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**REVISITING CULTURAL ROOTS: A STUDY OF PAULE MARSHALL'S
PRAISESONG FOR THE WIDOW**

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Abstract:

Black characters' social life is bothersome; its study in fiction is a comprehensive concern for various literary critics. But because of the complexity of this study, researchers are much more interested in their behaviors and actions. The study of Paule Marshall's text is in line with this perspective. In this novel, American capitalism is so influential that it compels black characters to sin by repudiating their culture to the detriment of material. But after realizing that their integrity and dignity remain rooted in their cultural heritage, they decide to redeem by undertaking a saving process of cultural reconstruction. To better comprehend these socio-cultural features, the use of cultural criticism will help to examine the way cultures are performed by Praisesong for the Widow.

Keywords: *Social Life, Psychological and Socio-cultural Disorder, Cultural Reconstruction, Spiritual Regeneration, Acculturation, Cultural Awareness, etc.*

A leading scholar of Anthropology, Steve Berry quotes, "A concerted effort to preserve our heritage is to link our cultural, social, aesthetic, inspirational, and economic legacies- all of the things that quite literally make us who we are" (www.preservationnation.org). Culture has always placed at the center of human development in terms of social and economic escalation. Many of the writers talk in a volume to show the importance of cultural roots especially those dealing with literature of diaspora.

Paule Marshall, an American woman novelist, basically a Caribbean migrant and one of those women writers who proved the caliber of black women to the world in general. Through her novels, she speaks of the problems of women, especially African American Women and immigrants in general. She also acknowledges the strength of women who had to struggle in the dominant 'white' world. She points out that in the history of emancipation of slavery of Africans, Caribbean migrants and their decedents have participated and often played a key role.

Marshall is an iconic figure in the history of African American literature. She is a feminist, classist, modernist and above all she is a re-constructionist with a greater vision for re-formulating the ideology of female 'self'. Rebuffing negative and stereotyped images of women on and off stage, Marshall attempts to portray the honest, sincere and truthful picture of black women who are rather strong, sensitive, and capable.



Published in 1983, *Praisesong For The Widow* accentuates utter necessity to recognize and realize one's African heritage and assimilation of blacks. For centuries, these people in the white society were strategically put aside the mainstream and were uprooted of their cultural heritage. Hence, Marshall strongly feels that 'blacks' first need to regain and restore their cultural identity and then individual. She talks about Pan-Africanism. One of the critics, Giulia Scarpa observes of this novel that the concept of culture- the culture of people of African ancestry is indicated as the foundation of black identity. Pivotal to Marshall's subtle analysis of how the concept of class, in relation to the race and gender, can destroy one's sense of identity by imposing upon its victim a gradual self denial in the name of acquiring a supposedly higher and better status in a culturally homogenized American society.

It seems that Marshall has deliberately set this novel in the backdrop of the U.S. and the Caribbean Mid-land embellishing the connection between legends of both African American culture and African Caribbean culture. These cultural setups need help Avey, the central figure of the novel to track her own past and to understand her present life. The title, rather goes back to the African ritual where in celebration had always been the core of African tradition.

Marshall has divided this novel into four inter related sections: 'Rungate' (to get separated) is the first section where Avey is found to be dreaming of her ancient world- the world which she has forgotten. At the next juncture, 'Sleeper's wake' (to come across the sensitive reality), the heroine recalls her past and tries to tie up with her traditions. 'Lave Tete' (purifying the self) is the third section of the novel where in Avey attempts to cleanse and to rinse the dust and rust because of which her customs are made over. The last being 'Beg pardon' (to reunite with her own Heritage) in which Avey reclaims of an older shared bequest. By giving a very apt title to the novel, the author wants her readers to take a journey through the midst of African ritual so as to make them familiar with richness of African traditions.

Praisesong for the Widow stands for the traditional song and dance. It also integrates emblematic death and then rebirth. Victor Turner one of the scholars points out the process that the first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in a social structure from a set of cultural traditions are from both. During the intervening period, the characteristics of the ritual subjects are ambiguous; they pass through a cultural realm that has very few or none of the past or coming state. The third phase (of aggregation), the passage is consummated.

As the novel opens, Avey is found very dejected over the loss of her husband Jorome. To nurse back to health, Avey accompanied by two of her friends- Thomasina Moore and Clarise, goes on a board to Binaca Pride- a luxury cruise. However, she becomes restless and nostalgic. She becomes a victim of bewildering reverie. In her dreams, she recalls her childhood days and sees her great aunt Cuney, with whom she used to spend her vacations.

Avey is so disturbed by her dreams that she decides to go back to New York. She lives a twin life. Physically, she is in an amazingly rejoicing ambience but her inner self urges for peace always revolving around aunt Cuney and the Ibos. She is obsessed by her childhood African customs and rituals. Back her way to New York, she lands on Caribbean island of Granada where she discovers that people treat her as if she belongs to the same land. Her attempts to distinguish herself from the native people go vain. Moreover, she finds that people



greet her in their local language which makes her even more restless. Nevertheless, this instance helps her to reconnect to her origin and her roots later in the novel. As the novel comes to the conclusion of its first section, Avey seems to unfold the mystery of her disturbing dreams.

In the second phase of the novel it is noticed of Avey that in reality she is not satisfied with the life she has been leading in the US. It is her unconscious mind that finds solace in the material world of America that has parted her from her African roots. However, now she has become quite aware of mistake that she has been unknowingly committing all these days and now she awakens to the values of Afrocentric life. Marshall exposes how Avey lost herself in American materialistic world that resulted in for getting her cultural roots and polluted her soul.

See reminds of the customs and practices- the jazz, the blues and celebration of black American life. However, the bitter reality; the poverty, the hunger, the despair forced black folk to run after money, leaving no time and room for the rituals and stories of their heritage and thus she better understands what she has lost.

Marshall throws light on harsh, rather, bitter reality that to identify with American superficial nightmares and glossy world, many of the people from black community cut off from their origin thus narrowing mind, heart, and spirit; Jay becoming Jerome and Avatara becoming Avey is itself a testimony that they completely moved away from their cultural links and tried to be one with the alien world. Avey regrets over the trauncing of fundamental spirit even in the small things.

In the third part of the novel, 'Leve Tete' that refers to a kind of cleansing ceremony, Avey discovers that she is recollecting all her memories associated with her childhood, her aunt, and above all her-cultural roots. Apart from this, she finds her inner world as being wiped clean making it a fresh. While walking down a beach, her curiosity in looking at the sea, the sand, and the bushes signifies her dramatic return to the origin. By this time, she is as good as a newly born baby. In an instance, she meets Lebert Joseph who in no time recognizes her thirst and quest. He takes her to the annual excursion to Carriacou and engages her in the ritual dances. To put this in another words, Joseph is none other than a messenger and intermediate force to restore Avey to the right space. He is the illusory re-embodiment of the West African holy being, while aunt Cuney is her spiritual mother. Joseph turns out to be her spiritual father thus making her ready for the process of regeneration. In this connection, Barbara Christian notes Joseph's instance draws her into the annual festival in karaoke which for the island people is there annual excursion of spiritual rejuvenation.

Avey feels getting rid of undesired lumber that she has been carrying so long. The first move is going away from the cruise then her arrival at yearly excursion where she meets and observes the people celebrating their racial and cultural heritage. Up to her quest, Avey figures out numerous ancestral images whom she thinks she has been deceiving living in the mixed of superficial world. Her dance with them brings her back to her own worth and she undergoes the process of inner purgation.

Avey in the last section, 'The Beg Pardon' goes through the bathing ritual which is both practical and allegorical. 'The Beg Pardon' is a song sung by the blacks expressing regret for deserting and over-looking their commune and legacy. Moreover, it is a confession to their



ancestors. This ritual wash cleans her body and mind and reconnects her to the cultural and ancestral roots. In this ceremony She Goes back and gets back to her cultural heritage. Finally, just as the moving walls of bodies were almost upon her, she too moved- a single declarative step forward. At the same moment, what seemed an arm made up of many arms reached out from the circle to draw her in and she found herself walking amid the elderly folk on the periphery.

As Marina Abramovic, a Yugoslav performance artist rightly puts it, “In every ancient culture, there are rituals to mortify the body as a way of understanding that the energy of the soul is indestructible” (Marshall, 89). Nevertheless, culture is a powerful and effective medium to widening of mind and of the spirit. Close to the ritual, Avey utters that her name is Avatara while she says this; there is an expression of conquest on her face. By having gulped the cultural richness, she is now fully equipped to transmit African Heritage to the coming generations and she now takes pride in being an African as she has spiritually evolved.

To conclude, it can be drawn that Marshall in an authoritative tone asserts that culture, ritual, heritage of any community is the back bone for it to stand ‘straight’. It is also a fact that Africans in America- a new world- have gained prominent place in all strata, despite the acquisition of material, Blacks suffer from cultural disconnection and social marginalization. So, to restore their cultural dignity, they embark on a process of cultural reconstruction. This novel is rather torch bearer for the community to respect, practice, and preaches the rich cultural heritage that Africans belong to.

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