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JOURNEY BACK TO THE ROOTS IN PAULE MARSHALL'S *PRAISESONG FOR THE WIDOW*

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Abstract:-Paule Marshall, (born April 9, 1929, Brooklyn, New York, N.Y., U.S.), a novelist, whose literary works emphasize the need for black Americans to reclaim their cultural heritage. The Barbadian background of her parents is evident in all her works. This rediscovery of African- Americans' heritage forms the core of the plot of *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). Avatara (Avey) Johnson, an acculturated middle – class woman, undergoes a spiritual rebirth on the island of Grenada. The paper analyses the character of Avey as she takes on to her journey from self effacement to self embracement. Marshall posits that black African American women need to recognize their past, their community and heritage in order to assert their identity. Her physical journey to Grenada is her spiritual journey to roots so much so that she ends up being the transmitter of her own cultural heritage.

Keywords:African American woman, cultural heritage, self embracement, Roots.

INTRODUCTION :-

“Sometimes a person has to go back, really back . . . to have a sense, an understanding of all that's gone to make them . . . before they can go forward.”(Paule Marshall)

Paule Marshall in *Praisesong for the Widow* presents the African American woman's effort to recognize her wholeness through her positive response to the dominant and entrenching voice of the Ancestors. The novel foregrounds the journey of Avey Johnson, a sixty four year old woman, from self annihilation to self recognition. It is after this experience of endurance that she renews her strength and hope in her African roots. For many years, black women have been suppressed by the world dictated by men, as a result of which, African-American women redefine themselves with an awareness that their psyche cannot be reduced into good or evil. Marshall divides the novel into four parts; “Runagate”, “Sleeper's Wake”, “Lave Tete” and “The Beg Pardon”. The first part is Avey's attempt to run away from *Bianca Pride* leading to her encounter with the past, the second part depicts Avey awakened from her lethargy and she retreats into her past life during which she was married and bore three daughters, the third part constitutes her initiation rite and the final part is dedicated to her conversion, baptism, and confirmation as a priestess who has achieved wholeness and is fit for the sacred mission of transmitting her wisdom to future generation. Marshall employs the traditional African cyclical time, which involves recurrence and duration, quite opposed to Western linear time, which suggests change and progress. The past is always present and the culmination of past and present make up a future duration. In the novel, Avey stands at the centre of the cycle and struggles to find fulfillment in synchronic time, since diachronic time cannot provide a solution for her metaphysical quest. Through this story, Marshall unravels her multicultural background – American, African- American and African- Caribbean. The story begins with Avey's dream of great aunt Cuney to which Avey initially pays no heed. However, it marks its significance when Avey finally decides to escape from her present situation so as to confront her past life. In her journey to roots, she is assisted by Lebert Joseph who accompanies her in a boat ride across the channel separating Grenada from Carriacou. During this ride, Avey's sufferings are brought forth to which Denniston remarks, “Avey must undergo a rite of passage that includes confession, cleansing, and confirmation” (137). Avey finally regains her strength upon reaching Carriacou and this journey is a metaphor for her spiritual growth for she affirms her roots and hence her lost identity. Avey's baptism (Leve Tete) and rebirth symbolize her merging with the black folk and communion with her ancestors.

Marshall portrays an African culture that serves as a source of identity for the people of Carriacou. At the age of ten, Avey responds to Aunt Cuney's tales of Ibos by asking, “But how come they didn't drown Aunt Cuney?”. This question from

Avey is suggestive of her future alienation from a collective, diasporic consciousness. Avey and Jay, as a young married couple, use blue music to transform them from the reality of discrimination and poverty they face and live. By resorting to Blues music, they assert their cultural heritage and affirm their own identity. However, this habit ends as soon as the couple moves to North Plains and substitute their selves for the ones having no historical lineage. Leantin Bracks notes, “[Avey] and [Jay] embrace the American dream of success, abandoning the truths of African American community of Harlem for a white suburb”.

Alexander also makes a pertinent remark, “employing the blues as a vehicle of and for self expression, Jay accordingly vents his anger and displeasure with his life”. Their discontinuation of blues music indicates their distance from African American history and cultural heritage. Barbara Christian similarly argues that “[Jay] and Avey”, in an effort to protect themselves, “commit a kind of spiritual suicide, for they give up their music, heritage and sensuality, their expression of themselves”. Avey's blindness from her past results in her total isolation from her daughter Marion, who celebrates her African heritage.

Avey Johnson's psychological journey begins with her dreams which she neither understands nor controls. The dream of Aunt Cuney waiting for her at the Ibo landing, makes Christian comment that, “Marshall develops Avey Avatara Johnson's journey to wholeness by juxtaposing external reality with memory, dream, hallucination – disjointed states of mind – in which the past and present fuse”. Marshall makes use of the dream of great aunty Cuney so as to develop Avey's connection with the past. This has further been remarked by Susan Willis, “the black woman's relation to history is first of all a relation to mother and grandmother”. After leaving Bianca Pride, Avey witnesses her past as a child and her marriage to Jay. Scarboro claims that “Avey's flashbacks purify her, because through them she relives her past and sees it with new vision. Her dreams also serve as cleansing rituals because it is through their influence that she is put in touch with her deepest fears and longings”. These visions finally result in her reaction as she begins “mourning, finally shedding the tears that had eluded her even on the day of his funeral”. Having been alienated from her personal history and herself, these visions of past elicit a response of insight and pain that she cannot consciously explain. “Avey's body”, argues Susan Rogers, “communicates to her what she has taught her conscious mind to ignore : her disconnection from her own sense of herself and from the African-American and Caribbean heritage which is crucial part of that self”. This past not only acts on passive Avey, but also elicits a visceral response that results in an emotional and psychological growth after this trauma. Avey Johnson does not in any way intentionally reclaim her past so as to affirm her identity rather she confronts her fragmented notions of identity passively as a result of which her past forcibly changes her course not as an act of her own will but as an instinctive response to the action of her past.

Lebert Joseph is portrayed as an epitome of the past, who is connected with time so much so that Joseph as well as the past are equally capable of acting on and affecting Avey's course of action. Avey Johnson is depicted by Marshall as a woman who does not consciously search her roots so as to define herself; she is instead revealed as a woman who is isolated from her past but who at the same time is unaware of the impact of this fragmentation on her ability to act with autonomy. Indeed, Waxman argues, “Avey's mystical reunion with other blacks not only inspires her to assume the role of transmitters of her cultural heritage, but also rejuvenates her because it reinvents her to the future”.

In her quest for a dignified identity, Avey never gives up in her continuous re-construction of positive meanings for black female selfhood. Marshall thus posits in *Praisesong for a Widow* that self realization could only be achieved through one's awareness of one's cultural and historical heritage. It is the physical action of the past that impels Avey to reclaim her history, connect with her community and revise her future. In the Introduction to *The Fiction of Paule Marshall*, Denniston argues;

However, as an artist, she prepares her readers for a reevaluation of the African presence in the Western Hemisphere. Most importantly, she offers a discursive model for change and possibility. As her artistic vision expands to include all people, Marshall develops a sensibility that is faithful to her African heritage. She figures a cosmogonical wholeness by valuing cultural difference even as she celebrates the triumph of the human spirit. (xxii)

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