

INDIVIDUAL 'SELF' VERSUS MATERIALISTIC 'SELF' WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO PAULE MARSHALL'S *PRaisesong FOR THE WIDOW*

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Abstract:

In the function of the world, the concept of power has become indispensable. The word power has the political colouring. The individual or a group or society or a nation, which is powerful than the counterpart, has the power to control the less powerful. Many modern writers and philosophers focused other forms of understanding of political power structures such as administrative power, organizational power, technological power, ethnic and religious power, colonial and postcolonial power, materialistic power, economic power, psychological power, class, race and gender power. Paule Marshall, stands out as a pioneer of the black women's renaissance. In her works, and in talks she has given about the craft of novel writing, she emphasized the need to create distinct human beings who are affected by culture and society, and who also affect these two important elements. Her works are pieces of sculpture; the shape and rhythm of her characters can scarcely be detached from the space around them. The exploration of self takes the black feminist writer to Africa. Paule Marshall's third novel, *Praisesong for the Widow* is indeed a novel of healing, as its structure emphasizes. The novel is divided into four sections: 'Runagate', 'Sleepers Wake', 'Lava Tete' and 'The Beg Pardon' trace the gradual purging, cleansing, and immersion of Avey in African rituals and also reflect a change in Avey Johnson's 'individual self' and context.

Key Words: Culture, ethnicity, rituals, materialistic self, ancestors, reclamation, identity.

Paule Marshall is the first black woman novelist in black woman novelistic tradition to go beyond the established shorelines and offer realistic representations of different models of black womanhood. Valenza Pauline Burke who has been later called Paule Marshall was born on April 9 1929 in Brooklyn, New York. She attempts to seriously capture the network of sentiments, motivations and misfortunes that are a part of human behaviour. Marshall presents her Black women characters as social, political and cultural activists, and captures the diversities and complexities of their experiences and informs that her women characters are not victims. In all her works, Paule Marshall is ostensibly concerned with the issue of reclamation of self. The novel is the story of redemption. It is the praisesong for a widowed woman, who is able to reject the standard of womanhood with which she has identified all her life.

The novel *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) portrays the protagonist, Avey (Avatara) Johnson's journey of life, Avey, a widow, has attained a comfortable middle class status in the white world and fulfills the American dream. Avey attained material success at the cost of her 'self' identity. Avey Johnson is the widow of Jerome Johnson. She is preparing for her physical journey and spiritual journey towards her true identity of seventeen days cruise by the luxurious ship called 'Bianca Pride' to the Caribbean island. In the middle of the journey, Avey is disturbed by a dream of her great Aunt Cuney. The dream causes some physical and psychological illness and makes Avey to leave the cruise in middle and go back to home. She is retired from her job at sixty. Her children are grown up and settled with family so has got rid of the responsibility of taking care of children. As a widow, she has the opportunity to be alone and to dream of the past. In this way, she had a dream of her aunt which helps her in the journey from materialism to her original self. Avey's materialistic life can be witnessed while she describes the ship and when her daughter Marion insisted her to repel from the cruise. The middle class status and materialistic success changed Avey's African American behavior to the white American behavior. She behaves like white racist even to her husband. In her quarrel with her husband Jerome, Avey scolds him with the word 'nigger'. "Goddamn you, nigger, I will take my babies and go!" (PSW 106).

Avey's financial success makes her to go away from her Black ethnic identity and it leads her to the extent of ignoring the subjugation and degrading of her people by the white supremacy. Thomasina Moore, a white woman and one of her companions commented and insulted Avey when she repelled from the cruise in between. "That's why if I've said it once I've said it a thousand times: it...don't ...pay... to... go...no... place... with... niggers! They'll mess up ever' time!" (27). Avey reacts to this indifferently and she smiles as if it is a compliment to her. This shows Avey's assimilation to artificial and materialistic life and her estrangement from her community. Avey's present financial status and position makes her come far away from her African American roots. This material success makes her to mingle with the white people: her travelling companions are whites; her home is situated in white populated area and even to the worse when she asked the taxi driver to find a decent hotel without niggers. The taxi driver stopped in front of a hotel and said "The Miramar Royale! I brought you to the best.' Then, leaning into the car, his voice a whisper: 'Only white people mostly stays here.'"(81).

Avey identifies herself with that of the white people neglecting her true identity. Though she is materialistically equal to the whites and even though she mingles with the white aristocratic people, she is considered as a stranger among whites. The identity of Avey is a shattered one. Avey is considered as stranger by whites because of her dark colour. Avey felt strangeness with her own Black community because of her negligence of emotional and spiritual tie up with them. Avey has realized that she has to connect with her past to regain her connection with her community and to find her true 'self'. Avey's journey towards her 'self' definition begins when her aunt Cuney appeared in her dream. Marshall sculpted the character of Avey as a memorable one by transforming her from the passive consumer of white materialism to the search of her identity and her culture.

The dream and her realization of her ethnic importance give her and her community to resist the influences of western ideologies. Barbara Christian explains: "Marshall's entire opus focuses on the consciousness of black people as they remember, retain, develop their sense of spiritual/sensual integrity and individual selves, against the materialism that characterizes American societies" (Christian 74). Avey creates an artificial self because of her interest in worldly wealth and power. With the help of her aunt Cuney, Joseph and Rosalie she regains her spirit and her transformation gets complete when she undergoes the physical and spiritual cleansing is done. She connects herself to the past and to her heritage when she involves in Beg Pardon ritual. Avey before the transformation, instead of being resistant to the white hegemony she is resistant to her black ethnicity. Even her daughter Marion pleads her to cancel the trip with white companions; Avey doesn't pay any attention to her words. "Why go on some meaningless cruise with a bunch of white folks any way, I keep asking you? ... Couldn't you think of something better to do on your vacation?" (PSW 13). Avey's financial status gives her a social status on par with the oppressors'. She is capable of paying for a luxurious ship 'Bianca Pride' shows her standard, which most of the African American cannot afford to.

African American culture is rich with arts, dance and music. During the slavery and post slavery period performing all the rituals is forbidden in the alien land except dance and music. Even when the black slaves were chained, they sing the songs and express their sufferings and sorrows. The dance and music are the weapons for the African American people to resist white hegemony and ideologies. The African American people are far away from their native and only dance and music connect them to their land and heritage. Angela Davies explains about the role of music: "Music has played the greatest catalytic role in awakening social consciousness in the community" (Nada Elia 8). The white oppressors controlled their oppressed and denied their freedom in following their culture and rituals in order to insist their rich culture. African American people face the problem of conserving their rituals and heritage in acquiring financial stability. To acquire financial stability they tend to assimilate western ideology and find no time to perform their rituals and they disconnect themselves from their heritage and loose their ethnic identity. Avey and Jerome are the victims of such assimilation. In the beginning of their marital life, Avey and Jerome were happy and they used to dance and sing together in the living room and go on a yearly trip to Tatem. Jerome is very

particular in connecting to their ethnic heritage. Though they struggle in poverty, when they dance and sing in the living room they come out of the trouble and revive their spirit. Paulette Brown Hinds writes on Jerome:

For Jay dance and music, especially the blues, are magical and serve purpose beyond entertainment. Avey recalls those evenings when Jay would return home from working "two jobs for the salary of one" and listen to the blues of Ma Rainey and Big Bill Broonzy with his head bowed in front of the phonograph as if in prayer at the altar. This ritual as well as the dances he staged for Avey in the living room, made the poverty and despair Halsey Street symbolized vanish or at least disappear for an evening (Brown Hinds 111).

When they had the link to their heritage, their marital life is a successful one. When Jerome tried to attain the material success and involve in hard work, he had no time to blues and dances. The relationship between husband and wife had also become a bitter one. He works hard to attain middle class status and material success and to live a standard life like the white oppressors. Avey and Jerome assimilate themselves with the white community and disconnect themselves from their cultural heritage. Jay once a lover of blues became to the opinion that blues hinders the growth of Black people. "If it was left to me I'd close down every dance hall in Harlem and burn every drum! That's the only way these Negroes out here'll begin making any progress!" (PSW 132).

The African American people fail to balance their life between financial need and spiritual need. They try to overcome poverty and in due course they detach themselves from their cultural heritage. In order to overcome poverty, they are forced to assimilate the white superiority. This is the position of Avey, she and her husband attained financial success at the cost of their spiritual and cultural heritage. Avey she totally forgets Ibo landing, of which her Aunt Cuney repeatedly narrated to her. Lebert Joseph served as a spiritual father to Avey in guiding her from present to past in order to meet the future. Avey at last realized how they lost their life in creating hegemony towards western power. She also got an intuition from her great aunt the purpose and duty of her birth. She has decided to return to Tatem and follow the footsteps of her Aunt in transmitting the importance and richness of their ethnic heritage and the history of Ibo Landing to the forth coming generations. The life of Avey equals the Long Term Orientation of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensional Theory. This LTO dimension deal with how past is connected to the present and future. This deals with how much society values and respect long standing traditions in contrast with short term. In high LTO the society will respect the traditions and at the same time they accept innovations and changes. In low LTO the traditions are honoured and kept and persistence to it is valued. The dream of Aunt Cuney haunted Avey from the beginning of the cruise. Avey tried to ignore the dream and tried to come out of it. But the dream again and again haunted her memory. To come out of the dream she stopped her journey in the middle and decided to go back to New York. She landed in Grenada and stayed in a restaurant to get the next flight to New York. Even in the room of restaurant, the dream of Aunt Cuney haunted her and this made her to have a walk. She met Lebert Joseph who led her towards her roots. In the Big Drum dance Avey stood there only one among the audience. When the people danced, without her knowledge Avey's feet started dancing and something from her behind induced her to involve in the ritual. This is not an immediate happening and it is preserved in the subconscious mind of Avey. Avey from her childhood heard the story of Ibo landing from her Aunt Cuney and involved herself in all the rituals. But in order to cope up with the materialistic life Avey and her husband went far away from their ethnicity. Though they forgot their culture and ethnicity, because of the imperialistic power structure of the society and to assimilate themselves with that of the white materialistic community, their ethnic identity remained in their inner thoughts.

The novel *Praisesong for the Widow*, is analysed based on the concepts of instrumental and primordial ethnic school of thought. The protagonist Avey Johnson adheres to the materialistic life of White imperialistic society. To Instrumentalist School, ethnicity is an instrument and strategy to gain resources. They opine that people belong to one ethnic group or ethnicity because they expect certain benefits from it. Avey to lead a middle class life in New York, forgets her heritage and adheres to the

principles of White community. Merele for the sake of material gain, she adheres to the White principles and came away from her ethnic beliefs which leads to the loss of self.

Through the dream of her aunt Cuney, Merele realized her ethnic roots. As per the concept of primordial school of thought, ethnicity is inherited from the ancestors; Merele inherited her ethnic identity through her ancestor Aunt Cuney. When Merele was in her childhood, Aunt Cuney described their ethnic history of Ibo landing to Merele. Merele along with her Aunt used to take part in the Afro centric rituals. The cruise has been turned into a spiritual journey of Merele from the instrumentalist thought to primordial's thought.

Merele also remembered Ibo landing, which her great-aunt Cuney used to narrate the historical myth. In the Big Drum her body and soul was cleansed and realized her 'self' and decided to go back to Tatem and continue the service of her aunt Cuney, by telling culture and the history of Ibo landing to the present and future generations. By the past memory of Avey Marshall incarnated Avey to 'Avatara'. Marshall skillfully used the memory of the past to shape the future and to find the identity of the self of the protagonist Avey Johnson.

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