Chapter II

THE OTHER OF THE OTHER:
BLACK WOMEN IN PAULE MARSHALL'S NOVELS

first
a woman should
be
a woman first
but
if she's black, really black
and a woman
that's special, that's real special

Don Lee.

As the epigraph says, black women have been living in special circumstances in the United States despite the commonalities they share with all women or white women residing there. Black women in White America are continuously "confronted by both a woman question and race problem" (Lerner 573). Mary Church Terrel, the first president of the National Association of coloured women, wrote in 1904, "Not only are coloured women.... handicapped on account of their sex, but they are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race. Not only because they are women, but because they are coloured women" (King 265).
June Jordan also emphatically expresses the special paradox of black womanhood: “to be black and to be a woman. To be a double outsider, to be twice oppressed, to be more than invisible. That is a tripple vision.” (Manvi 81).

The extreme torment of Black women’s reality is expressed in the most touching way in Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem “For Coloured Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf” (1976) which is one of the first fusions of Black arts and women’s movements:

Ever since I realized there was someone callt a coloured girl and evil woman a bitch or a nag i been trying not to be that & leave bitterness in somebody else’s cup

come to somebody to love me without deep & nasty smell in scald from Iye or bein left screamin in a street fulla lunatics

whisperin slut bitch bitch niggah

get outta here wit alla that (Shiach 292).

The hardships, cruelty and violence the black women met with in America are based on the two evils – racism and sexism which are allied and have a parallel existence. The close connection between racism and sexism is explained by Gloria Steinem in her introduction to *Outrageous Acts and
Everyday Rebellion thus; "Just as male was universal but female was limited, white was universal but black was limited" (7).

Gloria Wade-Gayles further explains this phenomenon and depicts the present condition of black women using the imagery of circles:

There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflect degrees of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space, in which black people regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness. Hidden in the second circle is a third, a small dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation and vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks of black womanhood in America. (3-4)

In spite of the inhuman conditions of black man’s existence, his condition is still much better than that of the black woman who is doubly discriminated against. She is considered an inexpensive commodity both by the whites and the black men. In America, ‘whiteness’ is perceived as a symbol of a higher degree of power, position, intelligence, beauty, purity and all other positive qualities, whereas ‘blackness’ is viewed as a sign of ugliness, stupidity, uncontrolled sexuality, passionate or violent behaviour pattern and all other negative and undesirable qualities. That is why a black male character of Paule Marshall cries:
Who knows what they see looking at us? The whole damn thing is so twisted now, so deep seated; the colour black is such a hell of a powerful symbol, who can tell.... some of them probably still see in each of us the black moor tupping their white ewe, or some legendary beast coming out of the night and the fens to maraud and rape. Caliban, Hester's Black Man in the woods. The Devil; Evil. Sin. The whole long list of their race's fears....

(Brown Girl, Brown Stones 253)

Richard Wright in his short story “The Man Who Went to Chicago” describes how the blacks are so marginalised and socially conditioned as to be submissive, silent and subservient in the domineering white world: “They were conditioned to their racial ‘place’, had learned to see only a part of the whites and the white world; and the whites too, had learned to see only a part of the lives of the blacks and their world” (The naked i 102).

Afro-American Nobel-prize winner Toni Morrison also points out the inability of white people to understand the hard realities of negritude when she says: “Black people and black things and Africa type things are understood to be a blank space for white imagination” (Stareitfeld 69).

Richard Right again speaks about black people's low self-esteem and self-hate in a profoundly honest manner:
Colour hate defined the place of black life as below that of white life; and the black man, responding to the same dreams as the white man, strove to bury within his heart his awareness of this difference because it made him lonely and afraid. Hated by whites and being an organic part of the culture that hated him, the black man grew in turn to hate in himself that which others hated in him. But pride would make him hate his self-hate, for he would not want whites to know that he was so thoroughly conquered by them that his total life was conditioned by their attitude; but in the act of hiding his self-hate, he could not help but hate those who evoked his self-hate in him. So each part of his day would be consumed in a war with himself, a good part of his energy would be spent in keeping control of his unruly emotions, emotions which he had not wished to have, but could not help having. Held at bay by the hate of others, preoccupied with his own feelings, he was continuously at war with reality. He become inefficient, less able to see and judge the objective world....(The naked i 82)

Black men who have been victims of colour complexes and racial prejudices and discriminations as described by Richard Wright fail utterly to understand the sorrows of their female counter-parts and to utter a word of consolation and comfort to them. On the contrary, these black men consciously
or unconsciously inflict the same injuries, insults and injustices experienced by them at the hands of white people upon their own women.

Black men’s treatment of black women is very touchingly and effectively expressed in Alice Walker’s compact poem, “He said come”

He said come
Let me exploit you
Somebody must do i:
And wouldn’t you
Prefer a brother? (Walker, Revolutionary Petunias 320)

The black woman is considered only an object of the black male sexual gratification and a producer of children. In other words, for black women marriage is “institutionalised prostitution.” She is no more than his private property but not very valuable or precious. She acts to please him and conceals her real feelings of frustration and sorrow. Her children act as a powerful hold or an unavoidable burden, which ties her physically and emotionally to her home, curtailing her freedom. Thus her individual interests are superseded by the desires of her husband and children. In effect black women become the most oppressed set of people in America, being the victims of racism, chauvinism and class discrimination.

As Toni Morrison says in The Bluest Eye, these black women, having only an inferior status are always expected to take orders from others:
Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders, white women said, “Do this”, white children said, “Give me that”, white men said, “come here”, Black men said, “Lie down”, the only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other. (Gayles 40)

The whites believe that a black woman has no mind of her own, no feelings, even pain and anger. The Black man who is a victim of racial discrimination wants the black woman to be his ‘shock-absorber’ in whom he can safely discharge all his frustrations, anger and lust. No one bothers about her hunger, pain and deep longing to be loved and appreciated as she has been the “slave of slave” and the ‘other of the other’. Thus sex, race, class and culture combined together to project her image as an uncomplaining and all-accepting stereotyped woman.

The double jeopardy of race and sex, causes crippling effects on black female psyche, as is observed by Grier and Cobbs in their work Black Rage:

Blackness is the antithesis of a creamy white skin, her lips are thick, her hair is kinky and short – she is, in fact, the antithesis of American beauty.... There can be no doubt that she will develop a damaged self-concept and an impairment of her feminine narcissism, which will have profound consequences for her character development. (Manvi 81)
Gayle Jones, in her fiction confronts the psychological brutality of black sexual oppression in a subtle manner, by presenting the ineffectual attempts of black women to identify themselves with white women. Similarly in *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison, powerfully presents black women’s urge to be appreciated as beautiful women by portraying Pecula Breedlove who ‘wants nothing more and nothing less than to be a blue-eyed blonde’.

According to the white standards of beauty the black women were branded as ugly and unattractive and it annoyed them a lot. These black women were caught in a web of stereotypical images of strong, tough-minded, masculine, sharp-tongued amazons or ‘mules of the world’ in the words of Zora Neale Hurston. They wanted to deconstruct these racist and sexist definitions of black womanhood. When white women tried to eradicate the ‘soft and sweet – helpless female image’, black women reacted in an entirely different manner. Since black women were treated as ‘manish’ women or ‘non-females’, they wanted to prove their feminine qualities and charm. These black women who so far attempted to come up to white standards of beauty, began to declare that ‘Black is beautiful’ during the 1960s.

In her work *Towards a Black Feminist Criticism*, the African-American critic Barbara Smith argued that black women writers were not given proper attention by academic feminism. Similarly after a few years the black poet and writer Audre Lorde made the observation as a representative of all black women; “By and large within the women’s movement today, white
women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the words *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist" (Bertens 102).

If white women fought for their identity as women, the doubly-denied and unfortunate black women fought for their very recognition as human beings. When black women realised that silence, suppression and evasion are not solutions for their sufferings, many of them come forward to assert their identity and to articulate their unquestionable right for a decent existence. These Afro-American women writers were convinced of the fact that mere superficial differences in race, colour and culture do not discount their dignity as human beings and they proved that the black women “with their folk memories, their special skills (midwifery, for instance), and their intimacy with the natural world were clearly distinct from white women” (Bertens 102).

For Afro-American women writers, African heritage and feminist impulses are equally important. They have projected their political, social, religious and personal experiences through their black female characters. These black women writers have projected, “The intensity, complexity and diversity of the experience of black women from their own point of view”(Christian 16). They have made the black women, who have always been in the margin, central characters. They have bravely rejected the misrepresentations of black womanhood and they shattered the negative
stereotypes through various forms of literature. They always express optimistic hopes for black women, by asserting black feminist consciousness.

I ideological and political investments made by these Afro-American women writers accomplished a spirit of unity and a growing sense of black feminist consciousness among black women in America. In addition to that, these black feminist writers challenged and dismissed the western feminist ideologies which always served the needs and desires of the dominant group of white women by making the subordinate sets of women including blacks believe that they too share the same interest. Like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Gayle Jones, Paule Marshall also used the medium of fiction to declare that feminism is not a movement with a limited vision, but a political strategy initiated by women which encompasses the liberation of all women for the welfare of all human beings and which doubtlessly demands human rights for all.

Paule Marshall makes audacious attacks on the patriarchal conventions, inventions and androcentric ideologies of Afro-American society in her novels which are based on the logic and experience of women in general – black and white. But she concentrates on the problems of the neglected and misunderstood Afro-American women. She strategically analyses their complex images as they appear in the male-dominated society. In the novels of Marshall a number of white women characters are significantly included because they too are victims of sexual politics and simultaneously agents of
racial oppression in the case of black people, especially black women and children.

According to Cheri Register, the major task of a feminist writer is to illuminate the 'female experience'. In that sense Paule Marshall is a true and daring feminist, brightly illuminating the forgotten and unknown lives of Afro-American women with deep understanding. The resulting vision of her novels is at once personal and political. "Her West-Indian heritage expands her vision so that ultimately she seeks synthesis of Black people – of third world people. At times this vision takes shape through the existing dichotomies of Black/White, man/woman, strong/weak, and life/death" (Kimberely 71).

Paule Marshall was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1929 as the second of the three children born to her Barbadian parents who had immigrated to the United States shortly after the First World War. It is remarkable that she started writing at the early age of ten. Soon after her graduation from Brooklyn college in 1952, she embarked upon her career as a writer for a Black publication: Our World Magazine. There she had numerous chances of travelling to Brazil and West Indies. Those journeys were of tremendous significance as they invested her with wide experience and information regarding these places which she used in her fiction later. During 1950s and 1960s she was associated with a revolutionary group of black artists and Negro intellectuals. She has taught at Yale, Columbia, Massachusetts and Iowa. She lives in New York city.
Paule Marshall’s contribution to Afro-American literature is quite significant and it consists of four acclaimed novels, two short story collections and a large number of articles. In all her novels, she speaks for women who are pushed aside just because they are of another race, colour, culture or nationality. She makes a clarion call in her fiction for all men and women to work together not only for the liberation of black women, but also for the welfare of the entire humanity by breaking the man-made manacles of gender, race, class and the like. While passionately trying to validate the black experiences, the novelist consciously attempts to minimise racial and social antagonisms between white people and black people, which are never constructive. As Marshall believes in universal brotherhood, she advises her people not to be depressed and aggressive, but to be aware of their own, unquestionable rights and to be systematically assertive.

Helene Christol observes that “Paule Marshall began her literary career as a writer when black American women’s literature was at a major crossroad, a crossroad that became the starting point for the contemporary black women writers’ thrust forward to a courageous revision of American history, society and literature from a black feminist perspective” (248). It is true that her first novel Brown Girl, Brown Stones published in 1959, was a pioneer work which anticipated the key features of the deconstructive and reconstructive black feminist fiction of the last three decades of twentieth century. Marshall adapted it for CBS Television Workshop and following the success of this, she was awarded a Ford Foundation grant.
Marshall started writing her first novel in a period when the works of James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison were immensely popular. These black American novelists had powerfully presented the theme of black man’s search for identity in White America. Paule Marshall was much influenced by their writings and she adopted certain qualities of their protagonists in order to give visibility to the ‘invisible woman’ in America.

For instance, *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* is an honest representation of a young Barbadian immigrant girl’s struggles for self-discovery and search for identity. It is often described as a fine female bildungsroman detailing the protagonist’s physical, emotional and intellectual growth. Her mother Silla is an ambitious and powerful Negro woman opposing an oppressive social order. Her father Deighton Boyce is considered a handsome, flashy, never-do-well and dreamer by the others. He loves and hates his wife for ‘the pain of her childhood’. Selina struggles to find her identity between her ambitious and materialistic mother and a romantic and idealist father. “At the end of the novel, the father, Deighton Boyce, is dead by suicide, the oldest daughter, Ina, is withdrawn into the church and a safe dull marriage, Silla is alone, and Selina is left wandering, trying to make sense out of her world and her history” (Afterword, *Brown Girl Brown Stones* 131).

The gradual process of growing up or the maturing experience of the protagonists is verbalised in detail in all the novels of Paule Marshall. This growing experience encompasses not only the physical growth but also the
mental and intellectual development of the central female characters as in the case of Selina Boyce in *Brown Girl, Brown Stones*. By the end of the novel, Selina becomes quite conscious of her existence as a unique individual, who seeks fulfilment and integration of personality into Afro-American society.

Marshall’s second novel *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* focuses on how the central character, Merle Kinbona, becomes an emotionally grown-up black woman leader whereas her third novel *The Praise Song for the Widow* portrays how the protagonist Avey Johnson, an exasperated adult, undertakes a spiritual journey to realise and accept her identity as a black woman. Avey Johnson’s sense of security, self-confidence and spiritual harmony are clearly manifested in her changed patterns of behaviour just after the completion of the severe, yet successful Carriacou excursion. At a later stage, all the protagonists of Paule Marshall understand the significance of the painful past experiences which have hurt them a lot, but contributed considerably to making them brave, new women. The periods of emotional strain were inevitable for their empowerment and enviable advancement as independent individuals.

African-American literature has a complex relationship with the Black cultural heritage of Africa and the materialistic culture of America. Frequently novels by the twentieth-century writers like Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Paule Marshall explore and expose the inner turmoil and the incessant
struggles of the black people in America to reconcile the two opposing cultural forces and conflicting value systems of which they are a part. The duality of their cultural legacy causes many confusions, complications, confrontations and compunctions in their daily lives. As they do not internalise the culture and values of either Africa or America fully, they experience a kind of cultural unbelongingness and a sense of incompleteness all through their lives. Hence the feeling of rootlessness, homelessness and identity crisis are important themes in Afro-American writers.

Afro-American women’s literature also reflects the meeting of two cultures—the African and the Western and its essential consequences in the lives of black people, especially in the lives of black women in America. For instance, in the novels of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, there is an enthusiastic exploration of the whole issue of black women’s place in American society; they depict black women’s pangs of alienation and experiences of emptiness in their everyday life. But in addition, black women writers make a radical questioning of the traditional white male order, which has been constructed at the expense of the ethnic groups, the poor, the illiterate and women. In their fiction they have frequently challenged this hierarchical social order based on sexism and racism and bravely represented the theme of black women’s quest for identity and autonomy along with their need for achievement and self-fulfilment.
Paule Marshall is one of the black women writers who are interested in the lives of black people with a dual cultural heritage. In her story collection *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* (1959) Marshall deals with the cultural dilemma and identity crisis of black people in America. The American and West Indian background of Paule Marshall enables her to understand the cultural variations and conflicts within the black diaspora. In addition to that, her literary career which extends from her first story “The Valley Between” (1954) to her latest novel *The Daughters* (1996) provides her ample experiences, emotional maturity and a well-balanced view of life. The theme of cultural conflict evidently assumes prominence in the second and third novels of Paule Marshall.

Paule Marshall’s second novel, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969) is about the inhabitants of a small, under-developed area of a Caribbean island known as Bournhills and their fear and reluctance to accept modernization. The conflict between rich and poor, white and black, town man and country man and the forces of progress and those of tradition are dealt with in detail in this novel. The central character Merle Kinbona is a mulatto woman who emigrates to England. She was drawn to a lesbian relationship with a wealthy older white woman who, long after that affair had ended, ruined Merle’s happy marriage by telling the young husband about the affair. Then Merle takes a brave decision to make a meaningful life by serving the less fortunate black people at Bournhills and she acts as a link between them and the team of social scientists from an American research-and-development
foundation who have arrived at the island to improve the living conditions of the black people there. According to Henrietta Buckmaster, Merle acts as:

... a bridge between past and present, attitude and action. The island is her bone and breath. But she knows what other worlds are like. She has lived in England; she now runs a guest house and has no illusions. She is a remarkable character, her spiritual intuitions are negligible, her human understanding profound....

(9)

Like her first two novels, Paule Marshall’s third novel Praise Song for the Widow (1982) also explores the cultural continuity of African descendants in White America. It is the story of Avey Johnson, an affluent and unhappy black woman who loses her husband and happy life during their mad materialistic pursuits. But Avey, who is about to retire from her supervisory job at the State Motor Vehicle Department, experiences a spiritual rebirth while vacationing in the West Indies, with the help of an unselfish, old man Lebert Joseph. During her Caribbean cruise which she cuts short due to some “odd discomfort” Avey undergoes a severe spiritual turmoil and seems to lose a firm grasp on the meaning of her past life of prosperity and power. Avey’s participation in the rituals of home-coming festival of Carriacou islanders and their prayer addressed to the ancestors called “Beg Pardon” produces a palpable psychic healing to her and she readily recognizes the relevance of her life as a black woman.
In all her novels Paule Marshall explores how the modern materialistic civilisation threatens the traditional black culture and deals with fragmentation of culture and tradition due to the imposition of white man's culture on the blacks. Thus the wide gap between the two conflicting cultures, white and black, is essentially at the heart of her fiction.

Though the major concerns of black feminist writers are economic survival, ethnic and racial discrimination and issues of gender, Paule Marshall gives her priority to sexism and racism in her novels and painstakingly portrays black women's sufferings, suppressions and oppressions in Afro-American social set up, while they struggle for a significant existence. Being a black feminist, Paule Marshall knows well that coming to terms with racial conflict is an inevitable part of growing up for a black girl in White-America and hence she focuses on the problems of selfhood and isolation experienced by black women.

In her *Brown Girl Brown Stones*, Paule Marshall points out both the aspirations and frustrations of the black female adolescent Selina Boyce. The fictional account of her first experience of racial conflict and its impact on the fruition of her youthful dreams is really touching. After a triumphant recital at her college, Selina, the only black girl of the Modern Dance Group, is brutally and unexpectedly reminded of her colour and race by Margaret's malicious mother Mrs Berton. She lavishly compliments Selina for her poise and speech with the remark:
“It’s just wonderful how you’ve taken your race’s natural talent for dancing and music and developed it ....” But when she looked up and saw her reflection in those pale eyes, she knew that the woman saw one thing above all else. Those eyes were a well-lighted mirror in which, for the first time, Selina truly saw — with a sharp and shattering clarity — the full meaning of her black skin.

(289)

She madly runs out of Margaret’s house — “like an animal broken by a long hunt” (290) and rushes to Clive, the young and unsuccessful artist for consolation. But the spineless lover who is accustomed to such racial discrimination fails to find her experience provoking and doesn’t comfort her. Startled by his indifference and inertia, she puts an end to her love affair with him. But this first exposure to racist attitudes widens her outlook about life and people. She gains a sense of identification with her mother, other women and the whole West Indian tradition. She acquires a new maturity and accepts the best in her heritage.

Bell hooks says in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* that “white women may be victimised by sexism, but racism enables them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black people” (Gamble 225). For instance, in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, the central character, Merle Kinbona, has to suffer a lot at the hands of white female persecutors. She is always haunted by the agonising and shocking memory of witnessing the murder of her mother,
by a white woman who was the lawful wife of her white father. The English lady who ill treats and misuses Merle during her college days in London and later puts an end to her marital bliss by informing her husband about their homo-sexual relation without any qualms is another female oppressor in her life. While she is struggling to forget her endless miseries, loss and humiliation, behind the facade of ‘endless chatter and assumed indifference’, she has to confront with the immensely influential and affluent white victimiser Harriet, the wife of the Anthropologist and sociologist Saul Amron, who works for the development of Bournhills:

Harriet represents the spirit of the white world. ... she fails to comprehend why a woman would sell the eggs to someone else rather than feed her own family. She takes it to be another backward streak of the incorrigibles. Her impotent anger and frustration come out vividly in the carnival scene where she realises that the reign of people like her is over and a new generation is emerging. Her death seems to be a symbolic end of all that white America stands for and the ever-mourning waves of the ocean perform the ablution of the old sins of the past. (Kapi 312)

*Identity Crisis* is a recurrent theme in Black fiction. Like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, Paule Marshall also delves deep into this theme of black women’s search for identity and acceptance. They present women
characters who think that they are not beautiful and attractive as per the white standards of beauty. At the beginning of the novel, Selina Boyce dreams herself as a white beauty and walks with white, beautiful imaginary gown spread to both sides and moving gracefully in the parlour. This is not a mere description of an adolescent delusion – but it is a hidden and painful dream and desire of black women to identify themselves with white women which cannot be fulfilled ever. The question of identity and selfhood occur in all the works of Paule Marshall.

When they share the black identity, which is the community identity, at least they experience a sense of belonging and a kind of unity. But when they try to be like white people by accepting white culture and the western way of living, it causes numerous psychological scars and frustrations due to the loss of membership in the community and the pain of separation. Like Avey Johnson, finally, these characters accept blackness and their racial identity as essential for a peaceful life. The fact that they are part of a greater entity which is greater than their individuality comforts them and confirms their own identity and self-importance.

Pre-marital and extra-marital relations of women are usually discouraged and considered mean in all patriarchal systems. And for black people, marriage is an institution which imposes heavy responsibilities on black women and demands their unflinching loyalty to black men and children whereas marriage, adds to the pleasure and privileges of black men who are
always free to lead a licentious life and spend their negligible income for luxuries or other women who are either white or black. In *Praise Song for the Widow* Avey Johnson seriously suspects her husband's fidelity and often makes unpleasant interrogations to know the truth. The political justification for such a fictional situation lies in the ever-present and hidden fear of being disliked or abandoned by men in the minds of women.

Paule Marshall presents the oppressed black women who are even ready to forgive and forget the lustful adventures of their husbands if they satisfy the minimum needs of the family. In *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* Marshall describes how sadly and submissively these women condone the extra-marital relations and irresponsible behaviour of black men. The conversation between Silla and Virgie reveals the lamentable and low marital status of black women in America.

“Where he is?”

“Who?” Silla lifted remote eyes.

“The beautiful – ugly Deighton – Upstairs?”

“Upstairs, what! You know every Sat’day he does run bird-speed to the concubine to lick out what’s left from his pay”
“But Deighton oughta shop.” Virgie roared her disapproval.

“Nobody did say he can’t have the hot-ass woman but, c’ dear, his own got to come first.”

“Ah Virgie, you does talk sense. Who in the bloody hell care how many women he got. Those women ain got nothing but a man using them. But his own got to come first”. (31)

Silla’s words evidently express the idea of sexual objectification and exploitation of women within the structure of marriage and outside it. Through her words, the novelist underlines the victimisation and sexual politics which exist within marriage and in most of the man-woman relationship where men are the users and women are the ‘commodities’ of sensual and sexual gratification. It can be seen in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, where the protagonist Merle Kinbona is thrown out of her marriage by her insensitive and hard-hearted husband as if she were an inexpensive sex-object. Also it proves that even today the gendered power structure does not tolerate the extra-marital or pre-marital relations of women whether it is hetero-sexual or homo-sexual.

Paule Marshall strikes vehemently against a male dominated society where women are treated as mere sex objects devoid of intelligence and efficiency. In her fictional world, she reverses the power-structured male-female relationship and intentionally invests her women characters with much power. Hence the black women figure prominently in Paule Marshall’s
writings because their power shapes her work, as admitted by Marshall herself in an interview in *Essence Magazine* (May 1979), which is quoted by Mary Helen Washington in the Afterword to the novel *Brown Girl, Brown Stones*:

I am concerned about letting them speak their piece, letting them be central figures, actor, activist in fiction rather than just backdrops or background figures. I want them to be central characters. Women in fiction seldom are. Traditionally in most fiction men are the wheelers and dealers. They are the ones in whom power is invested. I wanted to turn that around. I wanted women to be centers of power. My feminism takes its expression through my work. Women are central for me. They can easily embody the power principles as a man. (324)

Black feminist fiction projects angry women. They are depicted as angry and depressed because their family, the only institution to which they turn to for emotional, mental and material support, has been degenerating. It is not so depressive in the case of black men who find it easier to move forward in white society with materialistic goals rather than familial goals. That is why Toni Morrison, paraphrasing the painful and helpless plight of black women, comments on one of her character: “She had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself” (Shiach 292).
According to Barbara Christian, “Black women’s literature is not just a matter of discourse, but is a way of acknowledging one’s existence; it has to do with giving consolation to oneself that one does exist. It is an attempt to make meaning out of that existence” (Shiach 292).

A microcosm of the contemporary Afro-American society is realistically represented in the fiction of Paule Marshall. In her fiction Paule Marshall points out that family which was once viewed as the embodiment of order and harmony has been degenerating and the institution of marriage instead of ensuring a sense of security and peace of mind to women, in fact, deprives women of their pride and freedom and makes them reactive, repulsive and rebellious. That is why the black feminist poet Adrienne Rich ironically portrays marriage as an agency which sets limits on women’s lives, in her poem “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers”.

Paule Marshall is a novelist who is very sensitive to the sorrows and sufferings of black women within the patriarchal structure of marriage. In Brown Girl, Brown Stones, Silla is totally disillusioned and disappointed by the irresponsible and idiotic ways of her ‘beautiful ugly’ husband Deighton Boyce. In The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, conjugal conflicts make Merle a mad woman – a woman of intermittent nervous breakdown, ceaseless talking and showy nature and appearance. Similarly the novelist presents the past pleasures and the lingering pains of Avey Johnson’s marital life with her money-minded husband Jerome Johnson in a flash-back, through the memories
of Avey in *Praise Song for the Widow*. Very cautiously Marshall portrays the fall of Jerome Johnson as it is a gradual process. At first, he is presented as a happy man leading a contented life with his loving wife and dear children. They sing together and dance together. But slowly he has been captivated by white America's materialism and within a few years he becomes a total stranger, "Johnson" not 'Jay' to his wife. And according to Avey his real death occurred long before his physical death and hence at the funeral of Jerome Johnson, everyone ‘congratulated her on how well she had held up in the face of her great loss’.

Paule Marshall’s fiction does not support the cultural assumption that men are women’s protectors. In traditional literature, women opt for safety rather than risk and they seek the safety within the institution of marriage. But Marshall has depicted women who have to protect not only their children, but their husbands too. In her novels, she dismisses the idea that a woman’s highest fulfilment lies in having a husband and children. Her protagonists – Selina is unmarried, Merle is abandoned by her husband and Avey is widowed – denounce marriage which is in effect an agent of oppression. There is Selina’s sister Ina, who seeks peace and security in marriage, but it is reluctant acceptance of a predictable life and a withdrawal from active social life.

The spiritual return of black women in America and in the black diaspora to Africa is a recurrent theme in Paule Marshall’s fiction. According to the novelist, Africa is simultaneously a concrete destination and spiritual
homeland for her female protagonists. The novelist herself proudly and gladly describes her own experiences of going back to Africa twice as “a native daughter” and how it gets reflected in her novels, in an interview with Marys Conde:

There was also a spiritual, emotional and affective facet of my return. Well before my journey to Africa, I was conscious of my African ancestry. During the 1920’s, I was raised among Barbadians who would constantly talk about Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association. The West Indian Women around me when I was a young girl spoke of Garvey’s “back to Africa” movement in which they were active participants. You could say that Africa was an essential part of the emotional fabric of my world. Also, when I began to write my first novel, Brown Girl, Brown Stones (1959), I experienced a necessity to make a spiritual return to my sources. At the end of the book, Selina Boyce, leaves the U.S. in order to return to the Carribbean. In my second novel, The Chosen Place, The Timeless People (1969), the heroine, Merle Kinbona, completes the voyage to the Caribbean only to depart later for Africa. These two novels, plus my third Praise Song for The Widow(1983), in which my heroine, Avey Avatara Johnson, makes the mythic return to the Caribbean, again form a trilogy. (52-53)
The novelist thinks that in the life of her protagonists a spiritual return to Africa or to one's origins is essential for the reintegration of that which was lost in the collective historical past and which was sadly neglected during their feverish materialist pursuits. The awareness of being an African descendant gives her characters a sense of unity with all black people and a feeling of pride in their tradition and culture.

At the end of the novel Brown Girl, Brown Stones the protagonist Selina is going for a journey to Barbados to seek her identity in relation with the African culture there. Merle in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People also decides to visit her husband and child in Africa as part of her purposeful search for identity and roots. Similarly Avey Johnson, the central character in Praise Song for the Widow conducts Carriacou excursion which is in fact her spiritual journey to African values and culture.

Paule Marshall firmly believes that black women in America and the Diaspora can play an important and effective role in solving many of the problems of the illiterate and poverty stricken black people of African nations. According to Marshall, Afro-American women can be more influential, and effective in the world:

First in liberating ourselves from the inferiority complex imposed by the colonial system whose vestiges are still with us. Once reconciled with ourselves, we can begin to impose our own point
of view, and, in this way, make ourselves useful in the struggle for the liberation of our brothers and sisters in Africa. (52)

For instance, in her second novel, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, Paule Marshall creates the protagonist, Merle Kinbona, as a dynamic black woman leader who strives sincerely for the liberation of the less fortunate and the oppressed black men and women around her. Merle Kinbona, who always stands for the poor and the downtrodden, is a marvellously unconventional woman. She is a humanist more than a feminist. This daring black woman leader defies the degenerate and dictatorial ways of control of white people and authorities over the poor and the illiterate blacks of Bournhills. Her empathetic responses and effective leadership in their perplexing struggles for justice and human dignity make her dear to all of them. She denounces the white people vehemently for the deplorable and depressive living conditions of black people working in the cane fields at Bournhills. She leads them in their revolt when the cane factory is closed down.

In *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* Paule Marshall has created a miccosom, not only of Bournhills but also of all underdeveloped societies in the Third world under the psychological and economical control. These third world people are still exploited just as they were in the slave times or colonial period, with a slight variation in the manner and means of exploitation. Merle Kinbona becomes the voice of these voiceless people.
When Lyle Hurston explains the plans his government has for development by turning the country into a vacation paradise, she tells him:

Is that way we can exist? Well, if so, it’s no different now and when they were around here selling in for thirty pounds sterling. Not really. Not when you look deep. Consider the Kingsleys still hold the purse strings and are allowed to do as they damn please, never mind you chaps are supposed to be in charge. And the Little Fella is still bleeding his life out in a cane field.... The chains are still on. Oh Lyle, can’t you see that? ... Read your history, man! (Nazareth 124)

Paule Marshall’s characters are representative voices of all black men and women in America, as Sandi Russel says, “Marshall present characters who through their language and actions speak metaphorically for a larger group. They are individual characters who articulate the complex of a community’s action and desires” (Russel 114).

Marshall’s female characters, who are once victims of self pity and deep inferiority complex and undergo severe trials and ordeals, slowly but successfully move to maturity, reconcile with their Western culture and African heritage and finally emerge as powerful and dignified ‘female heroes’ who can make remarkable contributions to their community. All of her novels earnestly explore the central character’s journey of self discovery and the process of
liberation. That is why Ebele O. Eko comments about her third novel as follows:

Paule Marshall’s *Praise Song for the Widow*, … is not only a chronological continuum of her exploration of growth and maturity processes, it seems in itself a journey’s end, a mission accomplished, a “breaking forth into joy” of the essence of Black soul. The author advocates that the Black writers’ burden should be one of recreating Black history in heroic terms with the abundance of folk tradition around them. *Praise Song for the Widow* is, in that sense, a duty fulfilled. It celebrates the triumph of Africa’s indomitable and collective spirit, thus bequeathing to her Black readers, a new sense of pride and confidence in their heritage…. (232)

A new set of values are projected by black feminist writers. The value of sisterhood is frequently projected and promoted by them. The epistolary novel *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1983, depicts the story of a young, abused, uneducated Black girl, Celie, who is married to a cruel, hard hearted middle aged man. By her bonding with a woman, Shug Avey, who is a popular singer, Celie evolves into womanhood and gains a sense of self-worth. Shug’s words to Celie are worth recording: “You not my maid. I didn’t bring you to Mempis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet” (218). Toni
Morrison also presents the theme of sisterhood in her novel *Sula* (1973). In *Sula*, Morrison focuses on the warm friendship between two black women, Sula Peace and Net Wright. Both share a sense of alienation from community and family and have unfulfilling and frustrating relationships with men.

Paule Marshall also emphasises female solidarity in her fiction. For instance Selina Boyce, the young protagonist of *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* who feels limited by her sex and fights against her womanhood, is initiated to the world of adults, love happiness and beauty by Suggey Skete who is a prostitute. Paule Marshall, like other black feminist writers, encourages the enriching and mutually enhancing relations between women as it support them to establish their selfhood.

Economic security is a matter of prime importance for black women. As a black feminist who is also a participant observer of black reality Paule Marshall is deeply convinced of the fact that income generating activities are essential for the peaceful and decent life of black women in America. Hence she purposefully empowers female characters with education and employment. For them their career is as important as marriage and motherhood. For instance, in *Brown Girl, Brown Stones*, Silla is an employed women who operates huge machines like men arousing simultaneously fear and admiration in the minds of the onlookers. She is a woman who knows the value of financial prudence and whose sole aim in life is to possess a brown stone house in America which is indeed a symbol of self actualisation and social status for
her. Hence she blames her husband Deighton Boyce for his irresponsible way of life and lack of ambition to buy a house of their own:

“You put aside anything this week toward the down payment on the house?”

“Not penny one” he cried and wanted to wind his arms tight around his head to shut out her voice, wanted suddenly to strike her into silence.

Silla’s wrath broke and she whirled from the sink, her voice flailing across the kitchen. “You mean it all gone on fancy silk shirt and shoes and caterwauling with your concubine.”

He shrugged at the old accusation. “You’s God; you must know.”

Suddenly her anger was tempered by bewilderment. “But be – Jesus Christ, what kind of man is you, nuh?... Here every Bajan is saving if it’s only a dollar a week and buying house and he wun save a penny. He ain got nothing and ain looking to get nothing...”

“How you mean I ain got nothing.” He flared, “I got land”

“Land?”...
"I hear today self. Piece of ground muh sister that dead left me".

In order to materialise her long-cherished dream, she makes certain manipulations to sell the ancestral property of her husband Deighton. But it has been Deighton's favourite project to make a fantastic and palatial building in his own land and to enjoy the rest of his life there with his daughters and wife. Discovering the deception, deeply wounded Deighton takes the whole amount of money from his wife and spends it foolishly and lavishly for trifles, causing eternal enmity and estrangement in the mind of his wife which ultimately culminates in his suicide. Here the novelist poses the important feminist idea that economic self-sufficiency and financial independence are essential requisites for women's liberation, as the source of many of the family problems is located within economic matters. In addition to that economic productivity obviously adds to the self-respect, self-confidence and social-status of black women living in the materialistic, western cultural context.

Black women miserably fail to get protection, affection, stability, order and freedom from their male counter parts. On the contrary, black men make futile attempts to get a positive, empathetic and encouraging response from their women while they explain their great plans, visions and dreams. Paule Marshall presents a number of couples who are terribly wounded by incomprehension or inability to understand each other. Silla and Deighton, Selina and Clive, Merle and her husband, the white couple Saul Amron and
Harriet, Avey and Jerome Johnson. Marion and her husband—all are victims of unhappy, unfulfilling hetero-sexual relations. While analysing the man-man relationship as represented in the novels of Marshall, one will be reminded of the words of the notable Jungian analyst, Robert A. Johnson, “Men and women are so often like ships passing in the night without seeing or comprehending each other” (43). The novelist advocates for a gentle, respectful, intelligent and mutually enhancing relationship between men and women while portraying the happy days Avey Johnson and her ‘Jay’ shared together during the first decade of their married life.

Black male children enjoy special care and attention of their parents, especially of mothers as Paule Marshall points out it in Brown Girl, Brown Stones. Silla lashes against her mother-in-law, who by showering too much affection on her son made him an easy-going, pleasure-seeking and unsteady person and a good for nothing husband and father. In her words “Deighton’s mother was so foolish ‘cause she did think the sun rise and set’pon Deighton one, ‘cause he was the last and only boy…. That boy had some of every thing coming up. Always with shoe ‘pon his foot and white shirt…” (32). When all black people get locked into their works for survival, Deighton spends time and money on himself for making himself handsome and attractive.

Paule Marshall, simultaneously addresses the racial issues and the ‘woman question’ in her novels through her female characters like Silla, Selina, Merle Kinbona, Avey Johnson, Marion and the like who are indeed
representative black female voices. She has created women characters who are willing to accept responsibilities, willing to learn from life and ready to put forth the effort necessary for changed behaviour in order to become women of self-respect and self-actualisation. Since gender is a major constitutive aspect of the novels of Paule Marshall, one can easily see many shocking violations of the cultural construct of black womanhood in them.

By an artistic articulation of Black reality, the feelings, emotions, responses and experiences of black women in fact attain an irresistible fictional intensity and a motivating momentum in the novels of Paule Marshall. Definitely the author's aim is to help all black women gain high degrees of self-respect and a sense of direction to move ahead successfully in White America while they are retarded and opposed by the powerful forces of racism and sexism. According to Leela Kapi, "some of the major themes in her works concern identity crisis, the race problem, the importance of tradition for the black American, and the need for sharing to achieve meaningful relationships. In her technique she blends judiciously the best of the past tradition with the innovations of recent years" (49).

In her fiction Paule Marshall gives a detailed description of the lives, ideas, aspirations and preoccupations of black women in America. She presents numerous situations in which the Negro women are unfairly treated just because of colour, gender and lower economical status and how they struggle for a peaceful and successful survival within the family and in the
society. In fact these women are symbols of female strength and black pride. Unlike traditional novelists, Marshall shifts emphasis from male protagonist to female protagonists who are not at all stereotyped characters. Her deep psychological insights are evident in characterisation and thematic construction. Thus the feminism expressed in Paule Marshall’s novels merits special study “because female desire, what women want, is so repressed or misrepresented in a phallocentric society, its expression becomes a key location for deconstructing that control” (Eagleton 13).

Although the novels of Paule Marshall are set in Afro-American background, one can easily notice in them, the emergence of a universal theme – the fury and frustration of the oppressed and the marginalised due to an unfair and unequal distribution of power, violation of human rights and neglect of human integrity and dignity among people who are compartmentalised on the basis of colour, sex, class, religion and nationality. The novelist declares that all human beings, whether men or women, black or white, child or adult, have the same basic needs for affection acceptance and appreciation. Also she assures that wherever and whenever women enjoy security, affection and a sense of belonging, they definitely overcome their limiting beliefs, fears and inhibitions and prove themselves as positive and productive personalities.