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From Avey to Avatara: The Search of Identity in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*

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Abstract

The American writer Paule Marshall (1929–2019) was known for her work on immigrant and diaspora identities, particularly those of African and Caribbean descent. Avey's loss of identity in *Praisesong for the Widow* is examined in this study as a consequence of the cultural predicament that an African-American individual experiences while residing in a non-home family in the United States. This investigation endeavors to reconstruct the progression of Avey into Avatara from a multifaceted socio-cultural and existential viewpoint. It combines the ceremonial restoration of ancestral memory and a late-life identity crisis. Ultimately, this reframes the narrative as a global allegory of human reclamation.

Key Words: identity, self-discovery, culture, Afro-American, Avey-Avatara

من افي الى أفاتارا: رحلة البحث عن الهوية في رواية *أنشودة مدح للارملة* لباول مارشال

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المستخلص

عُرِفت الكاتبة الأمريكية باول مارشال (1929–2019) بتميزها في تناول ثيمات الهوية لدى المهاجرين ومجتمعات الشتات (الدياسبورا)، ولا سيما ذوي الأصول الأفريقية والكاريبية. وتتقصى هذه الدراسة فقدان الهوية لدى شخصية "أفي" في رواية أنشودة مدح للأرملة بوصفه نتاجاً للمأزق الثقافي الذي يواجهه الفرد الأمريكي من أصل أفريقي أثناء عيشه في بيئة اغترابية داخل الولايات المتحدة. وتسعى هذه الدراسة إلى إعادة بناء مسار تحول شخصية "أفي" إلى "أفاتارا" من منظور متعدد الأبعاد؛ سوسيولوجي وثقافي ووجودي، يدمج بين الاسترداد الطقسي لذاكرة الأجداد وأزمة الهوية في أواخر العمر. وفي نهاية المطاف، يُعيد هذا التحليل صياغة السردية بوصفها مجازاً عالمياً لاسترداد الذات الإنسانية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهوية، اكتشاف الذات، الثقافة، الأفرو-أمريكيون، أفي-أفاتارا.

Introduction

Home has always been a literary motif. Immigration increased after globalization accelerated after World War II. This method deconstructs and rebuilds the traditional concept of home with a different meaning in a different time and different space. Some immigrants desire to flee their deteriorating homelands, while

others try to write about a new ideal home. This strategy solves the identity loss caused by cultural dilemmas. Thus, writing immigrants' home and restoring their identity are linked. (Liu 97)

Identity has been reconsidered in contemporary critical theory as a dynamic, fluid becoming, rather than an immutable, biologically-determined essence. Identity is the obstacle at the intersection of economic systems, culture, and history. Identity is a phenomenon that arises when individuals are disconnected from their sense of history, whether through voluntary movement, forced dispersal, or the psychological seduction of cultural assimilation. This loss is a human catastrophe in the context of modernity and institutional distance, rather than merely gender relations. Stuart Hall's in 1990 “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” can be employed to interpret this global identity crisis and loss. Hall contends that cultural identity is a production that is never completed, always in the process of change, and generated within, rather than outside, representation (Hall 222). The initial perspective defines identity as a shared culture and a shared history. The second position recognizes that identity is a dynamic process that involves both existing and becoming, belonging to both the past and the future, and undergoing continuous change.

György Lukács' (1923) critique of capitalism is socio-economically associated with this loss of identity. Lukács investigates the process of reification and the manner in which industrial capitalism results in "a man's own activity, his own labour becomes something objective and independent of him, something that controls him by alien laws" (Lukács 87). The spiritual, cultural, and human qualities of the individual are fetishized and flattened down into commodities by material achievement and bourgeois objectives, thereby reifying subjective human identity. Consequently, the crisis is a battle for the existence of the genuine self and the market object.

Through the use of specialized language and fiction, African-American women writers confront social issues and prejudice in the United States. Currently, the literary ritual and the widespread desire for female writers from the 1970s and 1980s have reignited interest in authors who received significant acclaim but received little national or global recognition (Wane Ly 24). Paule Marshall, an African-American woman writer who frequently referenced African culture, distinguished herself by defining it. Her writings underscored the necessity for black Americans to reclaim their African origins and the distinctive cultural affinity of West Indians.

Marashall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983)

Paule Marshall was a Black woman writer who appropriately portrayed numerous Black feminine roles. Since selfhood does not require severing links with persons and the community, she does not limit them to secluded Black communities. Self is a knowledge of ties to family and community, she explains. Her characters are motivated to escape persecution. She does not see Afro-Americans as different from others because only their culture and heritage can save them from US racism (Kajal 372).

In this novel, the protagonist discovers herself both literally and figuratively. Local Community and lifestyle is part of this land-sea travel adventure. The story is about the individual and the community, it's narrative about estrangement and reassurance. The heroine, Avey Johnson, embarks in the Caribbean. She has abandoned her African legacy for American commercial culture. Her Caribbean family dreams make her feel anxious and apprehensive. A strange dream keeps repeating in her head. She leaves the ship in Genada and flies home to escape the island's emotional pain. She gets marooned on the island and misses her flight, greeted by the inhabitants. They are accompanied by Avey as they set sail for Carriacou, an island situated in the Middle Passage between the Americas and Africa. As the inlanders dance and celebrate, led by the elderly Lebert Joseph, Avey recollects myths and stories from his youth. It appears that her interest is related to a spiritual quest for self-discovery. Changing her cultural, ancestral, root, and economic identities is a tremendous deal. Because she is compelled to make this change, Avey experiences distress and further fractures her already fragile mental health (Kajal 373). An old Lebert Joseph asked Avey: "And what are you? Where do you call home?" (Widow 167) Her confusion is being exacerbated by these two queries. These are the fundamental concepts that Marshall builds her book around. Avey gets ensnared by these enquiries because she does not know her identity or her place in the world.

Avey and her husband Jerome have lived in the United States for a long time and have slowly adopted the values of white Americans while giving up the customs and history of their home country. At first, Jerome was a smart, capable, and driven young man. He made a family with Avey, worked during the day, and went to college at night, using the extra time to get out of poverty. After that, he finished and started his own business, which helped him get out of poverty. An angry Jerome has taken the place of the happy Jerome. Even so, white culture continues to treat them unfairly. For these African Americans to be able to live in the United States, they have to give up their own culture and try to fit in with American society (Zhou 106).

Although Jerome and Avey have resided in the United States for an extended period and are geographically distant from destitution, the country is not their

spiritual home. At present, they are unable to call America their home. The United States is intended to be the home of numerous ethnic minorities from a spatial and historical perspective; however, they encounter significant challenges in establishing a sense of belonging as a result of racial discrimination. In order to conform and adjust to the dominant culture of the United States, these African Americans have gradually renounced their national culture. In contrast, these black immigrants have been excluded and denied entry into mainstream American society. This has resulted in a cultural issue that impedes the ability of African Americans to achieve a sense of cultural and social belonging, ultimately leading to the loss of identity and the experience of identity anxiety. Consequently, they encounter difficulties in assimilating into mainstream American culture. So, African American immigrants need their own historical and cultural customs to help them feel spiritually stable and to help them find their own identity (Zhou 107).

Marshall emphasizes the importance of traversing a chasm or break in one's innermost self, which is the path that ultimately leads to the revelation of one's identity, in this novel. Avey is a work in progress, transitioning from one identifier to the next, making decisions, and subsequently committing to them. She experiences numerous phases of hardship. Her obligations fluctuate in tandem with her objectives. She is in the midst of an existential crisis when the reader first encounters her. She was on a cruise with her companions when she was abruptly compelled to return home. She had only a few days remaining on the fifteen-day excursion that she had enrolled in with her two closest companions. She is torn between her desire to return home and her concern regarding her companion's potential reaction (Kajal 373).

Avey's implicit aspiration to unite with herself is reflected in this change in a geographical sense. Despite her initial intention to return back to her home in New York, she will change her mind when she embarks on the cruise in Grenada. She effectively confronts herself by conducting a reflective examination of the preceding thirty years and the decisions she and Jay had made throughout that time in her room that night. She ultimately acknowledges with a sense of remorse that they have disregarded it: “Too much! What kind of bargain had they struck? How much had they foolishly handed over in exchange for the things they had gained?” (Widow 139-140). Avey weeps for her husband in a loud, excruciating sob for the first time, four years after his departure. This episode represents a critical juncture, as it illustrates the protagonist's initial indications of consciousness. It is essential to emphasize that this conscious awakening can only commence when she is willing to confront herself and not continue to avoid herself, as well as to acknowledge her past failures and express her regret (Begedou & Amouzou 4719).

A new type of Avey will be introduced the following morning. The hotel's desk receptionist, who observed the elegant black woman with many suitcases who arrived yesterday, recounts that the change is apparent even from the outside. The location of such a critical incident in the protagonist's life is not a coincidence. Avey's restoration process does not commence in the security of her New York residence or aboard the magnificent cruise ship Bianca Pride; rather, it commences upon her arrival in the West Indies, the homeland of her progenitors. This provides additional evidence that the protagonist was, in fact, in pursuit of herself. Avey Johnson chooses to rescind her departure to New York and accompany Lebert Joseph on an annual journey to a small island which is called Carriacou and located in her homeland, when it is time to depart the hotel (Begedou & Amouzou 4719).

Auto-recovery involves discovery/rediscovery and unlearning/relearning. This method depends on identity definition of Who you are? The first question Avey faces in this new phase is "…what you is?" (Widow 166) asked by Lebert Joseph after welcoming her into his rum business. Lebert's question is profound and existential regardless of her name, profession, nationality, familial background, etc. The old man wants to know Avey fully. To his surprise, the woman in her sixties cannot identify herself. This indicates that Avey is unaware of her past. Her cultural dislocation is evident in her words: "I don't know what you're talking about… what you're asking me…" (Widow 167). However, Avey is African American and she is separated from her roots from birth and adopts Western society as her own.

Avey has a vision in which she is one of many slaves crammed onto a ship as it sails away from port. Hearing their screams and cries, she realizes what a terrible situation they are in. The horrors endured by people throughout the Middle Passage are echoed in this image. Despite her efforts to erase the events of the past few decades, this painful history is a fundamental aspect of her identity. Marshall emphasizes the importance of embracing the past, despite its suffering and turmoil, because psychologically, it is necessary to endure the chaos in order to defeat it. (Shamail 183). In contrast to the Western norm, the place of birth does not determine one's identity in her culture. The origin of your parents is the foundation of your authentic identity. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Lebert Joseph, who has lived his whole life in the Americas, insists on identifying as 'Chamba', an ethnic group from West Africa. However, he regrets that a significant number of individuals of African descent have lost touch with their heritage. There are numerous individuals who are similar to you. Individuals who are unable to address their country by name.

Paulette Brown-Hinds states that dance is assigned a healing virtue in Marshall's fiction; the traditional dance rituals are used to heal the spirit and express

the relationship between the person and the greater community (Brown-Hinds 113). More importantly, the dance that the Caribbeans do on the Annual Excursion has spiritual meaning. Each ethnic group will dance its own dance and will experience a particular historical fact as a cultural marker. This enables the performers or the subjects to identify themselves as members of a specific tribe. This is a notion of the dance as symbolic of the threads that enable characters connect to their original or ancestral community.

Avey experiences a vision that she has not experienced since infancy at the Big Drum: brightly colored threads emanating from the individuals in Lebert Joseph's yard: “From their seared eyes. From their navels and their cast-iron hearts to enter her, making her part of what seem[s] a far-reaching, wide-ranging confraternity” (Widow 249). The return of "fraternity threads" represents the reestablishment of unity between Avey and her homeland, and by extension, the African diaspora in the Americas, all of whom are descendants of the transatlantic slave trade. Avey has the ability to execute the Carriacou Tramp in order to verify this reunion. She initiates the glide-and-stamp gait with her feet. Although she has never pursued it, she executes her movements in perfect harmony with the elderly individuals who are situated on the periphery of the vast circuit of dancers. Avey's impetuous dancing steps reflect her natural cultural ties to Carriacou, a microcosm of the African diaspora. Avey must reintegrate to reclaim herself. Avey learned from Lebert Joseph that African identity differs from Western identity. Unlike the West, Africans regard themselves as a tribe, not just one person. She exists because her community is intricately, spiritually, and physically bonded. 'Ontologically and epistemically, the community world trumps individual life histories (Rodriques 14). The finest illustration of this is Lebert Joseph's self-presentation:

> Well, that’s me. I’s a Joseph, oui!’ […] ‘From Ti Morne, Carriacou. The oldest one still living from that part of the island, if you please. Near everybody in Ti Morne is family to me. […] I’s also family—close family—to the Josephs at Plaisance and Bushnell and Friar Village, Carriacou. […] And I’s a far-distant relation to the ones at Spring Hole and Meridien over to the other side of the island. (Widow 163)

Lebert illustrates that he is of the Josephs, a member of their race, and that he is obligated to them for his identity. Avey was compelled to rehabilitate her history and her community before she could redeem herself.

Avey's concept of self undergoes a significant transformation from this point forward. But her response to the query “And who you is?” is no longer simply ‘Avey’ or ‘Avey Williams’, but “Avey, short for Avatara”, as her great-aunt Cuney constantly insisted (Widow 251). In African cosmology, the correct designation of an object is the means by which it is brought into existence through nommo. Therefore, Avey's recognition of herself as Avatara is also essential for her

reconstruction. Avey becomes her authentic self upon discovering her true name (Christian 82-83). In this critical phase, the protagonist uncovers her true heritage as an Arada descendant from the former Kingdom of Allada in southern Benin. According to Lebert, "Something about the way you was doing the Carriacou Tramp there toward the end put me in mind of people from that nation" (Widow 252). Additionally, by adopting the name Avatara, she is demonstrating her commitment to the responsibility associated with that name. Cuney had received a premonition from Avey's grandmother Avatara months prior to Avey's birth, which provided her with precise instructions regarding the child's destiny. Avatara observed that she was dispatched by Cuney's great-grandmother with the responsibility of "transmitting the spirit and survival of the culture in the New World from one generation to the next." (Shamail 181).

The preservation of history and culture is the responsibility of black women. Marshall warns African-Americans against accepting false values that damage their spiritual needs. They must appreciate their cherishing ground and teach upcoming generations. This text is not only about alienation and reaffirmation, but also the role and the importance of Black women as transmitters and preservers of culture, identity, and heritage (Ravell-Pinto 509). This is an oral history of the brave Ibos of maroon communities. During her transmission, Aunt Cuney tells this story to Avey's relatives. Storytelling is the art that shapes Avey's very being from childhood to adulthood. Marshall describes the Ibos' walk on sea water as a fixture in black New World mythology. Marshall also tackles the idea that Africans used sorcery to escape enslavement. Marshall recounts the mystical abilities of the African populace for the reader. These valiant men not only vanquished their captives but also prevailed against the elements. Avey's narrative approach has a substantial impact on her self-awareness and development. Avey's life mission, according to Aunt Cuney, is to safeguard the Ibo tales and stories. Avey persisted in narrating stories until she was thoroughly integrated into American society. She is guaranteeing the survival of both herself and the community through this approach. Avey has been narrating stories to audiences since she was a young child.

True identity is biological, tied to blood/lineage. Avey Johnson was born in New York, but her parents are from Barbados. Accepting her traditional name "Avatara" acknowledges and appropriates her culture. This cultural facet of Marshall's story resembles African-Americans' dual identity: naturalized and blood. Kimberly Roe Connor says "by becoming Avatara, by assuming the convert's pose of humanity before divine and ancestral power, Avey has finally become herself" (Connor 230). In black characters' lives, the ancestral name matters. This increases social well-being and preserves memory. The following segment depicts the woman in that cause from this point forward. Avey Johnson contemplates the estate that her

great-aunt bequeathed to her after departing Carriacou. She had resolved to rectify the situation by the time the aircraft touched down in Grenada. Alternatively, if it was unsalvageable, a new one would be constructed in its place. liquidate the residence in North White Plains and allocate the proceeds toward the construction of a new structure in Tatem. It may serve as an ideal location for a summer retreat. Every summer, she would request that her two grandsons be sent to reside with her in Tatem. She would then take them, as well as her grandchildren and visitors, in a troop to the Landing.

Conclusion

Paule Marshall *Praisesong for the Widow* deftly follows Black widow Avey Johnson as she seeks to define who she is. Through Avey's story, Marshall explores the challenging path of coming to terms with his own identity and reconnecting with his African roots. There is a deep and profound shift in culture when Avey becomes Avatara. As with Avey's first estrangement and cultural copying are universal human weaknesses that might cause an identity crisis in old age. Finally, her rebirth as Avatara during ancestral ceremonies lend credence to the idea of diasporic identity as an ever-present expression in collective memory. Paule Marshall's oeuvre is a potent example of how social memory and historical events shape personal identity. Avey encourages his listeners to find their own solutions by encouraging them to discover themselves via his story.

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