DOMINANT THEMES AND TECHNIQUE IN PAULE MARSHALL'S FICTION

By Leela Kapai

A first generation American, born and educated in New York, Paule Marshall is the author of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*;[1] *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*;[2] *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*;[3] and a few short stories and articles.[4] With a remarkable maturity in her work, she displays a subtle understanding of human problems and a mastery of the art of fiction. Some of the major themes in her works concern the 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. This study discusses the recurring themes in her fiction and elaborates the salient features of her technique.

Quest for identity is a perennial theme in literature. There is no age when a sensitive soul has not been troubled by questions about the meaning of his very own existence and his relation to the world around. The identity crisis assumes even more gravity for the minority groups who were either brought to this land or who came of their own accord in search of greener pastures. Lost in a new cultural environment, such people need more than ordinary effort to recognize and keep their identity alive. However, such self-questionings are not the prerogative of only the members of a particular group based on race, sex, or age; therefore, Miss Marshall concerns herself with people of all ages, of all races, and of all strata.

[1] New York: Random House, 1959. Hereafter cited as *Brown Girl*. . . . All references to pages in this as well as other books follow immediately after the quotation.

[2] New York: Atheneum, 1961. Cited as *Soul Clap* . . . in this essay.

[3] New York: Harcourt Brace & World, Inc., 1969. Hereafter cited as *The Chosen Place*. . . .

[4] In addition to other works mentioned elsewhere are the stories, "Some Get *Wasted*," in *Harlem U. S. A.*, ed J. H. Clarke (Berlin: Seven Seas Publishers, 1964) and "To Da-duh, In Memoriam," in *Black Voices*, ed. A. Chapman (New York: New American Library, 1968).

Miss Marshall's first book, *Brown Girl . . .*, is a *Bildungsroman,* in which the trials and tribulations of growing up are complicated by the fact that Selina, the protagonist, is the daughter of Barbadian immigrants. Selina is caught between the conflicting attitudes of her parents, though she sympathises clearly with her father. Her mother's efforts to own a brownstone house not only fail, but cause deportation and then death of Selina's father. Selina shows her defiance and anger by her affair with an unsuccessful artist in her community. Since an inevitable part of growing up in America is coming to terms with racial conflct, Selina cannot escape it either. Her moment of revelation comes through Mrs. Benton, a typical "liberal" Northerner. To show her broad-mindedneess, Mrs. Benton showers Selina with tales of her generosity to her "girl," who was "so honest too." She compliments Selina for her poise and speech, adding "it's just wonderful how you've taken your race's natural talent for dancing and music and developed it . . ." (p. 288). So Selina realizes that she is, after all, set for the stereotype role of an entertainer. And as if to confirm it, Mrs. Benton requests her to say something "in that delightful West Indian accent." This first exposure to racist attitudes forces Selina to see the life around her in a new light.

In the moment of her need, Clive fails her too, and Selina has to fall back upon her inner strength. She realizes then that despite her differences with her mother, she is very much like her. She also learns to value her people; "they no longer puzzled or offended her." She admits, "they had bequeathed her a small strength. She had only this to sustain her all the years" (p. 308). Of course, that would not be enough, but Selina's decision to go to West Indies to gather strength from her roots is a step toward maturaity.

The next book of Paule Marshall, *Soul Clap . . .*, with its title derived from Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," is, as a critic put it, held together not by mere alliteration but by theme.[5] In contrast to the first novel, these novellas deal with old men who, approaching their end, realize that they have

[5] Richard Sullivan, Review in *Chicago Sunday Tribune Magazine of Books* (October 1, 1961), p. 3.

failed to live. In the author's own words, "They missed out on life because they refused to give themselves to any one or any thing. It was my attempt to examine the question of what happens to the human spirit when love is absent, when a man refuses to give of himself."[6]

In both "Barbados" and "Brooklyn," the protagonists learn the truth about themselves through two young girls. In the former, the aging farmer Watford, who returns to his home rich after fifty years of toil in Boston, keeps himself aloof, disdaining others and assuming the superiority of his masters. When at last he turns to a young woman for affection, he is spurned mercilessly. And Watford, who had always shunned love, always avoided getting involved with human emotions, realizes his folly: "his inner eye was suddenly clear. For the first time it gazed mutely upon the waste and pretense which had spanned his years" (p. 28). In "Brooklyn" Max Berman, a teacher of French literature, not only fails in his attempt to seduce a fair Negro girl and sees the futility of his life, but also enables her to see where she belongs. All her life Miss Williams had been sheltered by her parents from the white people as well as from the darker members of her race. She had thus grown up belonging to no world. Max's behavior makes her accept her blackness with pride.

The old men of the next two novellas are Gerald Motley in "British Guiana" and Heitor Baptista Guimares in "Brazil." A descendant of Hindu, Chinese, and Negro ancestors, Motley does not know who he really is. He tolerates Sidney's arrogance and contempt because he serves as a constant reminder of what he could have been. Seeing Sidney's pain he feels glad that "he is old and would never know pain again." Death is perhaps the only merciful end of his state. In "Brazil" Guimares, the night-club entertainer, known by his assumed name O Grand Caliban, finds himself "lost in the myth he has created."[7] On the eve of his retirement, he realizes that his white partner has robbed him not only of his

[6] Miss Marshall has very kindly lent me her notes for a few lectures at different occasions. All references to her views, unless specified otherwise, are to these notes.

[7] Anon., Review in *Kirkus*, XXIX (July 15, 1961), 632.

years of glory, but even deprived him of his very name. He too perhaps has no chance to retrieve his lost identity.

Thus in all the four novellas, the old men finally come to see the truth, but their time is gone. Out of the ashes of the old, a new phoenix arises, and it seems that the nameless young girl of "Barbados" with her politically aware boyfriend, Miss Williams of "Brooklyn," Sidney Parrish of "British Guiana," and the madonna-like wife of Caliban bearing his child in "Brazil" are the heralds of a new future.

The question of identity is brought to the fore again in *The Chosen Place*. . . . Merle Kinbona is an enigmatic woman who, in the words of Allen, "somehow is Bournehills." Merle's traumatic experience in childhood when her mother was shot by her white father's lawful wife haunted her all her life. Even though her father never acknowledged her, he arranged for her schooling; however, material comforts have never compensated for love and understanding. Merle is now in her hometown after a long stay in London where she had a nervous collapse after her marriage with a young African broke on his learning of her past relationship with a white woman. At Bournehills, she is trying to forget her hurt and misery behind the facade of endless chatter and assumed indifference. By the end of the novel, she has learnt she must go back to Africa to pick up whatever broken pieces of her life remain.

Saul Amron is another troubled soul. A brilliant anthropologist, an excellent field worker, he is the type to immerse himself totally in his work. He is just emerging from the cocoon that he had woven around himself after the death of his first wife as the result of a miscarriage. Saul is haunted by her pleading eyes, her desire to live, and the memory of his own guilt in having been careless. His experience as the director of an experimental project in Bournehills helps Saul to accept his past and find new meaning in life.

Harriet, Saul's present wife, has her own cross to bear. Having seen the useless life of her mother, a Southern belle, her obsession is in proving that she is not like her at all. That means she must constantly find some one to depend on her entirely so her usefulness can reassure her. Her first marriage to a budding scientist ended when he no longer needed her

got his assignment, but just when Saul begins to get involved in his work, she feels left out. So the knowledge of Saul's affair with Merle gives her an excuse to get him transferred to the States. When Saul breaks with her, she cannot face the prospect of a useless life and commits suicide.

The other major character in the novel is Allen. He represents the "effete civilization" of America "that has pledged its soul to the gods of technology."[8] A wizard at figures, he can produce excellent case histories, prepare statistical charts, and work like a computer, but he is one of Eliot's hollow men. He cannot form any meaningful relationship to fulfil his life. No wonder, he always admires those who never give up. He likes Bournehills, for in the peace of this remote place he can face his weaknesses.

The search for identity of all educated black women seems to be Miss Marshall's concern in "Reena."[9] Reena, obviously the writer's alter-ego, is an intelligent girl who gradually grows aware of the acute injustice of the society. After her struggle at college and two abortive affairs with young men who use her for their own ends, she faces the problem of finding a suitable mate. The educated black men are either settled or they prefer white women. Her marriage to an aspiring photographer does not last too long, for he resents Reena's success. Reena resolves to bring up her children fully aware of their own personalities and race and plans to take them to Africa to show them black men living with pride in their heritage.

Closely connected with the question of identity is the race issue. In *Brown Girl . . .* the racist attitude of White America looms large in the background. Selina's cry of anguish voices the feelings of all people of all minorities. Her desire for violence, "to grab the cane and rush into some store on Fulton Street and avenge that wrong by bringing it smashing across the white face behind the counter" (p. 216) is not uncommon too. In "Brooklyn" the life of Miss Williams is an evidence of the ambiguous identity experienced by many blacks. She succeeds, however, in accepting herself as a proud member of

[8] Robert Bone, Review in *New York Times Book Review* (November 30, 1969), 4, 54. The quotation is from p. 4.

her race and thwarts the centuries old pattern of seduction and exploitation. Motley and Caliban in "British Guiana" and "Brazil" respectively suffer on account of the white power structure that encouraged no individualism.

The Chosen Place . . . weaves in the race issue subtly in the entire story. Harriet represents the spirit of the white world. She is only a step ahead of the Bentons of this world. When 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 vivid in the carnival scene where she realizes 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. Perhaps a new race of active men like Saul and sympathetic ones like Allen will create better understanding between the races.

This new world, Miss Marshall feels, will be created only through an acute awareness of the past. Saul echoes her thoughts explicitly: "'It's usually so painful though: looking back and into yourself; most people run from it . . . But sometimes it's necessary to go back before you can go forward, really forward. And that's not only true for people—individuals—but nations as well . . .'" (p. 359). Since Miss Marshall believes that without tradition one has no real existence, she has all her major characters go back to their ancient heritage.

Time and again, Paule Marshall brings us to the question of human relationships. Beyond the barriers of race, all men are the same; they share the same fears, the same loneliness, and the same hopes. And they cannot live as islands; the bridges of communication have to be built. She repeatedly stresses the act of "using each other." In the complexity of human relationships we use each other in strange ways. Selina's affair with Clive is a way of getting even with her mother, while Clive needs to relive his youthful aspirations through

annoy his father. But then Reena confesses with candor that she too had used him "to get at that white world which had not only denied me, but had turned my own against me" (p. 273). Despite these varied uses, the truth is that we need to share ourselves with others, barring which the life is a barren wasteland. However, sharing is by no means easy, for it means adding to one's sorrows.

The Chosen Place . . . also deals with the question of Western aid to the so-called underdeveloped countries. One cannot help wondering if the aid is meaningful and fruitful when an outsider tries to impose a new way of life to obliterate the centuries-old systems and values. The conflict between the old and the new assumes such proportions that the entire purpose is lost. Several attempts to modernize Bournehills have failed because the Americans have never tried to understand the place. Saul succeeds because he accepts the existing way of life and builds upon it.

II

Miss Marshall says, "My concern has always been not only with content, what is being said, but also the way it is being said, the style." This concern shows in her craftsmanship. She uses a judicious mixture of the old and the new in fictional tradition. The plots of her novels are unambiguous and interesting containing conflict and suspense to keep the reader engrossed. But she uses liberally symbolic language to heighten the meaning; thus her stories are very often capable of being taken on different levels of meaning. At one level, *Brown Girl* . . . is the story of Selina's growing up, but on another level, it is also the story of "any people undergoing fundamental change and disruption." In the author's own words, "It was a study of two opposing forces in life: the poetic as suggested by the father in the story and the practical and materialistic as symbolized by the mother and the necessity to reconcile, to balance these two forces is pointed up in the character of the daughter." *Soul Clap* . . . deals with the identity crisis of the protagonists, but it also represents the passing away of the old order and the time for the new. *The Chosen Place* . . . at one level deals with the problems of

its characters, but on the other level traces the history of black-white relationships.

Miss Marshall possesses the ability to blend the setting with the action and characters; the setting is so vivid and powerful that it often assumes an important role in the narrative. The examples are everywhere, but one can get the idea from a few selections. In *The Brown Girl* . . . the brownstone houses shadow the lives of Selina and her family, in fact, the entire community. They loom so large in the background that they are almost human. In *The Chosen Place* . . . there is a certain timelessness about Bourne Island, a certain mysterious quality in its environment and its inhabitants. The roads appear to be taking the characters " into the dense green heart of the island, into another time " (p. 95). Saul sees the place as " every place that has been wantonly used, its substance stripped away, and then abandoned . . ." (p. 100). Even the inhabitants take a hue of the surroundings: " Close up, their faces, with the pronounced cheekbones rising out of them like hills and the hollows beneath like dark valleys, made him think of some spectacularly rugged terrain not unlike Bournehills itself " (p. 124). The gestures of these people suggest the same timelessness.

In *The Chosen Place* . . . the sea creates the very mood of the place. The waves lashing against the shore produce a mournful note. Somehow the majesty of the sea succeeds in bringing out the innermost thoughts of all characters. One notices, however, that it is only the outsiders who are so affected by the environment; the Bournehill people seem to have crossed the man-made barriers of time and place. Merle captures this peculiarity of the islanders when she says, " We don't ever forget anything, and yesterday comes like today to us " (p. 102).

Paule Marshall excels in her character portrayals, but one must confess that she is partial to her women. They receive more careful attention, but that too is for a certain end, for she believes that the Negro woman has been neglected in literature. " The figure which emerges even upon the most cursory examination . . . is a myth, a sterotype, a fantasy figure which has very little to do with the Negro woman in

reality."[10] Thus she does not draw the stereotype, neither "the sensual, primitive, pleasure-seeking, immoral, the siren, the sinner" nor "the Negro matriarch, strong but humble, devoted, devoutly religious, patient."[11] Her women are complex characters but with hidden reservoirs of strength, which they need in order to survive. The mother in *Brown Girl* . . . is presented sympathetically despite her harshness; it is because the writer sees her as a product of her environment. If she is ruthless, it is understandable, if not excusable. Merle also is strong; her suffering has neither bent nor broken her. With her incessant chatter she may seem out of her mind at times to some, but that is her way of letting off her steam and diverting others from her sorrows.

In her attempt to battle with the old stereotype of the strong mother portraiture, Miss Marshall becomes unduly harsh with all mothers. Silla destroys her man and alienates her children by her very strength; Clive's mother keeps him tied to her apron-strings. In "Brooklyn" the mother of Miss Williams shares the responsibility in creating the ambiguity in her life. Similarly, in *The Chosen Place* . . . the mothers or the mother-figures, black or white, fail miserably. Harriet's obsession with meaningful life grew out of her mother's passivity; Leesy, the mother-substitute for Vere,[12] cannot understand the new politically conscious modernized young man. In short, there is no mother who is depicted favorably.

Among men, Selina's father is portrayed well enough though he loses our sympathy eventually. The character studies of the men in *Soul Clap* . . . also succeed in capturing their despondent states of mind. Saul, however, is the best creation of her fictional world. He is strong, yet has his weaknesses too and is very much aware of the common bond that unites all human beings. Thus he is a very human character.

Even though the writer does not use Joycean style of stream of consciousness technique, she frequently focusses on the subconscious mind of the characters. Combined with the editorial omniscience, her method succeeds in giving us an insight into the characters. In her first novel, the problem of the point of

[10] "Negro Woman in Literature," *Freedomways*, VI (Winter, 1966), 20.
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] Characters in *The Chosen Place*. . . .

view is somewhat simplified, for we see the action mostly through the protagonist's eyes. But we do see the events from Silla's angle and also from Deighton's perspective. In her novellas most of the narrative is seen through the consciousness of the protagonists. Her last novel shows an adept handling of the point of view. She makes use of the mystical quality of the island where in the solitude each of the major characters faces his past and the flashbacks assist us in understanding his motivation.

Like Ralph Ellison Paule Marshall believes that the " Negro American writer is also an heir of the human experience which is literature. . . ." [13] From Eliot and Joyce she has learned the value of tradition. And then she does not forget the valuc of folk material. She tells us that she learned the first lessons of the narrative art from listening to her mother and her friends. After their hard day of scrubbing floors, they had to talk out their hurts and humiliations. Their acute observations about the people they worked for and their vivid portrayals filled their young listener with awe and admiration. Miss Marshall sees their gift as a part of the great oral tradition: " theirs was the palaver in the men's quarters and the stories the old women told the children seated outside the round houses." Thus they taught her that " in the African tradition art was an integral part of life and that form and content were one." She feels that the mysterious element that held her spellbound has its source in the archetypal African memory. She uses it time and again, but it is at its best in *The Chosen Place*. . . .

Through Miss Marshall's comments and, best of all, through her works, one can attempt to formulate her aesthetic beliefs. She seems to be quite in agreement with some of the tenets of the much discussed black aesthetics, and yet she differs too. Miss Marshall also stresses the need for identity. She too believes in understanding of one's past, both individual and historical. She too stands for reviving the African cultural heritage which gives supremacy to man over the machine. She too believes that the black writer owes a great responsibility to himself and to his world, to express his views to the world

[13] " Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1964), p. 58.

through his art. But here she diverges. Her works show that she does not believe that the art of the black writer should serve only one end. Like several other writers, she knows that the American writer cannot deny his Western heritage. She is equally proud of her black heritage but believes that her art should be devoted to showing the relationship of an individual to the other inhabitants of this world, no matter what their color, race, or geographic location is. She writes of blacks, very often of West Indians, simply because a writer writes best when he makes use of what he knows best. Her characters are, therefore, human beings first; their racial identity is secondary so far as the art is concerned. This fact does not make her any less believer in black pride; in fact, her pride stems out of her deep confidence. She says, "I have always felt that one of the reasons the white man in this country has been so hard on us is that he suspects we have something going for us that he doesn't have any more, that he has lost. How shall I define it—an expressive quality, a strength that comes from suffering, a feel for life that hasn't been leached out of us by a fat, complacent, meaningless existence; a basic health in the midst of the sickness around us, and that once given the opportunity for this to come to flower, we would be formidable people. Our task as Negro writers is to prove this right." [14]

At present Miss Marshall is engaged in writing her third novel which will deal with Africa. It is not too much to hope that it will supersede *The Chosen Place* . . . in every way.

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[14] "Negro Woman in Literature," *Freedomways*, p. 25.