped their lives. Avey’s double purgation--physical and spiritual, occurs as she accompanies the Out-Islanders working in Grenada on their way to Carriacou to celebrate their heritage and remember their ancestors. She tried to alert them to her presence; in spite of her chemically straightened hair, her expensive shirt and her gloves, they seemed to think of her as one among them-- “their eyes immediately stripped her of everything she had on and dressed her in one of those cotton prints . . .” (72). Standing on the wharf, watching people, she is
reminded of the durbar in Ghana, which Marion had filmed for her on her last visit. Marion had spoken of something called a New Yam, of a golden stool that descended from the sky, and of ancestors who were to be fed. In the next moment, she almost experiences herself as a child waiting for the annual boat ride up the Hudson River to Bear Mountain. She had experienced a peculiar sensation of slender threads streaming out of her navel entering those around her and threads issuing from their navels and hearts stream into her. Marshall records, “she became part of, indeed the center of, a huge wide confraternity” (*PSW* 191) that both nurtures and protects. Now, in Grenada, after all the years during which she had suppressed her group identity, she feels the connecting threads extending from Africa to the Carriacou Out-Islanders and to her great aunt Cuney in South Carolina, all of who belong to “the same circle of cultural memory” (Meyer). This sort of overlap of place and time bring to the fore spiritual connections in the present. The description of the feeling she experiences as she walks along is evocative:

She felt like someone in a bad dream who discovers that the street along which they are fleeing is not straight as they had believed, but circular, and that has been leading them all the while back to the place they were seeking to escape. (*PSW* 82-83)

Avey’s trip to Carriacou is occasioned by a meeting with an old man, Lebert Joseph, who is the African and African-American confluence of the mythic deity of the cross roads Legba. Lebert immediately categorizes her
among those who cannot call their nation. “Calling your nation” implies a clear definition of identity and involves “not only the necessary growth of personal, but also of racial, political, historical and sexual awareness” (Christol 248). Her journey to Carriacou is not only the Middle Passage back but also “a rite de passage for Avey’s spiritual growth” (Wilentz, Binding Cultures 107) that includes “confession, cleansing and confirmation” (Denniston, Reconstructions 137). The journey evokes past memories--the old ladies in the boat remind her of “the presiding mothers of Mount Oliver Baptist Church” (PSW 194), she is again reminded of the annual boat ride up the Hudson. Her mind goes through the whole “call and response” sermon at Easter in an African-American Church and the memory of the dis-ease she had felt on the occasion sets off an explosion of vomit and she also loses control over her bowels. She is physically purged. Again Marshall evokes images of the slave ship and the Middle Passage as she captures Avey’s sensations while lying in the deckhouse. She felt a suffering multitude packed around her. “Their suffering--the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space--made hers of no consequence” (209). She now “remembers” and opens her mind to the history of her people, a history inscribed with pain and reconnects to her community and reclaims her group identity. She “cannot exist outside of Middle Passage history,” notes Angelita Reyes (247). Remembering, for her, involves a process of remembering of a dismembered and forgotten heritage and is accompanied by a literal re-alignment of bodily parts through ritual engagement.
For Avey’s transformation to be complete, she has to go through certain rituals. Only on joining the Creole dance does the sensation of the threads return, “myriad of shiny, silken brightly colored threads” (248 –249). They are the threads linking the living and the dead, the people separated by distance or culture or heritage, the self and other. The threads reinforce the central theme of connection: “Africa and the Caribbean; present and the past; memory and the future; self and other; place and spirit” (Olmsted). Still more significant are the decisions she takes for the future. She must return to the United States as Avatara the spirit incarnate of Aunt Cuney and Cuney’s grandmother and take up the task of spreading word about the excursion, about Halsey Street, about the Ibo Landing and quote for both her grandchildren and the visitors alike what had been said about her ancestor Avatara -- “her body . . . might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos” (PSW 39). Most significant is her decision to enlist Marion in her cause, Marion whom she had tried to root out from her body. She begs pardon of her too. She would fix her ancestral house in Tatem, or build it anew using the money from the sale of the house in the White Plains. It could be a vacation house for her grandsons, a summer camp for Marion’s “sweetest lepers.” After having reclaimed her history and cultural roots, Avey “feels centered and sustained” and “restored to her proper axis” (254).

Daughters is a review of Marshall’s preoccupation with the past, to suggest new directions for its future. Denniston sees Ursa Beatrice
Mackenzie, the protagonist, as a revisiting and a rewriting of Selina Boyce (Reconstructions 148). While Selina is in search of a cultural identity, Ursa is reasonably comfortable with her multicultural background--firmly grounded in her heritage that is dual--African-Caribbean and African-American. She faces no crises of “identification” regarding the cultures that have formed her. Her father, Primus Mackenzie, often referred to as “the PM,” belongs to the mythical Caribbean island of Triunion and her mother is American born Estelle, one who is able to identify with the culture and history of the Caribbean. She is perfectly comfortable in her relationship to her parents. Yet she has to struggle to be her own woman. The effort puts her at odds with her father. As the novel proceeds, one witnesses Ursa fighting back, exposing a “paternalist colonialism” (Ferguson 177) exemplified by her father. She has to break free of ties that are so personally constricting as to disable. She has to resist “the bondage of the mind and the heart” (Marshall, qtd. in Bray) for her to fulfill the role of the black female as savior in the face of pressures of neo-colonialism and western patriarchy. Here we find an extension of the historical and political notion of colonizing to other forms of human exploitation, normalization and dependency. The history of black life through generations figures prominently in the novel. The struggle of the first generation immigrants was to survive and to strive towards a world that already existed for the rich and the ruling class. PM’s mother, Miss Mack, visualizes a future for her son when he would find a means to live, as he would like to. Estelle and
Mackenzie belong to a generation that has benefited from the social political struggles of the 50’s and the 60’s. Ursa, her friend Viney Daniels and her lover Lowell Carruthers are a privileged generation --college educated professionals, YRUMs--Young, Restless, Upwardly, Mobiles as Ursa refers to them. Denniston sees Ursa as “one of those young, bright, fiercely articulate token few for whom Avatara Johnson’s generation worked the two and three jobs” (Reconstructions 147). Marshall seems to say that it is time for the fortunate younger generation to make itself useful to those who are still struggling. They “can and must afford idealism,” (Schaeffer 3) for their imperative is no longer what it had been for the earlier generations. The epigraph suggests this:

Little girl of all the daughters

You ain’t no more slave

You’s a woman now

They need not only to reclaim the past, but also to make it “usable” in the present through re-visioning it. They have to put their history to creative use. It is the realization that Ursa will have a role to play in determining the fate of Black people in either or both of the countries, and the desire that she should make a difference, that makes Estelle send her daughter to New York. She would not want her daughter to be one of those Triunion women bound hand and foot to her man, with little independence of thought and action.
When the novel begins, Ursa has just aborted the child of her self-obsessed lover Lowell Carruthers. She has a feeling that the abortion has not taken place; it subjects her to a virtual storm of memory. She summons up every one who matters to her. One moves along with her into the long past of the slave rebellion spearheaded by Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe—“co-leaders, conspirators, lovers, consorts, friends”—vanguards of Triunion rebellion, and still back to the colonial past when twenty-three wars were fought in two centuries among European powers, the British, the French and the Spanish over possession of Triunion, considered “quite a prize then” (Daughters 28) and back into the present, with Western imperialism having its sway over newly independent nations and capitalism spreading its destructive effects. Employing stellar imagery, Marshall, in the words of Moira Ferguson, “charts the orbits of traversing stars that relate back to a physical as well as symbolic gravitational force. While the stars may circle in different orbits, the former colonizing power, the symbolic Sun, still exerts its sway” (“Of Bears and Bearings”) Against the grain of the island’s postcolonial independence, Marshall suggests, the Empire replicates itself through corrupt politicians who do its bidding. Even those like the PM in Triunion and Sandy Lawson, his alter ego in the U.S, begin in idealism but finally capitulate to its power. Ursa’s comparative analysis of the diverse corruptions played out both in the United States and Triunion reinforces in her the sense of life being,
a series of double exposures . . . elections, roads, the South Ward, Amory Hill, the PM, the Do-Nothings, Sandy Lawson, the white people-- them! Still running things in both places--everything superimposed on everything else. Inseparable. Inescapable. The same things repeated everywhere she turned. (*Daughters* 332-333)

Evidently dissatisfied with the type of work she was engaged in, doing marketing surveys for whisky and beer, Ursa gives up the highly paid job at the NCRC. She then takes up free lancing and finds a more idealistic project, “the most challenging and satisfying” work she had ever done, --a political analysis of Midland City, a predominantly Black New Jersey city. Marshall indicates how essential the shift of the job is to her sense of self -- “felt she couldn’t take it another minute, that it went against her principles, it was another way of doing in Folks, so she walked . . .” (*Daughters* 90). Evidently an act of resistance both against employers and her father who expected her to be completely committed to the highly paid job, she abandons her NCRC suits, cars and apartment to live “like a peon” in one room. She starts donning Afro’s dreads and braids, Black Power hair style-- an attempt to define herself in terms of Blackness. One is reminded of Afro-centrists in the U.S. sporting ethnic hairstyles, clothes and listening to rap music as external signs of an ethnocentric position which is a self-defensive position to counter racism.

The rejection of Ursa’s proposal for a thesis on the mutually supportive relationship that existed between bondmen men and women and their
significance for and contribution to various forms of resistance to enslavement found in the United States and the Caribbean, by Professor Crowder, known to be the most progressive thinking member of the department, reflects a subtle kind of racism. This speaks to “the power of the dominant group to suppress knowledge produced by the subordinate groups . . .” (Collins, *BFT 2000* 11), which is critical to maintaining social inequalities. Ursa’s effort may be seen as an attempt to write out history for the future generations using as her sources “the slave narratives and oral histories, the old plantation records, Apethker, the Angela Davis article” (*Daughters* 12). It is again an attempt at participating in what Collins refers to as “the constructing and reconstructing of oppositional knowledges” (*BFT 2000* 10) by investigating subjugated knowledges of subordinate groups. This has to be read along side Estelle’s disapproval of drama clubs in Triunion, staging always Shaw, Oscar Wilde and then again Shaw. Ursa’s thesis can be seen as a response spurred by a significant question posed by Estelle--“why hasn’t someone written about Congo Jane . . . What a play the story of her life would make!” (*Daughters* 167). Marshall highlights the need to recuperate and preserve one’s own history rather than try to be “more British than the British,” (167) for a sense identity.

Ursa’s life is characterized by “a dialectic of oppression and activism, the tension between the suppression of African- American women’s ideas and intellectual activism in the face of that suppression . . .” (Collins, *BFT 2000* 3). Though by the end of the novel the thesis does not materialize, Schaeffer
sees Daughters as Ursa’s thesis, an examination of the relations between black men and women—“Ursa acts out, rather than writes out what she has learned” (3). She, according to Schaeffer, had started with the notion that relationships between the black men and black women had to be “mutually supportive” as it had been with the legendary couple Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe. But her subsequent experiences especially during the election campaign of her father in the Caribbean convince her that the ideal relationship is not necessarily supportive. On the contrary, it can be one involving mutual struggle, “if necessary against each other but always toward an ideal” (29). Ursa thus realizes that she must radically revise her original conception when she considers rewriting her thesis as second Masters Degree. Relations between men and women must change as times change. Marshall seems to illustrate Collins’ view that though race, class and gender still constitute intersecting oppressions, the ways in which they are now organized to produce social injustice differ from prior eras (BFT 2000 13) and that the shape of domination itself changes, taking forms different from the forms it took in prior historical eras (BFT 2000 228). Hence strategies and forms of resistance must also change. Marshall shows how forms of oppression have changed and how Black people of different classes are victimized in distinctly different ways. Congo Jane and her slave allies had to face physical cruelties; she bears a disfigured breast, the nub of which was torn off by an abusive owner when she was just eleven. The racist attitudes encountered by Mackenzie and Estelle differ from those
encountered by Ursa, Lowell Carruthers, Viney Daniels and that of little Robeson. Despite racism, Ursa and others, who are privileged by class, have before them a variety of choices and possibilities. The oppression that Ursa faces both at College and at work in the NCRC is of a subtler kind. Marshall shows how, though the U.S. defined itself as the world’s first independent anti-colonial nation state, it simultaneously incorporated many defining features of European colonial networks including the color line into its economic and cultural life. American neo-imperialism takes the form of aid programs and mutually lucrative projects that typically replicate many of the power games and struggles of the European imperial endeavor. The elite Blacks are drawn into traps that make them collude with the colonizers. The readers are shown how the American warship, the *Woody Wilson* stands in the harbor at every election, ensuring that those with wild socialist ideas such as those once held by Mackenzie, will not win the election in Triunion. The PM was for overhauling Triunion along strictly socialist lines and had decided “to put fire to the tail of the thieves running the government” (*Daughters* 130). But the surveillance of the U.S. Navy dampens PM’s idealism and he is gradually co-opted by the wealthy and the powerful, forcing him to become a willing participant in his own people’s oppression. He associates himself with the building of an enormous resort on public lands--a project aided by a group of developers from Canada and the U.S. that would bring great benefit to his family but misery to the poor of Triunion.
In a period of heightened racial oppression, the Blacks had to resort to revolt for resistance. When the issue was that of survival, the Blacks, as Marshall puts it, had to be “frighteningly strong” (Marshall, Reena 86). Historically, survival depended on sticking together as is evidenced by the struggle of Congo Jane and her associates. Central to the popular resistance was a unity forged under the lash in colonial days. The monument, the sculpture of Cudjoe and Jane accompanied by their slave allies, bears testimony to this. Now, in a changing political economy, as domination changes shape, and survival becomes less of an issue, resistance takes the form creating spaces for self-definition and self-empowerment. But Ursa needs first to cut herself free of relations and dependencies that restrict her growth. It is Lowell who gives her an insight into the kind of relationship that binds her to Primus Mackenzie. She is like Triunion-- “independent in name only. Still taking orders from Big Daddy England, America or whoever” (Daughters 268). She understands that she is clogged by a colonial mind-set that made her allow her father to run her life through remote control. One disturbing image that continuously visits her is that of her father standing at the edge of the pool watching her -- “His body would be in the way, his head blocking the Sun,” (Daughters 355). He would be standing between her and the light. The abortion symbolically speaks of Ursa’s need to sever psychological ties that disable her. It is against her father that she has to develop her identity. She has to abort his corrupt image within herself and cut herself free. Ursa takes upon herself, on her
mother’s insistence, the task of delivering to the PM’s opponent, Justin Beaufils, an independent running for Mackenzie’s seat, the previously uncirculated prospectus that outlines the development of the resort on public lands in Moorland district. The scheme is made public and people realize that he has acted behind their back, and the PM loses his seat to Justin Beaufils, who “actually talks about class and color . . . something nobody’s ever dared to do openly before (360). In one “triumphant act” (Jordan 38) Ursa saves her father from falling into depths while at the same time freeing herself from his dominance. Ursa resists by doing something “that is not expected” (Collins, *BFT 2000* 98). Marshall indicates that her individual act of resistance could not have been possible without a distinctive, collective Black women’s consciousness that rejected long-standing controlling images of black women, without acknowledging the links that connected her to the past, without the desire to put her history to creative use. It is the return to the stories of past resistance and the wisdom she has drawn from that history, which guides her. After she is born anew and equipped with the added power gained through political participation, she is in a position to confront Professor Crowder, who had aborted her attempt to write her people’s history. Fergusson notes, “. . . she will erase his cultural identity as he tried to erase hers” as her research now includes political participation. She has now joined the “revolutionary continuum” of Congo Jane (“Bears and Bearings”). One finds in Ursa’s determination to chronicle alternative Caribbean slave history in an elite U.S. institution, the
functioning of what hooks describes as “liberatory politics”—“a critical intervention and interrogation of existing repressive and dominating structures” (Yearning 110) which is part of any decolonizing process.

_The Fisher King_ is set in the 1980s with reminiscences back to the height of the jazz era of the 1940s and 50s and still back to early immigration history. Maxine E. Thompson, in a review, states that the novel gives “a historical lesson” on the rise and fall of jazz for the many African-American expatriates who fled the country for creative freedom. Marshall presents the artist vis-à-vis his community and projects the view that America is a difficult place for black artists. Marshall looks back, to tell the story of jazz through the history of expatriate African-American jazz pianist Everett Payne (renamed Sonny-Rett Payne by his admiring friends) gradually unfolding itself through the memory of Hattie Carmichael, his close associate and special friend. The readers are shown a family in turmoil over his memory—his mother Ulene Payne, his wife Cherisse’s mother Florence Varina, his brother Edgar Payne. They share their “memories” of him with eight year old Sonny, his grandson, the Parisian-born, French-speaking, Sonny Carmichael Payne, reared by Hattie Carmichael in a seedy quarter of Paris. Sonny is brought to New York in connection with a concert in honor of his fabled grandfather. Detecting a revival of interest in Sonny-Rett’s music, well to do, entrepreneurial-minded, Edgar Payne plans to capitalize on it by throwing a concert to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of his death. From then onwards the past and the present collide. Most of the
actions of the present are filtered through the consciousness of the grandson so that one understands what is going on in his childish perception while at the same time getting to know the hidden agendas of the adults. The narrative constantly shifts from the present to the past as Hattie remembers Sonny-Rett, his music, his wife, his child Jojo, and their unconventional life in Paris. Hattie takes the readers to forty years back to hear about Sonny-Rett’s night club debut as a jazz pianist with a talent of recasting and reinventing standard tunes through “an outpouring of ideas and feelings informed by his own brand of lyricism, yet lit from time to time with flashes of recognizable melody” (TFK 139). He had combined his creative genius with his childhood training in Bach and Beethoven, and created tunes that became part of the innovative and unpredictable music called “jazz.” The bedrock of his music was Bach and the Blues -- “You heard them, both Bach and the hard, pure lyricism of the blues in that powerful, driving, disciplined left hand of his” (139). Marshall considers jazz as a part of African culture and art, of which the Negro everywhere is the direct inheritor. Legend holds that jazz came over to the Americas from West Africa in the slave ships. The American Negro is supposed to have shaped jazz by imposing his native chants and rhythms upon the European materials he found in the land of enforced adoption. Barry Ulanov, in his book *A History of Jazz in America*, refers to the concept of an “African music lodged in the unconscious of the American Negro” as the source of Jazz. (17). Central to the novel using jazz as its backdrop, is the project of
“reclamation, restoration and rebirth” of the past, that is embodied in the motto of the Three R’s Group headed by Edgar Payne. Parallel to Edgar Payne’s efforts to entirely rebuild Bed-Stuy in order to salvage the old neighborhood, which he prefers to refer to as Central Brooklyn, runs his effort to salvage and honor his brother, the renowned Sonny-Rett Payne, jazz pianist, whom he once wronged. If Bed-Stuy and its Black population had been harmed by “the burn-baby-burn rioting” on the part of the “justifiably angry” (TFK 47) black folk in the sixties, Sonny–Rett had been harmed by the family’s disapproval of his music alongside the racism of white America which eventually led to his being irrevocably lost to Brooklyn and to his family.

Little Sonny’s visit to Brooklyn leads him to the discovery of his family’s past and helps him connect with those related to him in blood and with the community that his grandfather had long abandoned. He has to bear collective and personal history into the present. Hattie--his “fathermothersisterbrother”--had been the only relation he had known so far. His knowledge of his past is derived through memories of what he had overheard of the conversation between Hattie and his “nounou,” his sitter, old Madame Molineaux and through what Hattie recollected of her life with his grandparents. Sonny had seen a large picture of his grandfather, enshrined larger-than-life, outside the Club Belle Epoque. Sonny was taken to visit it every birthday; Hattie had even taken a photograph of him “standing like a sentry below the image” (TFK 64). Then onwards he takes
up a role for himself—one who is to protect and safeguard his “wounded”
grandfather.

Sonny’s visit to both his great-grandmothers reveals the persistent family
and community rivalries that drove his grandfather into exile. The two
Brooklyn families were unwillingly united through the Romeo and Juliet
romance of their children Everett Payne and Cherisse McCullum. But both,
-- Ulene Payne, a demented and bitter West Indian and Florence Varina
McCullum, the “high yellow” Southerner, unable to overcome their rivalry
even years after the death of their children, are now faced with the need to
justify themselves before their grandson. They now vie with one another for
his affection. Though in Brown Girl, Brownstones Marshall touched upon
the disunity among people of the African diaspora, with West Indians trying
fiercely to maintain their specificity, we find an extended treatment of the
issue through the depiction of the family feud in The FisherKing. Edgar
Payne comments on Florence Varina “. . . . She’s still waging the American
--West-Indian War. As if a people in our situation can afford that kind of
divisive nonsense” (TFK 51). Marshall has indeed captured accurately the
power struggles between black ethnic communities, between families and
individuals that both pull people together and push them apart. As Sonny
maneuvers the variegated households of his two great-grandmothers, his
ability to withstand the fallout of a long-standing feud is tested. The subtle
way in which Marshall suggests the role the boy assumes for himself as
protector when the adult world keeps distributing blame, is striking. When
Hattie and Mr. Payne describe Ulene as “impossible,” he jumps to her defense. Marshall enters the boy’s consciousness—“Someone had to defend her, so putting down the mammoth sandwich, Sonny announced, “She showed me how to play it, her piano, and it was fun” (48). Likewise, he does not respond to queries about the other great grandmother, who they said, must have “talked” his “ears off” (TFK 50) “. . . but he suddenly decided he wasn’t telling on her either, the Florence Varina woman, never mind all the mean things she’d said. Let Hattie tell if she wanted to. But not him” (50). This mature approach was unconsciously bred into him by Hattie who “accorded equal space” (39) to his reputed grandfather and to his “vedette” (movie star) grandmother. His response to the meanness exhibited by the old women was also instigated by Hattie. She had told him on an earlier occasion that in order to be able to love them, he was to pay attention to the good part of their character and ignore the bad part. Sonny, thus, is able to forgive their meanness. He loves Ulene for making him use the player piano, and Florence Varina for her story of “Magnolia Grandiflora” that her father had brought all the way from Varina, Georgia, as a fruit and planted in their yard in 1889 as a remembrance of their days in the South before the oppressive Jim Crow Laws. The tree had now become a tourist’s attraction. Florence Varina now worked for the Landmark Conservancy people, explaining to tourists Magnolia Grandiflora’s history, which is also the history of the displaced Black Southerners. Sonny is made aware of his race’s history as Ulene narrates her experiences as a first
generation West Indies immigrant having come to this man country with nothing but “a gripsack and two willing hands,” (TFK 98) as one who had sacrificed her life as a hard working widow to provide classical musical lessons for her son who was “her heart and later the ruination of her heart” (100). She had envisioned him in white people’s Carnegie Hall playing “their music better than them” but he broke her heart by turning to jazz. Ulene tells Sonny about how, as a young girl, she had asked her father after the white man’s war, for her passage and “show money.” Show money was “fifty big U.S. dollars” (104) they had to show the authorities the minute they stepped off the boat to prove that they were not coming to be paupers. Marshall again evokes memories of the Middle Passage--the traumatic journey of the Africans in slave ships across the Atlantic to the U.S. in Ulene’s description of her transit from the Caribbean to America-- “The Sea hard. Her and Alva puking and praying, praying and puking the whole time and bawling like babies for their mothers”(99). The other great grandmother’s “Magnolia Grandiflora” bears the history of the Southern Blacks at the beginning of Jim Crow time when they were getting back at the Colored all over the South for having been freed. But she too took to work in the houses of Jews to be able to groom her daughter to be a singer and dancer, for which Cherisse had neither the talent nor the inclination. Although Cherisse never became a star, she dressed up like a vedette, a movie star, always drawing attention to her perfect self, until her death. Marshall indicates that upward mobility and breaking in through musical
talent was part of the American Dream for the Blacks in the 1940’s. Sonny’s effort at reconciliation between them, symbolized by his leaving of the Magnolia branch, a present from Florence Varina, at Ulene’s house, gets defeated as Ulene asks him to get away with it. By reconnecting with the women who provide him with part of his heritage, by sharing music and family history, he reconnects with his history, which is also his race’s history in America.

Sonny gets connected to history at yet another level—through the reminiscences of his great Uncle Edgar Payne about the role he has played in the uplift of the Black folk. Marshall projects the idealism that guided him, though he repeats his credo—“Nothing’s pure. Nothing’s wholly selfless” (56). Edgar recollects how he was among those who helped research and draft the proposal for the rebuilding Central Brooklyn as part of the inner circle of Robert Kennedy, how the proposal was accepted by Washington and how Kennedy intended making the project a “showpiece” in his bid for the White House. Kennedy had promised to keep the “pipeline” from Washington open, but “they killed him too” (56). With LBJ gone and Nixon in charge, they found themselves on their own; and “the pipeline dried up” and he had to look for money elsewhere. Edgar Payne put up a photograph of himself shaking hands with Kennedy. This served as “collateral” and banks were disposed to approve loans. He tells Sonny, “Sometimes shaking hands with the right folks can make a big difference in this life. . . . It might come in handy one of these days”(57). But he wished
it were otherwise. He could have avoided running after banks, skinning his teeth, if the Black people had their own loan companies and their own resources. He strikes us as one inspired by the wish to make life better for the Blacks, as one who could manipulate power, using it in favor of his community. He envisages a time when their children would not have to “smile and beg.” The memorial concert he arranged is personally an act of reparation, but ultimately, an effort at bringing Sonny-Rett home and restoring him to where he belongs, putting him to rest “properly on native ground” (211).

At Sonny’s meeting with his second cousins Kendall and Benjamin, there is a mutual sharing of personal history. Sonny is confronted with the need to speak about his African father, a former vendeur of postcards and miniature Tour Eiffels at Sacre’ Coeur, and his run away girl-mother who had destroyed every picture of hers before leaving and had abandoned him even before naming him. Sonny realizes the need to search out and reclaim his parents, which he was going to do when he was older. Sonny is as caring of Hattie as she is of him, comforting her, slipping his hand into hers whenever he thought she was upset; she fondly says of him—“My big fella! My savior” (112). At the slightest indication by Edgar Payne that he lives among old people in France, he jumps up shouting “Hattie is not old” (109). Even when he hears Hattie and his great-uncle quarrel over him, he chooses to keep aloof—“whose side would he take, loving them both as he did?” (222). Along with Hattie, he needed his family too, for they provided him
with a sense of belonging and of being part of something. He was certain his uncle would visit him “tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and the day after day after day after that forever” (222). The reader is finally convinced that Hattie’s repeated assertion “there is all kinds of family and blood’s got nothing to do with it” (18) is both right and wrong. On Mr. Payne’s revelation that his brother had written to him to care for his child Jojo when he, like jazz, had fallen on evil days, Hattie is forced to reassess her actions of the past, which she believed had always been on the right course. Hattie had so far believed that there was nothing in Sonny Rett’s life that she did not know. She is left to ruminate on the question whether she had done right by the boy, keeping him away from his own, claiming him for herself.

Sonny embodies in his person the theme of an identity that is a composite of what is African, West Indian, American and even French. For a sense of self he would have to journey between these identities, each with a history of its own, embracing all of them, rejecting none. The question Florence Varina asks him is significant --“You got some of all of us in you, dontcha? What you gonna do with all that Colored from all over creation you got in you?” and so is her suggestion “better be somethin’ good” (36).

To sum up, it may be said that to Marshall, history involves the recognition and re-working of memory, both on the collective and personal planes. What is important is the formation and inscription of identities in the act of remembrance. Memories are those of historical
circumstances of powerlessness in the face of imperialism and racism, of
guilt associated with emotional estrangement and alienation from one’s own
kind on the one hand, and of historical acts of resistance against oppressive
forces on the other. Each generation, Marshall seems to say, must discover
its history and re-vision and reconstruct it as a reply to the lies told by the
dominant power. Her characters have to view their selves in relation to the
historical forces that have shaped the migrations of their race, the struggles
of their community, and the relationships within their families. Marshall has
explored the interplay of individual and collective history. The journey into
the past enables her protagonists to understand the experiences of the
present and to equip themselves for the future. Reclaiming history and
culture fuels their desire for a political future. History needs to remembered,
re-visioned, and used creatively in new ways by the new generation. The
distorted past can be re-conceptualized and re-invested with multiple
meanings to make it usable in the present. Knowledge of the past could be
used to recognize and resist oppression in the subtler forms it has taken and
to break away from psychological dependencies that are crippling, so as to
create spaces of self-definition and self-empowerment. The gesture of
claiming as one’s own turns out to be an affirmation of change, progress
and culture. For Marshall’s characters, reclaiming of history involves a
reconnection with the different elements of their diasporic heritage. The
reclamation is not that of a pure, untainted “originary” history.
Interestingly, the knowledge of the past which Marshall’s characters
reconnect to, does not have one unified origin but a number of sources: different places, different cultures, memories both collective and personal, experiences that are disparate, stories and events which disparate groups cling to. Reclaiming of the past requires on their part a wandering across cultures including that of Africa.