Individual and Society in the novel of Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place* and *The Timeless People*

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Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* examines Caribbean historical and socio-economic development by presenting a relationship between two women, one Black, one White, whose legacies and destinies are bound by the peculiar history of gender relationships, characteristics of slavery and the plantation. The novel links the Caribbean historical experience to the racialist ideology of the American South and the northern entrepreneurial sprit that profited from the slave trade. The Chosen Place, The Timeless People is a complex novel, rich in varied characters and situations. It is set in Bournehills, a small village in the fictional Caribbean territory of Bourne Island, which is home to a people whose courage to struggle against their poverty and misfortunes rests on their deep roots in the Caribbean landscape and its history.

The novel starts with the development of an American foundation's research and aid plan for the village, headed by a sympathetic Jewish-American researcher. Marshall develops two central themes that of the importance of history in developing the national and personal identity required to transcend the legacy of colonialism and slavery and that the need to foster Caribbean economic self-sufficiency as the only way to achieve and preserve true independence. The research and development project brings three strangers into the community: Saul Amrom, a Jewish Sociologist; Harriet Shippen, his wealthy patrician wife and Allen Fuso, a young research assistant. All will serve as both catalysts and victims of the change required for the community and personal growth in Bournehills. Merle Kinbona, the protagonist of this novel, has embarked on an Odyssean "Journey back" to self-recovery. As Merle does not grow up but realises herself vis-à-vis her environment, history, and culture; Eugenia Collier Writes:

> "The novel, (The Chosen Place, the Timeless People) then, is the next step in Marshall's ever broadening vision of the relationship of the individual with the community. A vision that links black culture in the Western Hemisphere with its African past and the promise of the future; it sees this black culture as different from European – American, which has been the oppressor . . . . (310)"

The Chosen Place, The Timeless people is a novel not only about race, racism, and slavery but also about one of the most pervasive problems of the contemporary world—Western imperialism and neocolonialism. Marshall brings into focus both the African-American experience and the experience of the underdeveloped communities in the Third World Countries. Barbara Christian argues :

> Marshall creates a microcosm representative not only of Bournehills, but of other under developed societies in the Third World, that are captive both psychologically and economically by the metropolises of the West, yet somehow possessing their own visions of possibility. (167)

By focusing on the typical aid program funded by an American philanthropic society, the novel explores the complicated web of relationships that are the legacy of colonialism. The colonial assumptions behind the developmental programs, the concept of "development" itself are the core of the relationships between these newcomers and the people of bournehills. A close-knit group whose resistance to the changes prescribed by outside "expert", has been the Achilles heel of every development project previously attempted on the island. Saul has hoped for development among the Bournehills people through program by program. But he gets a different view latter. He tells Merle:

> In most of the places I've worked – in south and central America – the Sier Johns… are the same, all of them out to own and controls the world: determined to hold on matter what means they have to employ. And they behave the same, the arrogant bastards toward the people they feel they own…. They have to be gotten rid of the basterds. Thrown out! And in one clean sweep. That's the only way. There is no gradual or polite way for it to be done as Lyle and his friends in town would like to think (225).

Saul is simply trying to understand why the people refuse to accept the new progressive plans, why they refuse to change and why they are hatred to the black bourgeois community. The next scene occurs when Lyle Huston, the barrister and a brainwashed black bourgeois person from Bourne Island informs Merle about the new development plan. He tells that the boys in New Bristol have decided that the only means of improving the islands economy is to get more foreign investors and to expand the tourist trade. Merle understands that these blacks have allowed outside business to strip the island of resources through tax exemption plans, in addition to permitting owners to send all the profits out of the country.

Merle bitterly muses: 'Signed, sealed and delivered. The whole bloody place. And to the lowest bidder. Who says the auction block isn't still with us" (209). She puts the questions to which Hutson has no answers. Merle asks:

> "It is that what are threw out the white pack who ruled us for years and put you chaps in office for? For you give away the island? For you to literally pay people to come and make money off us... why, man, Bourne Island comes like freeness to them. (209)".

Merle is obviously torn between wrath and helplessness. Her wrath is against those psychologically enslaved, treacherous black bourgeois who are out to sell the island for a few dollars in much the same fashion which the brokers had sold mother Africa a few centuries ago. Lyle Hutson and the likes who are to prepared auction off not only the Bournehills people, but their own conscience too. Merle is the only person who can bring these uppity blacks, the cultural combines to some sense of awareness. She reminds Lyle Huston:

> "The Kingsley's still hold the purse strings and are allowed to do as they damn please, never mind you chaps are supposed to be in charge. And little Fella is still bleeding his life out in a cane field. Come up to Bournehills some day and see him on those hills. Things are no different. The chains are still on (210)".

She tries to awaken these zombies reminding them of the entire black history. To Saul, Merle appears to be the living conscience of the whole Bourne Island. He is struck by her strength and her intense commitment to those voiceless peasants of Bournehills. She represents that energy that transforms cultural zombies like Hutson into cultural beings and prevents black people from falling into further catastrophe. Finally, Saul has learnt that Bournehills is not a geographical land but some ravaged part of his own psyche that must be explored and healed up. Marshall presents a landscape where the wrongs done to black people. Even the Atlantic that rows by the side of Bournehills echoes the same grievances. It will not forget those wretched blacks who were constrained to jump from the slave ships during the infernal voyage across the middle passage:

> "It was the Atlantic this side of the island, a wild eyed, marauding sea... with a sound like that of the combined voices of the drowned raised in a loud unceasing lament—all those, the nine million and more it is said, who in their enforced exile, their Diaspora, had gone down between this point and the homeland lying out of sight to the east. This sea mourned them. Aggrieved, outraged, unappeased, it hurled itself upon each of the reefs in turn and then upon the shingle beach, sending up the spume in an angry froth which the wind took and rove in like smok over the land . . . these

sculpted into fantastical shapes by the wind and water, might have been gravestones placed there to commemorate those millions of the drowned. (106)

On the one hand, we find the metropolitan plantation masters, the new technocrats of sugar estates, newspaper offices, and white, brown and black-faced, but all speaking the language of expediency, opportunism, self-interest, and exploitation. On the other hand, there is the great mass of the ex-African population, and most of them stunned into an apparent acceptance of the inferiority and superiority principle handed down from the slave plantation. Percy Bryam, the planter, and Cuffee Ned, the slave leader who are the symbolic figures of these two opposing dispositions. Kingsley the absentee plantocratic boss, Lyle Hutson, the black lawyer and Harriet - English native, and Yankee, make no difference in their dissimilar ways of representing the continuation of the exploitation principle.

The community of Bournhills, in Marshall's presentation, "might have been selected as the repository of the history which reached beyond it to include the hemisphere north and south" (402). The struggle for survival and independence which is the essence of this history is symbolized by the story of the Pyre Hill revolt "the only bit of history" to have taken in Bourne island a slave revolt led by Cuffee Ned, who managed to drive back the government forces in a fierce battle. As a result of this confrontation, the former slaves lived for two years "as a nation apart, behind the high wall, independent, free" (102). Cuffee Ned's story sets the villagers apart from the rest of the inhabitants of Bourne Island as people solidly rooted in their proud past. Each year at Carnival they re-enact the drama of the Pyre Hill revolt in the Bournehills masque in a quasi-ritualistic enactment whose aim is that of maintaining the sprit of the revolt alive. The re-enactment reveals their belief that "only an act on the scale of Cuffee's could redeem them" (402).

Bourne Island has many celebrations but the cardinal event for the people of Bournehills is the Carnival. It is a two-day festival which the black people on Bourne Island celebrate every year. It is a traditional black ritualistic celebration, dates back of the days of slavery. Marshall has already reinforced the themes of rebirth, renewal, and redemption. The carnival brings into focus a code of reincarnation of black psyche. V.S. Naipaul explains Carnival thus:

"The slave... worked by day and lived at night. Then the world of the white plantations fell away; and in its place was a secure, secret world of fantasy, of Negro "Kingdoms", "regiments" bands. The people who were slaves by day saw themselves

> then as kings, queens, dauphins, princesses....At night the Negroes played at being people, mimicking, the rites of the upper world.... The Carnival... is a version of the Lunacy that kept the slave alive. It is the original dream of black power, style and prettiness; and it always feeds on a private vision of the real world. (333-334)".

Marshall's Carnival is slightly different from the Carnival that Naipaul portrays. In that, the Bournehills people are a determined band of people who will perform the Carnival dances not in the fold of darkness, not in the absence of white 'lords' but during broad day-light marching through their streets, dragging them in and even leaving them traumatized. During those two Carnival days colourful floats are constructed along with big banners to announce the theme of each event. New costumes are donned, holiday foods are prepared and rum flows freely. On Monday evening, a big dance is held in the several districts of the island and on Tuesday, there is the magnificent parade which is orchestrated in the main town of New Bristol. It is the time of dancing, singing and pageantry. The heart of the Carnival is the re-enacting of the islands four hundred years of history-their slavery and so called recent "emancipation" dressed in the same blue and white-striped home spun. They march along the narrow dusty roads of Bournehills, a long silent march. Bournehills people celebrate their revolutionary cultural hero, Cuffee Ned. They re-enact his revolt the Pyre Hill revolt. They sing and dance with new costumes. By evoking the memories of the past, these participants bring more meaning to the present. From the eldest to the youngest, everyone seems to have joined the big ritual. Having enacted enslavement, the marchers proceed to perform the actual act of revolt through which Cuffee Ned brought liberation to black islanders. So, reality is the drama of Cuffee Ned capturing the oppressor. The song that accompanies their celebrations of victory is a song of unity:

> "They had worked together! the voices of the people sing in unison. If we had lived selfish, we couldn't have lived at all... under Cuffee... a man had not lived for himself alone, but for his neighbour also. They had trusted one another, had set aside their differences and stored as one against the common enemy. They had been a people. (287)".

This is a celebration of the liberation of all oppressed people. This is their psychological and emotional return into the past. Cuffee Ned's "death was not an end but a return, so that" in dying he would be restored to the homeland and there be a young worrier and hunter" (288). Marshall is obviously singing a song of rebirth and rejuvenation of the

collective black self. The Carnival brings rebirth and rejuvenation for the Bournehills people, but it leads Harriet to a horrifying experience. Frantz Fanon Writes:

> "The colonized people make use of particular incidents in this history of the country to give them a feeling of unity and to keep alive the revolutionary zeal. The instigator of the remembered action, although he may be an outflaw to the established power, is a hero to the oppressed people and is capable of inspiring another insurance (69)".

The Carnival, then is such an attempt "to keep alive the revolutionary zeal" infact to inspire another insurgence. The effect of Carnival is so deep on both Saul and Merle that it causes a remarkable upheaval in their emotional world. When there is a massive celebration collectively, it directly coveys the message of identity that becomes the crisis in the society. Marshall's depiction of carnival as ritual underscore of two themes that the ability of history to fuse individuals into a "people," and that of the latent capacity for revolution and renewal found in a people who once shared a heroic experience and are awaiting a chance to repeat it. That latent force is displayed in their "oneness" as they march through the streets during carnival:

> "…And more than ever now that dark human overflow… resembled a river made turbulent by the spring thaw and raising rapidly-a river that if heed wasn't taken and provision made would soon burst the walls and levees built to contain it and rushing forth in one dark powerful wave bring everything in its path crashing down (289-90)".

Merle, a new wounded and vulnerable Black woman, and Harriet, the Anglo-Saxon patrician wife of the Jewish scholar. The White woman triumphs over the Black, mulatto, as in the case of Antoinette woman "ruined" by her contact with Blacks in one hand, we have a Black born and bred in the "despoiled" reality of Bournehills, who has already broken the binds of sexual convention in London, losing her daughter and husband in the process, now standing on the brink of mental breakdown. Paradoxically, Merle is presented as the embodiment of both the strength of the people of Bournehills and of their wounds. She is a profoundly vulnerable woman, haunted by her past and full of remorse for having lost her daughter, now in Africa with the child's father. Her personal history is the representative of the colonial and self-sufficiency issues around the people. Merle is the product of the peculiar sexual relationship that characterized the plantation particularly. The "outside child" of a formerly powerful White planter who died without legitimate heirs, Merle inherited both the

house and what was left of the land of her father's original estate, her mother was murdered when Merle was two years old, was thought to have been the victim of her father's legal "high coloured" (i.e., nearly White) wife, believed to have either killed or hired someone to kill her husband's coloured favourite. Merle, ignored for years by her father, was acknowled and brought to live with him when his wife died childless.

Marshall utilises her narrative line to explore how the legacy of colonial relationships is nothing but the extension of a plantation-era way of life based on the exploitation of the masses. These local people are prey to their decisions. The neo-colonial relationships in Bourne Island still determine survival for the Black masses of Bournehills, who still cut cane under a scorching sun while the White manager rides past in the distance, wearing jodhpurs and a cork hat, calling to mind "some ghost who reused to keep to his grave". The lands are still the property of the English-in the case of Bournehills the Kingsley Group, owners of most of the land and of the only sugar mill in the district. This ownership gives them power to control even when and if the few canes grown by the Bournehills people in their own tiny plots-an important source of their pride and independence. Being black is the victim of this society.

Works Cited

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