

# An Interrogation of Black Female Individuals and Collective Black Identity in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow

J. Babitha<sup>1</sup>, Dr. S. Adinarayanan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar (Part -time), Roll No: 2101180022, PG & Research, Department of English, Swami Vivekananda Arts & Science College, Villupuram, Affiliated to Annamalai University, Chidambaram

<sup>2</sup>Research Supervisor & Head, Associate Professor, Department of English, Swami Vivekananda Arts & Science College, Affiliated to Annamalai University, Chidambaram

## Abstract

This paper scrutinizes the affinity between the black women and their collective black identity. It will demonstrate how Afro-American women's collective black subconscious is shaped by sexism and racist oppression, enabling them to rebel against it and achieve self-actualization in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*. The protagonist of the novel, Avey Johnson, is put into a slumbering state by Marshall, preparing her for the trip back in time to not just Avey's but the entire black community's history. As Avey travels back in time, she becomes a conduit for the pain that the black community has endured from enslavement to the present. The trip also presents the revival of the cultural heritage as a remedy for the Afro-American community's defections. This path towards the pursuit of black identity is a common one. All ladies of Afro-American descent who are seeking a new identity can benefit from Avey's qualities.

**Keywords:** Black, Female, Collective, Individual, Identity

Paule Marshall is the first black woman writer in the tradition of black women's novels to offer genuine depictions of many black womanhood models, stepping beyond of the traditional boundaries. She tries to accurately depict the web of emotions, drives, and misfortunes that make up human action. She conveys that her women are not victims and reflects the diversity and complexity of their lives by portraying them as social, political, and cultural actors. Because she is the one who has created these new stereotypes of female characters in relation to their culture and community, Marshall is also a groundbreaking black woman author. In addition to her role as a transmitter of Afrocentric culture and a sculptor of complex personalities, she is a trailblazer in the development of feminine aesthetics, which are ideas created by women that define a stance of and for women.

Marshall recounts the tale of the Afro-American widow on a Caribbean cruise in *Praisesong for the Widow*. Avatar "Avey" Johnson has fully given up her African ancestry and assimilated into the materialistic American lifestyle. When Avey starts having dreams about her ancestors while on a Caribbean cruise, she becomes uneasy. She cannot get this mysterious dream out of her head. Avey disembarks in Genada with the intention of flying home to remove herself from the emotional distress she connected to the island. The locals accept her into their community and invite her to take part in their activities after she misses her flight and ends up stuck on the island. Avey agrees and goes with them to

Carriacou, an island connected to the middle passage, a sea route that was used to transfer slaves from Africa to the United States.

Under the guidance of the elderly Legba figure Lebert Joseph, who represents the African God of the Crossroads, Avey starts to recall the folktales and oral histories she was exposed to as a kid and joins the inlanders in their celebration and dancing. Her involvement sparks a spiritual quest that demonstrates self-discovery. One must go through a crisis and occasionally vacillate between cultural, ancestral values, roots, and economic imbalance before reaching self-discovery. In *Praisesong for the Widow*, Avey, the main character, must deal with this upheaval, which at times breaks her and causes her psyche to become damaged.

Old Lebert Joseph asks Avey Johnson a lot of questions, such, “And what is you? Which country are you from?” (167) She is confused by both queries. Marshall has built this tale on these key questions. When Avey is unable to comprehend where she stands and where she belongs, these are the questions that leave her in a state of psychological servitude. Marshall explores these concerns in the novel by following the story of Avey, a black widow.

*Praisesong for the Widow* begins with an incident in which Avey Johnson begins to dream about her past while on a lavish Caribbean Island trip. Marshall wants to guide us on a path of self-discovery and recovery through this adventure. Avey stands in for black women who experienced the anguish of tyranny and enslavement. the suffering that Africans endure daily. African people’s dispersed existence, the circumstances under which Afro-Americans must live, and the sacrifices they have made or must make to thrive in American culture. Additionally, these circumstances always entail a separation from their emotional foundation. Avey discovers that this is a recurrence of the historical separation that also occurred in her personal life. Only Marshall’s heroin can withstand the circumstances, which need a strong will, patience, and sacrifice.

Marshall focusses on the rift or rupture that occurs in one’s spirit, mind, and soul when one embarks on a path of identity achievement in *Praisesong for the Widow*. Avey fluctuates between different identification statuses as she makes decisions throughout life in her quest to discover who she is. Her search and her roles vary according to the various crisis situations in her life. Avey is experiencing an identity crisis when we first meet her. She decided to leave from the ship in Grenada while on a cruise with her pals because she felt an overwhelming need to go home. She knew that she and her two best friends had only been on their fifteen-day cruise for a few days. Avey is caught between wanting to go home and how her friend will react to her choice.

Avey dreamed that she was in complete emotional turmoil and that her ancestral house, her ancestral land, was beckoning to her. Through the dream, she was able to connect with her roots and past. Her heart and mind were constantly filled with recollections of her hometown and her roots. She had suppressed those memories to adapt to American culture. Her urge to flee the ship is triggered by her recollections of her great-aunt and her stories. It appears Aunt Cuney’s legendary hand was drawing her back to her roots through her dream and organising a performance, Carriacau, to show Avey the lost cultural identity she was seeking. Avey nearly unintentionally abandons her companion and the vacation currently, revealing her deep-seated psychological fissures. Like how someone with a fractured mentality may act strangely without realising it, she even does not question the thoughts that motivate her to act. Through Aunt Cuney’s tales, Avey had learnt about her forebears. She had been exposed to Ibo history since childhood. She had to fulfil the responsibilities of a wife and mother as she grew up and follow her plans, principles, and

aspirations for the future. She still held in her heart and soul the ideals of her great-aunt, the Ibos, and the Africans who arrived on the US south coast.

Later, when Avey encounters financial difficulties, her quest for financial advancement diverts her attention from staying connected to her heritage. As she is affected by western beliefs, she becomes sidetracked. She adheres to the American philosophy that is required by American culture. Avey's pursuit of the American Dream as a wife and mother gradually pulls her away from her cultural customs, which are suppressed because of her altered values. By giving up the cultural customs she followed to achieve the American ideal, she disassociates herself from her identity. However, Avey is unable to maintain her African identity. She cannot fully relate to the American concept.

Black people lose their identity when they pursue the American Dream at the expense of cultural customs and family values. As a result of her inability to define herself, Avey experiences another crisis as the year goes on. It is disheartening to learn that Avey's pursuit of worldly wealth causes her to become estranged from her roots, leading to a period of confusion. She feels as though she is torn between two extremes. Her current American way of life and her ancestry were mentally tearing her apart. The pull caused a fissure in her mentality, and because of the mental difficulties, she displayed strange and erratic behaviour during the cruise. Even in the middle of the trip, she could feel her aunt's grip on her left wrist, and she would see islands in the dining tables.

Through her flashing recollections of voluntarily separating from her origins to follow her dreams, Marshall captures Avey's tormented spirit. Even though they are merely cherished memories and no longer a living part of her life, they come to life when she thinks back on them. They stand for those events that have long since vanished, but the recollection compels her to re-establish a connection with her heritage. Her aberrant behaviour changes after the reconnection, as though the fracture has healed. In a sense, Marshall reaffirms the value of maintaining ties to one's roots and the collective community. When Avey re-establishes her connection to her African heritage through her meetings with the Carriacou people, she emerges from her crisis and anguish. Marshall therefore advocates for diasporic blacks to reconnect with their African heritage to heal the pain that resulted from the identity crisis of the Caribbean immigrant as well as to eliminate a sense of "rootlessness."

At the end, Avey discovers the answers to the question posed by Lebert Joseph, which she was first unable to respond to but that she can now answer by returning to her origins. Her memories were revived by Aunt Cuney's dream. Although Avey maintains her ties to her heritage in *Praisesong for the Widow*, she loses her cultural identity throughout one stage of her life in the quest of the American ideal. Her roots haunt her here, and she loses her identity. A double-exposed position like this causes psychological damage. She acts strangely by abruptly leaving the ship; she might imagine her root's island while having dinner. Later, however, she returns to her origins to recover from her ruptured mind state.

A widow's search for identity is chronicled in *Praisesong for the Widow*, which ends with a literal and symbolic voyage. It is about the voyage on land and on water, where culture and community are crucial. The work emphasises the importance of both individual identity and group belonging. The novel also explores reaffirmation and alienation. Cultural identity and tradition are transmitted by black women. Marshall shows the readers the mystical abilities of the African people, who were courageous individuals who were able to walk on water and free themselves from enslavement. As a result, Avey's storytelling style is crucial to her identity rediscovery and personal growth. According to Aunt Cuney, Avey was conceived with the intention of preserving the Ibo legends.

Avey kept telling stories until she embraced American society. She exists for both herself and the community. She can move from materialism to maturity and an African-based identity due to the opportunity to be alone as a widow, retire from her job at the age of sixty, and let go of her children's burdensome responsibilities and her dreams from her past. Barbara T. Christian, in "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*," writes, "Paule Marshall's belief that African-based cultural and historical rituals possess the ability to withstand centuries of psychological colonisation and loss is evident in all of her works of fiction" (187). Although Avey's incomplete trip and desire to embark on a new adventure to avoid the previous one appear to have been caused by a dream, there appears to be a more nuanced explanation for this abrupt choice. Avey has grown weary of being alienated from her black identity and culture due to her ostentatious way of living among white people.

The way Avey is shown on the cruise liner dramatizes her opulent lifestyle. Her feet slammed against a chair as she slipped back over to the couch. She suppressed her tears quickly, shook off the discomfort, and continued. "When was the last time she walked around the house barefoot?" (11). When her daughter Marion convinced Avey not to go on this trip, it was also evident how opulent and materialistic her life was. Avey had continued to pursue the issue while experiencing worry, but after witnessing the Bionica Pride and the ship's opulent appearance, she concludes that Marion was mistaken to convince her to abandon the voyage. She used to be black with Afro-American ancestry, but her aristocratic conduct has turned her into a white bourgeoisie that despises black culture. She might have been mistaken for a White racist if it were not for the colour of her skin. Avey reacts as someone who views her own people as strangers to the man who mistakenly believes she is someone else.

Avey's wealth has caused her to become so estranged from her black identity and culture that she does not care about the oppressive stereotypes that White people ascribe to her fellow black people. "For this reason, if I say it once, I've said it a thousand times: don't pay to go somewhere with niggers! They will always make mistakes" (27). When Avey chooses to leave their cruise, a White woman named Thomasina Moore, one of the three companions on board, confronts her with these remarks. Avey has an intriguing response. She was surprised to discover that she was grinning. A little, delighted, self-congratulatory smile, as though the woman had spoken something flattering in place of the offence (27). Her financial situation has created this false self for her and distanced her from who she really is.

Avey's current demeanour has deviated too much from her black Afro-American heritage to be accepted by the black community. She lives in a predominantly white neighbourhood, travels with white people, and to make matters worse, the motel where she wishes to spend a few nights must be free of Negroes. When Avey demands that the black taxi driver transport her to a better hotel, he notices her disdain for black people and remarks, "The Miramar Royale! I took you to the pinnacle. Then he said, "Only white people mostly stay here," (81) as he leaned inside the automobile.

Avey's materialism has been like a mound of explosive gunpowder that requires an igniter to erupt during the years that he has lived among White people and in accordance with their values. Avey's dream about her aunt Cuney, which transports her back to her early years, serves as the catalyst and destroys the stronghold of her materialistic cravings. Avey's sense of self-understanding has also been triggered by her loneliness following the death of her husband. Despite the anguish of losing a loved one and the strain of adjusting to living alone, widowhood usually presents beneficial chances for self-discovery and personal growth. The widow can redirect her life towards a more fulfilling future after reevaluating her past. Avey has always felt alienated among White people since her personal identity was not connected to her group. Because she no longer has a physical or emotional connection to her past, Avey is a stranger in both her

own black community and the White-dominated society because of the colour of her skin. In “The Widow’s Journey to Self and Roots: Aging and Society in Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*,” Waxman: “Rekindled relationships with a larger community and a larger collective past arise out of opportunities for self-reaffirmation and growth” (94).

Avey is aware that to create a new self-definition, she must re-establish her relationship with her black community and her greater collective past. She also understands that the White culture has nothing culturally in common with her. On a white fabric, she is a striking patch. Avey’s dream about her aunt helps her connect with her ancestors. Avey’s physical and emotional path towards self-definition begins with her first dream about her aunt Cuney. Any audience should consider if her desire to see her father’s great-aunt can serve as a valid excuse for departing the cruise and returning home. By citing the dream as the reason for her resignation to her friends, Avey herself fears being accused of being insane. After four years of mourning, Avey loses her husband, and her determination and purpose drive her to a state of disassociation from her true self.

Avey’s metaphysical death has transformed her from a materialistic, self-centred elderly woman to someone who reclaims her black identity and “must revivify her relationship to herself and to the black community” (186). She transitions from the materialism of Western hegemony to the Afro-American community’s spiritualism. Her physical response leads her on an impromptu physical excursion, while her subconscious aids her in her emotional journey. These two elements are like the two sides of a coin, and their presence can add value to it. The significance of the shift is demonstrated by destroying Avey’s false ego and transforming her viewpoint from one of a merely materialist to one of the adventurous spiritualists. Her fake ego results from her preoccupation with material possessions. She engages in material wealth and goods at the expense of spiritual worth. She worries so much about worldly prosperity that she is unable to assist them, not even in her dreams. True and false consciousness, as well as material and mental life, are distinguished. Material circumstances give rise to mental existence. Class position, or place within the relations of production, is the primary determinant of social being.

Avey is inspired to continue her journey beyond the past and present by her capacity to find significance for herself within the black community. In her novel, Marshall introduces her black readers to a sick individual who has been impacted by racial injustice. Marshall makes a distinction between an illness’s cause and a person’s inability to integrate into society. Marshall does not abandon her patient without a remedy, and like the majority of black women authors, she presents the quest for self-definition as a remedy for this kind of suffering.

Avey’s experience is completely different from her actual circumstances. Her consciousness, which is still a place of freedom for her, transports her back to her early years even though the direction of her journey is towards the future. Because of her emotional trip back to her childhood and her erasure of the painful and terrible years of marriage and material life from her consciousness, Avey seems older on the outside but feels younger on the inside. Avey can see a new world that is a source of knowledge, power, and resistance against oppression because of the rebirth of a culture and history that have been dead to her all her existence. A new character with a new identity emerges because of Avey’s rebirth, which is a resurgence of fresh concepts and substantial modifications.

The novel’s female characters outweigh its male characters to the point where the entire mood of the novel speaks for black women’s suppressed emotions. Avey concludes her trip by coming to terms with her black origin and culture. Even though the elderly woman starts her journey from ignorance, Avey eventually realises that the story provided her ancestor with an intellectual and creative buffer from which to preserve

her sanity, sense of self-worth, and autonomy while she was enslaved. Marshall reiterates the value of maintaining ties to one's heritage and the collective community. In Carriacou, Avey's identity crisis is transformed into a stronger black woman who is a griot and a storyteller because of her purification process.

The transformation that Marshall's women undergo is very similar to the external trip of returning to their homeland and re-establishing a connection with their history. Instead of trying to hide their identity behind a hyphenated one, they embrace it and come to grips with it. To offer the New black women a voice that is not merely a protest or a copy of the White community or men, Marshall assumes the position of a leader guiding them out of the White Community. The reader is frequently reminded of the lives of black women in pre-conquest Africa, which brought them to an Edenic cradle of civilisation, because Marshall gives her women a key role.

### References

1. Brown-Hinds, Paulette. "In the Spirit: Dance as Healing Ritual in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." *Religion and Literature* Vol.27, No.1, 1995, pp.107-17.
2. Christian, Barbara T. "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." *Callaloo*, Vol.18, 1983, pp.74-84.
3. Marshall, Paule. *Praisesong for the Widow*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1983.
4. Macpherson, Heidi Slettedahl. "Perceptions of Place: Geopolitical and Cultural Positioning in Paule Marshall's Novels." *Caribbean Women Writers: Fiction in English*. St. Martin's Press, 1999, pp.75-96.
5. Stevenson, Pascha A. "Dreaming in Color: Race and the Spectacular in *The Agüero Sisters* and *Praisesong for the Widow*." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol.28, No.3, 2007, pp.141-59.
6. Taylor, Michelle, L. "Paule Marshall." *Contemporary American Women Fiction Writers*. Greenwood, 2002, pp.216-23.
7. Thorington, Jennifer. *Black Diasporic Connections in Paule Marshall's Fiction*. UMI, 1998.
8. Waxman, Barbara Frey. "The Widow's Journey to Self and Roots: Aging and Society in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." *Frontiers*, Vol.9, No.3, 1987, pp.93-99.