

# REDEFINING BLACK FEMALE IDENTITY IN PAULE MARSHALL'S PRAISESONG FOR THE WIDOW

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper concentrates on how Paule Marshall in her novel *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) redefines the lost identity of African American people living in America. The novel through the process of revisiting the past reaffirms the identity consumed by the white racist society. This paper deals with the issue of cultural alienation of the black people living in America and their reaffirmation of self through search for roots and it is rendered from a feminine perspective. The novel explores the importance of cultural continuity of peoples of African descent as a stance to resist against the values of the New World. Marshall's work focuses on the consciousness of black people as they remember, retain, and develop their sense of integrity against the materialism that characterizes American society.

**KEYWORDS:** Redefining, identity, black, female, search for roots, stance.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The novel *Praisesong for the Widow* is the story of Avey Johnson, a middle- class, middle- aged widow, who abruptly leaves the Bianca Pride, the Caribbean cruise she is on with two of her friends. Jolted by a recurring dream of her long dead great aunt Cuney, who calls her back to Tatem, South Carolina, Avey insists on returning to the security of her suburban home in White Plains, New York made by her husband, Jerome Johnson. But unfortunately, she misses the plane to New York and is drawn into the yearly festival in Carriacou island people which is their annual excursion of spiritual rejuvenation. With historical memory and with the help of Lebert Joseph, an old man in Carriacou assisting her, she goes back to her roots.

Paule Marshall's novel *Praisesong for the Widow* reclaims and revises the African descent as the only surviving tool for the African Americans to redefine their lost identity. After the Civil Rights Act of 1968, the blacks got the rights to vote although the living conditions of the black people deteriorate. The policy of separatism still exists as the blacks were forcefully compelled to give up their culture and has to behave as whites. They have to abandon their African culture in order to survive. Apart from that racism still prevail. It is this inequality that Paule Marshall resists in her novel *Praisesong for the Widow*. Paule Marshall's novel is concerned with materialism, the process of Americanization and deterioration of relations within the African American community, the past and one's self.

In *Praisesong for the Widow* as in many narratives of spiritual awakening, the protagonist, Avey Johnson, goes through a process of dispossession of all materialist elements in her life, a kind of spiritual rebirth; this starts to happen while she is on the Bianca Pride Caribbean Cruise (Bianca means white in Italian) with Clarice and Thomasina. Avey has been struggling in silence and stasis against the violence that had been inflicted on her firstly by the white racist society and then by her husband Jay or Jerome because of his self- alienating job. Through time, Avey was forced to conform to the process of assimilation; Avey was discriminated against and also forced to abandon her identity as a black woman. She was denied the freedom of expression and was compelled to assimilate and become "white" as required by the American society and it is evident through many incidents depicted in the novel.

During the Caribbean Cruise, Avey does not identify with the habitat of the Bianca Pride, where whites look at blacks as if they did not exist. Avey feels that she has lost her identity as a black woman, because she does not recognize her African traits and she realized the need of restoring and reaffirming her African heritage. At the beginning of the novel, Avey has become so detached from her own heritage that she does not consciously recognize that it has been lost. But, she gets alerted to what is missing in her life in two ways: through her dream of Aunt Cuney who calls her back to her childhood home in Tatem and by her body's illness. These two developments precipitate Avey's hurried departure from the cruise ship on which she is travelling, but instead of returning to her home in New York as she anticipated, events conspire to take her on a journey of grieving and discovery. At significant moments during the Caribbean cruise she is taking, Avey recollects childhood trips up the

Hudson with people from her neighborhood, trips to her family's old home in South Carolina, a legendary journey of Ibo slaves return to Africa, and the original journey of the slave passage. All these incidents and recollections indicate her desire to return to her cultural roots.

Marshall's protagonists are women who find that when they confront the past they not only do they better understand themselves as African people, but they also gain greater awareness of their womanhood. Marshall's female protagonists discover that their African identity and their female identity are intertwined. Thus Avey Johnson confronts her past she comes to realization that her African identity and her female identity are intertwined. The novel focuses on Caribbean community and its insistence in maintaining its cultural heritage in the wake of Americanization. The novel depicts the condition of rootlessness of African American women who has departed from cultural values of her community thereby losing their identity as a black woman in the white society. The novel through the depiction of Avey's journey back to the past tries to re-establish a place for the black women. Marshall continues to demonstrate that identity and the past are inextricable, that the past inevitably shapes the present and future and that the journey back to the past is necessary if displaced African people are to survive the effects of Americanization.

In the novel, Avatara Johnson, or Avey as she is called loses her connection to her past. As she and her husband attempted to survive economically, they left behind their early life on Halsey Street which was filled with poverty, but also with praisesongs and affirmations of their culture and heritage. However in order to better their economic condition, Avey and Jerome, or Jay, as he is called, placed all their efforts into securing a prosperous lifestyle for their children and themselves. They left Halsey Street and moved to the suburbs and no longer found the time to reaffirm their identity and heritage. Thus, Avey's separation from community begins and it aggravates as she and Jay flourish economically in their life. In the second section of the novel, "Sleeper's Wake," Avey's mind takes her back in time. Barbara Christian interprets the word "wake" as having two meanings. She states it is "wake for the past, as well as awakening from the past." (12) It follows sequentially, her experiences as a fugitive in the section "Runagate," where she began to run from the white world. At many significant moments Avey is at unrest and she has an ardent desire to amalgamate herself with the African heritage. In this section, Marshall reveals the special qualities and rituals that Avey lost on her way from Halsey Street to North White Plains. As Avey and Jay ascended the economic ladder, they lost their identity as African in an attempt to assimilate into the white culture. They lose their integration as an African in their desire to assimilate with the white mass culture.

Their move from Halsey Street was a transition that exacted their identities. Their Sunday morning rituals of listening to Gospel music and reciting black poetry was given up as Jay continued his effort towards economic security and Avey found only time enough for her career and the children. They had abandoned the rituals that were once important to them. These rituals protected them and connected them to their lineage.

As Jay and Avey progressed in their life, they found little need or time for the praisesongs, the poetry and the music. In *Praisesong for the Widow*, Jay and Avey are the embodiment of those black couples who lose their sense of belonging and identity amidst the white culture. Jay's transformation is complete when he shaves off his mustache. Jay's mustache was a symbol of his African heritage as his father wore it during World War II. It not only connected him to his past but the mustache had protected him.

As Jay's lifestyle changed he insisted on being called by his Christian name, Jerome. He no longer felt the need for the security of the mustache. He also began distancing himself from the African-American community as if he no longer belonged, and began to negate those things associated with his culture. "If it was left to me I'd close down every dancehall in Harlem and burn every drum! That's the only way these Negroes out here'll begin making any progress." (16) He wanted to destroy important parts of his culture, the very parts that had sustained him, the music and the dance. Critics agree, as Kubitscheck puts it, that "Jay's identity is slowly but completely destroyed by negation of his heritage. By the time Jay died his transformation was complete. Avey no longer recognized him as Jay; he had lost his African identity and had become Jerome Johnson.

Jay's death had taken place long before Jerome Johnson's. There had been nothing to mark his passing. No well dressed corpse, no satin-lined coffin, no funeral wreaths and flowers. Jay had simply ceased to be. He had vanished without making his living known. (18)

It is the fate of every black people who lived in America. Their existence means nothing to anyone.

But, Avey was not like Jay she understood that if black people had to survive the effects of Americanization, they had to abandon white materialism and should adopt the African heritage. Avey courageously leave behind her hard-won middle-class security and status, the assimilated world of North White Plains, New York and moved towards wholeness and her roots. She has buried her "natural" ethnicity over the years, has cut herself off from her racial community. She gradually purges this artificial self through dreams of her familial past, and thus her black female self has been hidden inside her artificial self. The dream of her great-aunt Cuney's life on Tatem Island, off

the South Carolina coast, and afterwards recalls her aunt's stories about their African kinfolk, the Ibos, who came to the Landing at Tatem. These dreams initiate Avey's confrontation with the past and Aunt Cuney represents Avey's desire to go back to her ethnic heritage. Avey's artificial self is dispelled through her participation in the Big Drum ceremony, a ritual in a small Caribbean island where people make contact with their ethnic origins. Thus, the novel treats Africa as historically grounded and through the celebration of its heritage dismantles the stereotypes of Africa as a timeless monolith. On Carriacou, Avey discovers her link to the Arada nation and finally becomes herself reassuming her true name, Avatara, for "in African cosmology it is through nommo, through the correct naming of a thing, that it comes into existence. By knowing her proper name Avey identifies her black female identity. After knowing her true self and reaffirming her black self, Avey at sixty-four takes on a new, consuming mission in life: she adopts the role of a myth extender, a passionate witness to her ancestry and she would pass on this lineage to her own children and to the generations to come. Atoning to her sin of assimilation into white America, she will keep retelling the mythic stories of Carriacou and of the Ibos at the Landing in Tatem, thereby helping to keep alive the ties between American blacks and their Caribbean and African kinfolk. Thus, Marshall is of the view that black women could establish identity only through their indulgence with their roots.

Avey's journey towards integrity and reaffirmation of self begins when, freed by widowhood and her years from obligations to husband, children, and work. Her becoming a widow offers her the opportunity to be a free woman. She started to free herself of everything that is related to white materialist society. The use of physical illness to suggest the distancing of Avey from her present and her desire to reconnect with her ethnic roots. If Avey is to define herself as a black woman, she must learn that harmony cannot be achieved unless there is a reciprocal relationship between the individual and the community.

Avey was unable to reconcile and connect with the white mainstream culture. To describe this self alienation or lack of self-recognition, Marshall uses the image of mirror. At dinner on board ship, Avey stares at the reflection of her two friends and herself in the mirror and tries to realize her true self.

The self alienation and lack of understanding her true self is evident in her physical discomfort. Her physical illness and her inner desire compel her to leave the ship when it docks in Grenada have surfaced because of a dream Avey has had about Aunt Cuney, although her Aunt has been long dead. The dream forces her into the first of three important confrontations with her past: the past of her youth, especially those memories of her summers with Aunt Cuney on Tatem Island. The second confrontation involves the past of her married life with Jay, and the third a more distant, communal past evoked by Carriacou Excursion. These confrontations with her past and experiences in the present enable Avey to move beyond her Marian Anderson reserve, good taste, and middle-class "white" respectability to her true self, her real values, an authentic sense of community, and a new purpose in her future.

In the beginning of the novel, we see Avey suddenly begins to pack her bags at night after the dream. Avey's consciousness has in fact, been disturbed, disrupted by the dream of her great aunt who recounts her relevance of Avey to return to the past. Her frequent dreams about Aunt Cuney who has been dead for several years comes to her dream as a reminder of her real identity as a black woman. In the dream, the assault that her aunt makes on her body brings Avey to her consciousness. It is the memory of the past that forces Avey to embark on her own personal ritual of cleansing, healing and empowerment. Thus, Avey felt the need for healing or cleansing of her artificial self. While, the Runagate is the first step in the ritual called Praisesong, which is a ritual of cleansing and healing in African tradition. Ironically, it is a dream that startles Avey from her long unnatural sleep. Again, in the section, "Sleeper's Wake", the relationship between mind and body is sketched out. It is Avey's wake for the past, as well as awaking from the past. In this section Avey's mind is displaced from her body and her inner desire drive her to her ancestral home and she leaves the cruise immediately.

In the meanwhile she reviews her marriage with Jerome and she realized that she has dishonored her true self and lost track of her spirit until she was unable to recognize her own face. Her marriage appears to be successful to the outer world, because she accepts the "shameful stone of false values." In accepting and achieving the American dream, she dishonors herself, as black, and as a woman. But, unlike her husband Avey does not surrender herself to the American values as she wants to release herself from the bars of societal norms. Avey's desire to relive her past is evident in the section "Sleeper's Wake" when Avey after her husband's death peel off her gloves, hat, girdle, the material trappings over which she and her great aunt fought in her dreams and with angry words, "Too Much! Too Much! Too Much! Raging as she slept." (148) it is the release of anger, and her hidden desire to leave the world of materialism. It is a reference to her reawakening, that allows her, this contained widow from White Plains to "open up the bars of her body" (148) so that her mind and body can be healed.

Avey wants to escape her own bondage to the middle class white values and recommit herself to her ancestors' values, like Aunt Cuney's grandmother, after whom Avey has been named. Although Avey has tried to get rid of the mission that has been entrusted to her by her great aunt, but it comes to her in her dreams. However, it takes

Avey in the course of the novel to commit her to fulfilling it. Marshall also as a writer speaks and writes of the black woman like Avey's grandmother and Aunt Cuney who tells richly evocative stories from their collective past, stories that inspire every black woman to glorify their past.

In the dream that calls up the buried memories of Aunt Cuney, Tatem, the Ibos, and her rich heritage, Avey finally confronts her aunt, who beckons her once again to walk through the Tatem fields they shared in Avey's youth. The only problem is that Avey is dressed not in the sturdy high-top shoes and woolen stockings of her youth, but in her chic New York suit, complete with hat, gloves, and fur stole, suggestive of her assimilation into the middle class America. The dream becomes a war between Avey and Aunt Cuney, where Cuney pulls the struggling Avey toward Tatem. Marshall pulls the reader into the nightmare by describing vividly the physical tussling and fierce facial contortions of the two women and by bizzarely juxtaposing in the dream sequence unchronological elements of Avey's past. Avey and Aunt Cuney hit one another and Aunt Cuney tears away Avey's refined clothing. As her North White Plains neighbors watch, her mink stole "like her hard-won life of the past thirty years is trampled into the dirt underfoot.(44-45).By trampling on her niece's mink stole, Cuney is attempting to warn Avey about "the dangers of materialism" and to guide her back to her roots, away "from artificiality, guilt, and self pity." Thus Avey is able to understand the futility of her hard won economic security and respectability which provides her nothing. In spite of her economic status, for the whites she did not exist, as she is a black. The jolting effect of this dream and the consequent memories of Aunt Cuney's enactment of the ritual dance step compel Avey to enact "her own personal ritual of cleansing, healing, and empowerment". At the end of it, she claims an ethnic heritage that enriches and sustains her life.

The unsettling dream of Aunt Cuney prompts Avey to remember things long forgotten in her past. It is almost as if the dream leads Avey to recalibrate her lost identity by taking into account things that had been previously dismissed. Brogan notes "how stories of cultural haunting repeatedly testify to memory's instability and capriciousness. Cultural continuity is not assumed, but is achieved in the course of each haunting. Memory in the novel takes the form of mourning, a way of remembering dominated by a sense of a break with the past" (28). We can definitely observe this in Avey, as her haunting stimulates memories that had been buried, while also triggering mourning once she realizes the things she has lost reflected in these buried memories.

Avey's failure to keep the preserve her past is particularly significant because she appears to have been sent by the ancestors to do just that. Her great-aunt Cuney "sent words months before her 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" (42) Aunt Cuney believed her gran, Avatara, had sent Avey. In fact, John Pobee notes in "Aspects of African Traditional Religions," "The ancestors are believed to give children to o the living for continuance of the family, clan and tribe in which alone is found self-fulfillment".(9) For Aunt Cuney and her grandmother, it has been predestined that Avey will carry on the family tradition of remembering the Ibos. She has been selected to join the matrilineal line of culture bearers. Thus, the novel through Avey draws a line of black women who are independent of the racist society and carry on their own line of culture. They are free from the bondage race and gender. Consequently, Kimberley Rae Connor in her book *Conversions and Visions: In the Writings of African-American Women* asserts, "she is chosen by Avatara to carry on the legacy Aunt Cuney was guarding, and she must answer the call" (237). Avey is expected to carry on the tradition of remembering the Ibos. Thus from age seven on, Avey was inducted into this tradition as she spent her summer vacation with her aunt in Tatem, who shared with her the story of Ibo Landing.

As the novel unfolds, it indicates that the physical and mental discomfort plaguing Avey is in direct response to her negligence of roots and ancestors especially Aunt Cuney. Her life in White Plains, New York, has dislodged her from her roots and it is only her trip to Carriacou, a sort of reverse Middle Passage. This brings her back to her roots and the story of Ibo Landing.

Although *Praisesong for the Widow* is not directly about slavery, it is very much about its legacy and in fact, an attempt to rewrite this legacy. Marshall, through this tool of rewriting is trying to establish a counter narrative on this degraded part of African history.

De Veaux, a critic thus emphasizes on Marshall's desire to go back to the roots and she believes that it is the only way of emancipation for the black Americans. Marshall is very much aware of the importance and power of history which can lead them to the achievement of self identity.

However, it is only years later that Avey comes to understand the significance of the dreams and story of the African Ibo landing. This ancestral story has to share as a source of strength, but Avey's question at ten years of age reveals that she had not completely understood the importance of this tale. Her question demonstrates that Avey did not learn the lesson regarding self-determination that the tale seeks to impart.

It is this lesson that Avey need to relearn from her Aunt Cuney. Although, Aunt Cuney tried to teach her this lessons during her girlhood at Tatem, but Avey could not learn anything from her teachings. Therefore Aunt Cuney return from her grave to teach again Avey the lesson of self-determination imbedded in the action of the Ibo. Aunt Cuney wants Avey to learn the lesson of self determination of the Ibos, so that she could reaffirm or reclaim her lost identity. For Barbara Christian, it is the emphasis on self-determination in the tale that stands out:

“This story of Africans who were forced to come across the sea- but through their own power, a power which seems irrational, were able to return to Africa- is a touchstone of New World black folklore. Through this story, peoples of African descent emphasized their own power to determine their freedom, though their bodies were enslaved. They recalled Africa as the source of their being. | (“Ritualistic” 76)

Storytelling becomes in the novel a cultural metaphor, reassuring the continuum of the tale for generations in the spirit of survival and cultural inheritance as before Avey it was carried on by Aunt Cuney and her aunt before her. Cuney insists upon the need of retelling this story within a cultural context, a story that includes its own formal and informal ritual, in addition to the words themselves. Not only does the story have a meaning, but the circumstances too had a greater significance for the Africans. The combination of the story results in a form of acculturation for the seven years old Avey, and a source of self possession and wholeness. From the context of textual structure of the *Praisesong* too storytelling becomes central. It also helps in Marshall’s project of self-revalidation. Through the story of Ibo Landing, Avey leads to the path of wholeness and affirmation of her cultural identity.

*Praisesong for the Widow* invites the reader to undergo a grounding ritual along with the main protagonist, Avey Johnson who abandons a luxury cruise named Bianca Pride (the ship’s name which means white pride embodies all the symbolic properties of privilege, wealth, ease, and the myth of individual happiness) However, she suffers from a loss deeper than the loss of her recently deceased husband. Avey and her husband has lost connections with their past which lead them to the path of deterioration. Avey has to undergo a journey of personal consciousness by remembering her past life, recounting what has been lost throughout the time, and recovering and reconnecting herself with her cultural roots, beginning with her own childhood in Tatem and the significance of her great-aunt’s words. Avey’s crisis of consciousness develops because in adopting a temporal perception that sees time as a progression from the past to the future, she has forgotten her ancestral duties. As a consequence, her repressed past has returned to haunt her, for “her memory seemed to be playing in the same frightening tricks as her eyes”.(57) Avey seems to be caught in what looks like a dead end street: how can she recover the value of a past that now appears more remote from her than it was when she and Jay started pursuing the American dream?

On her journey, Avey will learn the true significance of the Ibos’ tale, for not only the story in itself is important but also the specific form of ritual that the widow, almost fifty years later, begins to understand. Avey’s journey into her past means a spiritual relocation from the upper-middle-class neighborhood where she now lives, White Plains, back to Tatem, South Carolina and finally to the Caribbean island of Carriacou, where the themes of return and historical and spiritual continuity are inscribed in the collective memories of the people.. In this way, her personal quest leads Avey on a metaphorical journey to a place where the archetypical African memory is intact, therefore allowing her to enact a spiritual return to Africa. The route that Avey’s subliminal memories force her to follow describes and represents, in reverse, the slave trade’s triangular route back to the motherland Africa. The idea of spiritual return to a historical self is an important tool in the *Praisesong for the Widow* since it represents a possible resolution to the crisis of temporality which grips characters like Avey Johnson.

Therefore Avey’s state of inner fragmentation and cultural disconnection, the result of her and her husband’s efforts to succeed in terms of American society, is healed through the path of re-memory and reconnection. Marshall’s purpose in this novel is to take the reader along with Avey, on a journey of self-recognition and healing. Avey resist the white materialism through her recognition with her roots.

Avey through the dispossession of material belongings leads towards a path of self consciousness. Although Avey seems to be happy in her middle class society, but there is an inner urge in her to go back to her real home. Avey’s physical discomfort in the form of stomach troubles and vomiting reveals her mental state of mind. However this state of mind in which the mind is in one place while the body remains in another is not a source of fragmentation but a source of wisdom. The split between her mind and body functions in the novel as Avey’s guide to becoming centered, to reconcile her conscious and unconscious self. For Avey, the dream with her aunt Cuney creates a space where she can meet her ancestors and cohabit with them, remembering them. This encounter with Cuney in her dream will represent for Avey a journey towards identity and self knowledge. Through the dream Avey will be able to decide over her future actions through her learning of the past, entering in this way into the transformative, regenerative cycle of wholeness, creating the change towards positive consciousness. Thus, the ancestor is presented by Marshall as a means of responding to the cultural trauma of slavery and its aftermath. Although Avey describes this stranger in the mirror as “a black woman of average height with a full- figured yet compact body,” her clothes and bearing seem to deracinate her. She is described as wearing “carefully coordinated

accessories. The muted colors. Everything in good taste and appropriate to her age” (Marshall 48). However, what is more interesting is the description of her “composed face with its folded-in lip and carefully barred gaze. She was clearly someone who kept her thoughts and feelings to herself”.(48) It is almost like wearing a mask to protect her inner thoughts from outsiders. Yet the most revealing comment is about her bearing: “her Marian Anderson poise and reserve, the look of acceptability about her. She would never be sent to eat in the kitchen when company came!”-(49). This reference to Langston Hughes’ poem, “I, Too,” along with the dream tug –of-war over her mink stole suggest that the look of acceptability Avey has painted, much like the trappings of middle-class status, are meant to gain white- bestowed respectability which entails erasing her ethnic identity.

Aunt Cuney’s visitations provide Avey with self confidence to affirm her identity. Thus, Avey’s decision to leave the Cruise leads her to Africa. In travelling there on water she has re-enacted, remembered, and memorialized the miraculous mythic flight of the Ibos” (111). Like the Ibos, Avey flees the evil she senses and is ultimately led to symbolic return home. Avey does indeed need to experience the healing atmosphere of home, but it is not the White Plains, New York, the home to which she must return, but her African home.

In the novel, Marshall explores the complex relationship between black men and women through the relationship between Avey and Jerome Johnson. The novel shows how race and gender fuse affecting the relationship between black men and women. Marshall maintains a tension between black people’s need to survive and develop in America, and their need to find spiritual sustenance in their lives.

The novel thus emphasizes on the ability that the small rites of African culture possess to enrich one’s identity. Avey’s mind is suspended between her usual reality and at the same time widely awake to what really exists around her. When upon arrival at the Grenadian hotel, undressing, she loosens her girdle, this untying and untangling represents her beginning to understand the reconnecting bond, its applications, thus becoming a knowing soul. After she wakes up, Avey cleans and bathes her body. This act signifies a necessary ablution for the vital connection that she is now ready to make. Here, the metaphor of sleep symbolizes creation and renewal, being a symbol of rebirth. Thus Marshall emphasizes the transformative power of sleep, for in sleep, for in sleep we are re-created, renewed.

Desperately thirsty, after wandering a long time on a sunny Grenadian hotel, she reaches a small bar. The owner of the tavern is Lebert Joseph or Legba as Velma Pollard has pointed out, “with his hip shot walk and his ancient mariner eyes.” (25) Legba is according to Ewe religious practice, the god of household and threshold and in African Caribbean, the god of crossroads. And through her naming herself correctly, she would recognize her real identity. Lebert Joseph feels the need to help Avey reconnect with her diasporic roots, and re-enter her spiritual relationship with the people of the African diaspora. Joseph becomes Avey’s guide towards the wholeness that she unconsciously seeks. Joseph is a curious character. Just as her aunt Cuney, he embodies a certain androgyny- her aunt Cuney strides the field like a warrior in her husband’s brogans, and Lebert Joseph dances the Juba in an imaginary skirt. This reveals the fact that these old parents- Joseph and Cuney, go beyond gender and conflict to a deeper, more fundamental form of being.

Whenever Avey think of leaving the hotel she is immediately counteracted by the bloated feeling in her stomach and she had the vision of her house in White Plains destroyed by Mount Peele’s lava, reducing her beautiful and expensive furniture to “grotesque lumps of molten silver and glass” (181). Finally, the presence of the old man Joseph helps her to seek her path of self identity. Thus, she decides to go with him to Carriacou, to attend the “Beg pardon” nation dance. When she will make the last part of her journey, crossing the threshold into the ancestral home in which Beg Pardon is celebrated, then Avey will be able to truly recall her origins. In the context of her journey to Carriacou, it is presented as a return to a place of potential and recovery. However, the novel’s construction of Avey’s being as a blank, a “yawning hole”, risks evoking damaging perceptions of black women as negligible, people without autonomy. But, Marshall questions the notion of black woman’s body as “tabula rasa” or clean sheet with the perception of black woman as non- being. Yet Marshall challenges such conceptions by reworking the understanding of a tabula rasa. The experience of purging has erased those white hegemonic inscriptions and allows Avey to begin a process of drawing on her own cultural resources. The possibility of bodies existing as places of unmediated physicality is a point of much critical attention. In Marshall’s novel the description of Avey’s body as a tabula rasa upon which a new history can be written clearly perpetuates the idea of the body as a site of unconstructed materiality upon which culture inscribes itself. Avey’s experience of purging supposedly wipes clean damaging inscriptions of whiteness, literally the inscriptions of white chalk upon a black slate, and allows her to return to black slate, and allows her to return to her essential state. Avey’s reconnection with her body, her awakening to physical sensation, triggers a series of memories from throughout her life that help her to recontextualize her experiences. It also triggers, however, the surfacing of collective memories of an African past.

In the task of restoring Avey's self identity, Rosalie Parvey, Lebert's daughter acts as a spiritual mentor. Avey, becoming responsive to her own pain and all black women like her who has been severed by American materialism, realizes the need of her spiritual awakening. Now, suddenly, Avey remembers watching a black man, innocent of any crime, being beaten by the police. She is confused, why this memory of racial violence should come to her. She has come to rely on her senses to block out any reminders of the difficulties and conflicts of her life as a black woman in America. She now wants to get rid of the artificial self that she has adopted. Avey's awareness of spirituality deepens when she realizes the importance of the African rituals. Avey exhibit damaged perceptions of her body which leads to association of negative meanings related to blackness. Here the novel declares that a sense of inferiority based on a specific physicality, rooted in American justifications of slavery, continues to exert restrictions on black Americans' ideas of themselves.

The novel resists the characters moves toward the material security they associate with white, middle class acceptability go hand-n-hand with erasing, or alienating themselves from, blackness. It seems that Avey wears a mask over her face: "what almost looked like the vague, pale outline of another face superimposed on his, as in a double exposure" (131). The double exposure suggests Du Bois's concept of the double-consciousness of the African American. Avey is discriminated doubly firstly by gender and then by race. The novel through the return of Avey to her actual home, as represented by Carriacou, one of the most easterly of the Carribean island makes clear the falsity of the idea of America as an arcadia for the people of the African diaspora.

Avey comes to understand her own identity through a series of journeys, physical and emotional, literal and symbolic, that help her to reaffirm her self as a black woman. Yet her visit to the island has irrevocably altered her perspective and she now wants to impart her newfound understanding to others. Avey wants to tell those who are "unaware, unprotected, lacking memory" of her ancestor's perspective of a body grounded in Tatem but a mind "long gone with the Ibos" (255). In conjunction with this, she wants to recount her own memory of dancing to jazz and blues, during her earlier years of marriage, on a wooden floor that felt "like rich and solid ground under her" (254). Avey's decision to go back to her origins posits a solution to Avey's crisis of cultural disinheritance that calls attention to the plural origins of African American culture. In Marshall's novel the body, as a source of collective memory, functions as a crucial symbol of the need to discover, recall the self, outside of hegemonic social and political prescriptions.

Avey's decision to return to Tatem and to bring her descendents there, and keep on telling the story of Ibo Landing will help in enhancing the awareness of their origins to all black people living America. Kubitschek describes the importance of this decision: "Avatara's decision to take on her great aunt Cuney's role as griot, retelling the story of the Ibos, shows an individual's consciously choosing to participate in myth." (44). Avey retells the story of Ibos because it is related to freedom of the fugitives and Avey was no better than a captive under the American society. By choosing a middle age female protagonist, Marshall is revising the identity of "the classical quester"," suggesting that this effort to "renew society" is a form of women's work. Marshall emphasizes on the power oral narratives carried on by women.

Avey throws off the psychological bondage of many years' loyalty to a false ideal which had lead her to a reaffirmation and redefinition of her African identity, which seemed to be her only means of survival. Marshall has thus expanded the horizons of black women's search for self identity. It is not personal quest, but it also includes the community. It is no longer an isolated quest of an individual, but a lifelong commitment and a continuous modification of identity. Thus, Avey in the final scene addresses a wider community and becomes an empowered woman quester who becomes a griot who will retell the story of Africa's rich heritage to the centuries to come.

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