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TRANSCENDING THE CULTURAL CONFIGURATION: LINKAGES OF AFRICAN DIASPORA IN *PRAISESONG FOR THE WIDOW*

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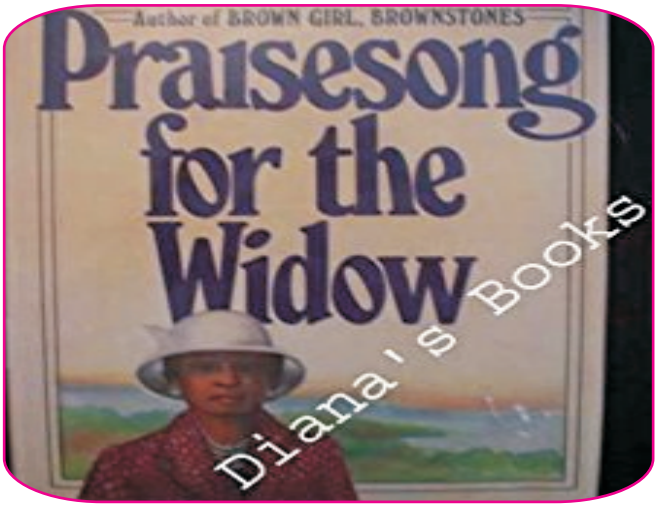
ABSTRACT:

In Praisesong for the Widow, Marshall reiterates African cultural similarities between the black people of the Diaspora and encourages a spiritual return to African roots. The human need to find one's personal identity and to establish one's cultural affiliation is the hallmark of Marshall's fiction and in Praisesong. She further suggests that the search has no age or geographical limitations. In this novel, Marshall brings the traditional values alive with freshness and vitality of a master storyteller. She sings praises of all mankind depicting human potential to succeed in unifying the spiritual with the physical. In order to develop a sense of our collective history, Marshall says, "I think it is absolutely necessary for black people to effect this spiritual return". This is Marshall's novel in which a middle class African-American woman protagonist explores African cultural vestiges that exists in North-America. Throughout Praisesong, the author is concerned with American materialism which signals the destruction of the soul. She cautions people of African descent to avoid false values that obviate spiritual needs. Marshall states that the protagonist must respect and revere the "nurturing ground" from which they have originated and instilled lessons in generations to survive. The novel is written to honour one of Marshall's ancestors and dedicated to her grandmother, Alberta Jane Clement (Da-duh).



KEYWORDS:*Praisesong for the Widow , African roots , traditional values .*

INTRODUCTION :

"As the history of people of African descent in the United States and the Diaspora is fragmented and interrupted; I consider it my task as a writer to initiate readers to the challenges this journey entails" - Paule Marshall.

Praisesong refers to a traditional heroic poem recited or sung at various celebrations in Africa. It also refers to a religious song commonly used by African-American congregations. *Praisesong* takes on ethereal qualities emanating from dreams and memories that dramatically overlap opposing time frames and conflicting modes of temporality. The long forgotten past of Avey Williams Johnson tumbles forth in bits and pieces to startle and paralyze the sixty-two year old widow of the novel's title. Associations, impressions, people and events seem to evoke bizarre connections within her and the reader is caught up in the whirlwind of Avey's disoriented mind. As she rearranges her thoughts and impressions, we see that Avey is really involved in a subconscious search to regain her lost identity.

This is the first work in which Marshall focuses at length on a middle class African-American woman. The choice indicates her continuing exploration of African cultural vestiges that exist within the continental shores of North America. She employs the stream of consciousness technique and

interweaves spontaneous associations of the moment with past reality. She also opens new thought processes that lead to the surfaces of subconscious impressions and revaluation of old beliefs. The history of Ibos forms the central myth around which the novel revolves. In the space of four days she covers the lifetime of an African-American woman.

The Ibos were "pure born" Africans, noted for their ability to see not only into the past, but also into the future. When the Ibos were brought as slaves to the landing in Tatem, South Carolina, they quickly assessed what was to befall them and without bothering to get back on the ships, they simply walked out on the water. In a voice that seemed to possess her, Aunt Cuney would recall the exact words her grandmother had recited: "Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos" (Praisesong, 39).

Marshall allows the reader to overhear the sacred, unwritten history of the Ibos by using the oral storytelling form of communication. She also establishes the central myth of the novel as well as its dominant motif: the human capacity to be physically in one place and mentally in another. Avey is the epitome of this theme as she is physically present in a luxury cruise liner named The Bianca (white) Pride en route to the Caribbean, but she is thinking about recurrent and disturbing dream of her great aunt beckoning her to come along on a walk to lbo landing.

In having Avey travel south each summer to visit her great aunt Cuney, Marshall alludes to the common practice of African-American families who after migrating to different parts of the world, regularly returned themselves or sent their children to reunite with relatives and friends. Avey had long forgotten her many childhood treks and abundant rice fields to reach lbo landing. There she would listen enraptured to the proud old woman retelling the Ibos' story or resistance self. Determination and empowerment in instilling the story of Ibos, the old woman has entrusted Avey with a mission which she could not understand. Aunt Cuney's insistent plea rings Avey's waking and sleeping thoughts "Come, won't you come...?" (Praisesong, 42) Narrator adds that Cuney "had sent word months before [Avey's] birth that it would be a girl and she was to be called after her grandmother who had come to her in a dream with the news: "It's my gran'don sent her. She's her little girl" (Praisesong, 42).

Avey functions from the Western timeframe. She had spent close to thirty years living in a suburb of White Plains, New York. She now has secured civil service job and all three of her children (Sin, Annawilde, Maion) have grown up. Although Avey continues to work, her late husband Jerome has left ample provision for her financial security. Her yearly cruise to the Caribbean is but one measure of her comfortable lifestyle.

Marshall focuses readers to experience time from a dual perspective. Although Avey functions in Western linear time, her thoughts travel in circles, symbolic of separate cultural constructs at odds with each other. To reconcile that conflict, Marshall places Avey in Grenada where, unable to make flight connections, she is forced to stay overnight. Grenada, and later Carriacou, becomes important locales because both islands are geographically and culturally close to Africa. It is in Carriacou that Avey connects with African rituals that have lain dormant in her consciousness. As the people are "out-islanders" taking the yearly excursion to their homeland, they speak a Patois or Creole, a mixture of African and French languages. Book One is entitled "Runagate" and it is prefaced with Robert Hayden's poem of the same title: "and the night long and the river/ to cross". The water imagery in both the poem and the novel connote a journey [physical and mental] from slavery in south to the freedom in the north. Barbara Christian comments: "Like the Runagate in Hayden's poem, Avey's great aunt Cuney recalls history this time in the form of ritual to be passed on from one generation to the next" (Christian Barbara, 151).

Book two "The Sleeper's wake" re-enacts the wake of Avey's late husband Jerome Johnson, and it details conscious awakening of a woman who has metaphorically slept through the past thirty year of her life. In depicting both Avey and Jay, Marshall illustrates the problem inherent in accepting Euro-American values that displace those of traditional African culture. Initially, they were able to cope up with the problems of racism and poverty because they were able to "nurture their culture" for sustenance, but slowly they made sacrifices which are far too costly to realize "The American Dream". Jay used to dramatically recite "The Creation" to the children or a poem or two by Langston Hughes but with the struggle to get ahead in the modern world, a drastic change occurs.

One of the most memorable scenes in the novel forecast this change. Avey is pregnant with a third and unwanted child, which, due to their limited means, she tries to abort. Though she knows that economic opportunities for the blacks are limited and Jay has been working two and three jobs just to make ends meet; she is disgruntled with their poor living conditions. The tension builds until Avey explodes with rage borne of deprivation, self-pity and loneliness: "Goddamn you, nigger, I'll take my babies and go!" In his struggle to gain economic freedom and security Jay no longer gives attention to his private self and the music and poetry cease to exist in his life. He also shaves his moustache which provided him "rakish" look and exuded "that strong nigger feeling". His hard-won and growing career left no time to cultivate "those small rites, an ethos they held in common, which had reached backed beyond [Avey's] life and beyond Jays to join them to the vat unknown lineage heard in the music and in the praisesongs of a Sunday: ".... I bathed in the Euphates when dawns were/young.... had both protected them and put them in possession a kind of power" (Praisesong, 137).

Avey mourns not the death of rigid and compulsive Jerome but the more sensitive and culturally attuned Jay. She also mourns her won cultural loss. To rejuvenate herself, Avey must undergo a rite of passage that includes confession, cleansing and confirmation. Hence Avey's rebirth takes place in Book Three namely "Lave Tete" with the following verses, *Vodum Introit from Haiti* which means "oh, Bars of my body, open, open". The movement towards the restoration is guided and facilitated by Lebert Joseph, an old man who owns the rum ship upon which the exhausted Avey stumbles. His agelessness, his timelessness is described in terms of indestructibility. Lebert Joseph with "lines etched over his face like the scarification of a thousand tribes, turns out to be one of the out-islanders busily preparing to go on the excursion to Carriacou. He does not enquire Avey's name, rather he asks of her ethnicity suggesting the overriding importance of her collective kinship rather than her personal identity. When Avey answers in negative that she has forgotten her tribe, Lebert states: "I tell you best remember them I". They can turn your life around in a minute, you know. You can't figure it out all you try. Is the old parents, oui" (Praisesong, 165).

As Aunt Cuney is Avey's spiritual mother Lebert Joseph becomes spiritual father. Androgynous qualities are clearly incorporated into Joseph's characterization just as they were earlier incorporated into Cuney's. Joseph's gestures reminded of Legba, the African god of the Crossroads. Avey is at the crossroads of her life, and Marshall provides her with the guidance and protection for a living figure. As a child, Avey recognized her inclusion with a people, but over the years she has suppressed her group identity. With her disconnection from the kin, she has not only dishonoured the story of the Ibos but also maternal forebears. The author suggests that physical purging of Avey is necessary for her spiritual cleansing. Hence she loses control of her bowels. It becomes evident as the women assisting her repeatedly whisper "Bon!". Avey is now empowered and self-possessed.

Marshall includes in Book Four the "laying on of hands", a religious ritual common in African-American communities. The rituals "Beg Pardon" and "Dance of the nations" proclaim the tribes one after the other. Temne, Banda, Arada, Cromanti, Chamba. The last dance of the ritual is set aside for the Creoles who because of "Seperation and loss "cannot identify their tribes. At the close of the novel, Avey indeed becomes an avatar, for she assumes her messianic role- to continue the story telling legacy of Great - Aunt Cuney and Cuney's grandmother. In *Praisesong for the widow*, Marshall emphasizes African cultural similarities not to minimize distinctions between black people of the diapora but to encourage a spiritual return to African roots. "In order to develop a sense of our collective history"; Marshall says, "I think it is absolutely necessary for black people to effect this spiritual return".

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