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## **Dance: An Echo of Cultural Kinship in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *Praise Song for the Widow***

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### **Abstract:**

In the African worldview, dance is a conduit of individual and Cultural echo. African culture is integrated with social, spiritual, physical and mental realms, all of which are impacted by trauma. This paper will expose the significant place of dance and ritual throughout the African culture. Culture in their veins made Africans realized the real values during dance rituals. Traditional African dance is connected to ritualistic and spiritual healing practices. The underlying belief is that in the community, mind and body must be incorporated into ritual systems of culture. Dance plays an integral role in society to express one's identity to the community; gives room for expression and communication; encourages to build and maintain a healthy sense of self system; and also offer an alternative cathartic experience for not only individuals but for the community as a whole.

**Keywords: Dance, tradition, culture, island, ancestor, spiritual.**

Dance is the symbol of culture, tradition of one's society, an identity of one's community, and the expression of one's emotions. In Paule Marshall's writings, Dance plays a predominant role in all characters. Failing to adopting new culture paves the way for seeking one's cultures. Hence, protagonists are supposed to confront the rituals of cultures. In this article, Paule Marshall's *Browngirl, Brownstones* and *Praise Song for the Widow* are taken up to analyze in the perspectives of cultures, dance, music, and traditional living of the people. Dance purges the soul and it exposes the umbilical cord relationship between the self and the larger community.

This research article aims at projecting the cultural aspects of Afro-Americans in naturalistic way of prettifying their dance. Their dance is their culture and with which the dance depicts their culture. In view of this aspect, Paule Marshall gave a vivid picture about Afro- American's culture,

custom, and tradition by illuminating their dance in her fictional works. Moreover she clearly renders each and every characters involved in the ring dance symbolizes their culture. The portrayal of Marshall's protagonists' in her novels like Selina Boyce and Avey Johnson are exemplified as the represents of their culture in dance.

Marshall portrays the life of Selina Boyce and Avey Johnson in the light of culture and dance. Protagonists' obsession about separation from their cultural heritage coerces them to unite with their indigenous culture. Selina Boyce is different from Avey Johnson. The former reunites with her community after knowing the traditional values from the society, the latter, a middle-aged widow, in a cultural dilemma of separation from her cultural heritage coerces her to leave the cruise immediately. She feels the need of spiritual journey in her life. She realized her impoverished state of her spirits. The dance that she eyewitnessed in Carriacou consoles and soothes her largely. The Circle Dance reminds her diasporic link with the African past. Commonly, these dance rituals not only act as consoling but also unite the black people spiritually. The circle dance, employed by Marshall to illustrate the diasporic experience, is the central element of West-African based spiritual rituals. The symbolic dance forms the text, from its use as central metaphor to Marshall's narrative structure.

Marshall, an American-born writer, whose parents migrated to the United States from Barbados, which impacts in all her works focused on reconnection and reconciliation. Separation and dislocation from indigenous culture tormented Marshall's characters largely. They healed themselves using nostalgia for their cultural and ceremonies from their homeland. If as Susan Willies argues, Marshall's "...more recent novels sheds light on a previous one" (56), which is rightly appropriate to the writings of Paule Marshall. Therefore, analyzing her first novel *Browngirl, Brownstones* as a companion text is a need of the hour. Clearly, for Selina Boyce and Avey Johnson- Marshall's youngest and oldest protagonists-reconnection to an ancestral past is achieved through the performance of dance.

In these texts dance becomes "an expression which builds bridges to connect seemingly unconnectable spaces" (113). Marshall's use of dance in *Browngirl* sheds light on how dance functions in *Praisesong for the Widow*. While Selina becomes symbolically reborn as she performs the well-choreographed dance on a New York stage, Avey finds herself burying the past and looking forward to the future on the tiny island of Carriacou as performing the dance ritual, she remembers from childhood. For Selina, dance offers a way of remembering the impossible and imagining the unimaginable, which allows her to grow emotionally and reconcile to some extent her relationship with her mother. As her mother dances the Little Island dance at Agatha Steed's wedding with other members of the New York Bajan community, Selina watches closely and begins to imagine her mother as a young girl dancing on the island pasture. The image is so vivid that Selina's fascination leads to a revelation: "suddenly she yearned to know the mother then, in her innocence. Above all, she longed to understand the mother, for she knew obscurely, that she

would never really understand anything until she did” (145). For the first time, Selina sees her mother as more than the oppressive tyrant that she battles at home; the dance allows her instead to stretch linear time to remember years before she was born, and to bend geographic space to return to a place she has never been before. Her emotional growth, achieved through dance, is evidenced further in her performance of The Birth cycle and her marked change in the narrative from childhood to womanhood.

In contrast of Silla, the fate befallen on her husband Deighton is different. Their community rejects him for not thinking about “brownstones”. His steady hold concept of buying house in home land rewards him ostracism and obliteration. It is really ironic that his invisibility is celebrated by everyone through visible art form of dance. He is forced to stand outside lonely on the border of the Ring Dance:

She (Selina) glimpsed a man standing in the doorway. She saw only his legs but their stillness in the midst of all the movement arrested her, and the stance reminded her vaguely of her father. Deighton stood committed, between the summer night filled with faces behind him and the brilliant scene in the hall. He might have been one of the silent surging mob outside who had been shoved by them into the light – or a guest who had purposely arrived late and waited, poised, for his presence to be noted and his name murmured throughout the room. His smile was ready. (149)

Ring Dance is performed to express the unity among community. But exclusion of Deighton during the dance performance stands irony of the community. Selina, the daughter of Deighton, who supports her father and stand beside her father and expresses her voice against her own community. Despite of her stand, Deighton could not bear his sufferings. He states that,

Her Silla’s hand half lifted as though to beckon him.. But even as he took the first tentative step forward, her hand dropped and her derisive laugh drove him back. The mother laughed, the song soared: “Small island, go back where you from...” and both sound tore his thin composure apart. His eyes wheeled over the room in a desperate search for a single welcoming face. To the bar, but the mean there had seen him, and as his eyes met theirs, as his hand lifted uncertainly, they turned away with cold nods, and their backs formed a wall against him. His eyes then swung in a wide arc to the dancers... But they had seen him by now and they closed protectively around Silla and Ina; like the men at the bar, the dancers turned in one body and danced with their backs to him. (150)

Dance means communal life. It is used as a social manifesto which brands Deighton’s behavior as untraditional thinking and bans his entry during Ring Dance which results in his death.

In *Praisesong for the Widow* the elderly Avey, however, this rebirth comes as a result of her remembering a past she has forgotten and reconnecting with the culture and history of her childhood. The narrative is constructed in the form of the symbolic circle, which historian Sterling Stuckey argues the central organizing principle of the early Africans in America, and in a movement which Eugenia Collier asserts a driving force in Marshall's fiction – the movement from fragmentation to wholeness. Movement in time is cyclical, rather than chronological, as Marshall's protagonist moves from memories of the past to projections of the future. Instead of creating a linear narrative that begins at one point and ends at another. Unlike, Avey's journey starts with memories of the Ring Shout and ends with the performance of the Big Drum. Dances, which simultaneously acknowledge the similarities and differences of the diasporic experience. But the circularity of the narrative is obvious at another level as well, because it is the subtext of the West African Circle Dance which joins the two together.

The beginning of *Praisesong for the Widow* which is also the end of Avey Johnson's voyage, is a vivid collection from her childhood. While cruising the Caribbean with friends, her vacation is interrupted abruptly because she begins to remember her dreams. After spending a tiring day in Martinique, Avey finds herself confronted by her deceased great-aunt Cuney the moment she falls asleep. Avey's aunt Cuney, as ancestor figure, provides her with important information, specifically, the tools to remember an African and African-American past she has buried deep in her subconscious. These are memories which Avey is unwilling to recall as she wrestles not only with the ghost of her dream, but with herself as she struggles to remember what she has long forgotten. These memories of aunt Cuney and Tatem, South Carolina, are the first step to Avey's spiritual and cultural renewal. But the significance of this spiritual visit reaches far beyond Avey Johnson's life, beyond even the pages of the novel, for Avey's dream of her great aunt Cuney recalls a practice deeply rooted in African and African-American culture:

The old woman (she had been young then) had been caught “ crossing her feet” in a Ring Shout being held there and had been ordered out of the circle. But she had refused to leave, denying at first that she had been dancing, then claiming it had been the Spirit moving powerfully in her which had caused her to forget and cross her feet. She had even tried brazening it out: “Hadn't David danced before the Lord?” Finally, just as she was about to be ejected bodily, she had stormed out of the circle and the church on her own. (5)

Although the African bondsmen and women were from various cultures, among them the Ashanti, Ibo, and Akan, an important common bond was the circle dance which was associated with ancestral ceremonies that surfaced in America in the form of the Ring Shout. During the Shout, the participants, bodies positioned in the form of a ring, moved rhythmically in a counter-clockwise direction, singing spirituals. It was performed in a variety of settings, and the dancing and singing

were directed towards the ancestors or gods. But while dance plays an essential role in supplication in Africa, in the Euro-Christian tradition dancing in church is regarded as profane. Harold Courlander argues that the Ring Shout is a fusion of these two types of religious behavior:

Not all religious rites in West Africa include dancing, but most of them do; certainly at some stage of supplication dancing plays an essential role. Among West Africans, dancing in combination with other elements is regarded as a form of appeal to supernatural forces, and this tradition remains alive in New World African cults in Jamaica, Trinidad, and other West Indian islands. In the Euro-Christian tradition. However, dancing in church is generally regarded as a profane act. The circular movement, shuffling steps, and stamping conform to African traditions of supplication, while by definition this activity is not recognized as a “dance”. However if one violates the compromise by going too far, he has committed an irreverent act. (6)

In *Praisesong for the Widow*, however, the young Avey does consider the “little rhythmic trudge” dancing, although according to the people of Tatem, it was not supposed to be. Looking back, she recalled those nights when she joined aunt Cuney across the road from the church, viewing the elderly men and women slowly circling the room in a loosed ring. Standing at her aunt’s side, Avey performed that dance and under her breath, joined the Shouter in song. As the shout is performed the rhythm of the song becomes visible in dance:

They sang: “who’s that riding the chariot? Well well well...? Used their hands as racing tambourines, slapped their knees and thighs and chest in dazzling syncopated rhythm...arms shot up, hands arched back like wings: “Got your life in my hands/well well well...” Singing in quavering atonal voices as they glided and stamped one behind the other within the larger circle their shadows cast by the lamplight on the walls. (34)

This vivid recollection of the elderly shouters performing the ritual dance of their ancestors functions similarly to the Halsey Street rituals Avey and Jay participated in during the early years of their marriage. The singing and dancing are rites that reached beyond their lives to connect them with a rich lineage “that made their being possible” (137). The Ring Shout, like the Halsey Street rituals, offers spiritual affirmation to the participants through bodily movement and lyrical accompaniment.

After jumping ship in Grenada, Avey’s memories explore her conversion from being culturally spiritual, moving from her given name Avatara- to culturally spiritless, only recognizing herself as Mrs. Avey Johnson. In “Sleeper’s Wake”, we discover Avey’s marriage is full of music and dance as she finds herself stranded on the island attempting to take the next flight back to New York. Avey’s deceased husband appears not in her dreams, although the dream of aunt Cuney had

been vivid enough; he appears instead while she is awake. Linear time is disrupted as Avey's dreams become reality and her spiritual journey back in time informs the present. Avey begins to remember her life with her husband and the importance that dance and music played in their early life together. As Wilfred Cartrey remarks, "The ritual of dance and song and poetry in which he and Avey Johnson and the two young children nest, is a cocooning African source of strength and renewal" (479).

For Jay, dance and music, especially the blues, are magical and serve purposes beyond entertainment. Avey recalls those evenings when Jay would return home from working "two jobs for the salary of one" and listen to the blues of Ma Rainey and Big Bill Broonzy with his head bowed in front of the phonograph as if in player at the altar. This ritual, as well as the dances he staged for Avey in the livingroom, made the poverty and despair Halsey Street symbolized vanish, or at least disappear for an evening.

Jerome Johnson's western / class-based desire to achieve material wealth and success is not without consequence. As their life grows materially, it becomes void spiritually. The dance rituals they once engaged in were discarded as Jay Johnson became in Avey's mind "Jerome" the accountant, salesman, and night school student. The evenings spent dancing to "Flying Home," "Take the A-Train," and "Stompin at the Savoy", were exchanged for study manuals and self-improvement books. The dances which once made them feel "like new", were distant memories which Avey re-enacts alone, condemned by feelings of guilt and betrayal. She realizes before the move from the apartment on Halsey street to the home in White Plains, that these rituals provided the nourishment for her downtrodden spirit and the healing of Jay's broken soul. For "Jerome", dance gradually came to symbolize laziness, performed by those Blacks only interested in "having a good time". These sentiments are later echoed by Avey, during one of her annual cruises after Jerome's death, when she recalls her disgust at Clarice joining the dancers of carnival:

It had been Cartagena, Colombia, where, to Avey Johnson's disgust, the woman had abandoned them to dance in a carnival parade they were watching with other passengers from the Bainea Pride. Had gone off amid a throng of strangers a wishing her bony hips to the drums. Wish the slight hump like an organ grinder's monkey begging peonies from her shoulders. And with their fellow passengers watching. White faces laughing! Avey Johnson had never been so mortified. And she returned, the woman, laughing proudly, with the jumpsuit she had on soaked through under the arms, and in her laugh, in her flushed face, something of the high stepping, high-kicking young chorus girl she had once been. (25-26)

For Avey Johnson as well as Jerome, dance was no longer affirming or spiritually powerful, but instead signified the oppression of the minstrel shows and Cotton's Clubs, becoming a history shaped by exploitation and humiliation.

Avey's remembrance of the tale of the Ibo's which aids her flight and connects it to the significance of dance under slavery. The tale passed down from generation to generation tells the story of how the Ibo's shackled in chains and unsatisfied with the conditions of slavery, walked back to Africa. Lorna McDaniel posits that the slave danced not only for entertainment, but to define his/ her individual system of escape – of flight. Avey's flight from the cruise ship to the island of Carriacou is part of the “middle passage back”, which she must experience to give meaning to the emptiness and banality that her yearly Caribbean cruise represents.

The novel's conclusion is the moment Avey is finally able to mourn her past life and, through this ritual movement, nourish her deadened spirit. For Marshall, the West African Circle Dance “rhizomatically”, links the African diaspora to healing the wounds of forced migration and cultural alienation. In Marshall's narrative voice she offers an important detail which creates an allusion to the circle dance and its centrality to a conjunctive diasporic experience: “Nevertheless those in charge remained the elderly folk, and chief among them Lebert Joseph... He was constantly darting over to her...with a sly smile, his head performing its trickster dance.”

Historian Sterling Stuckey explains the relationship between the circle dance, the trickster figure, and burial ceremonies in Africa and the Americas:

For the dead, it appears, were especially susceptible to humor and to exceptional occasions. This explains the prominence of trickster tales of Anansi, the spider, being used to amuse the spirit of the dead in suriname. But since tricksters, most notably the hare, pervade much of black Africa, as does the ring ceremony honoring the ancestors, and since the trickster and the circle are associated not only in South America where Africans were enslaved but in North America Slavery as well, the evidence implies a wide association of the two in black Africa and, consequently, among numerous African ethnic groups in North America. (17)

Finally, allowing Avey to join the elderly dancers, Marshall achieves the reconciliation she seeks, but which must be repeated by each generation in an endless cycle of reconnections:

And under cover of the darkness she was performing the dance that wasn't supposed to be dancing, in imitation of the old folk shuffling in a loose ring inside the church. And she was singing along with them under the breath: “who's that ridin' the chariot/well well well ...” The Ring Shout. (248)

Thus, the research article centers around all about the dance viz culture in *Praisesong for the Widow*. Marshall in her self-revelation proves that dance is their culture, which is in their dance.



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