

## “A STUDY OF STRUGGLE FOR SELF-DEFINITION IN PAULE MARSHALL’S *DAUGHTERS*”

**BHARATI DESHMUKH**

Research Student, Department of English, Shivaji University, Kolhapur, Maharashtra, India

### **ABSTRACT**

Paule Marshall was a prolific American author. She was a poet, novelist, professor and librarian. She published her first novel in 1959, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, which received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1960. Her collection of four novellas, *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*, won the National Institute of Arts Award. She published her powerful and promising novel *Daughters* in 1991. *Daughters* was a novel about the main character, Ursa McKenzie whose parental dependency suppressed her identity, freedom and independence. This novel was about the impact of her familial and cultural surrounding on her struggle for self-definition. Ursa was a well educated and honest black woman who is struggling to make a career and life for herself in New York. She faced many obstacles like in her life. She passed through the abortion, a break up with her boyfriend, the start of a new job, and finally, the need to come to terms with her family back home. Throughout the novel, she was struggling to understand herself her parents back home in the West Indies. *Daughters* was highly focused the struggle for self-definition in this novel.

**KEYWORDS:** Paule Marshall, African American Literature, Self-definition, Homeland

### **INTRODUCTION**

Paule Marshall was a prominent American author. The novel presented the struggle for self-definition of black women. Paule Marshall was born April 9, 1929 at Valenza Pauline Burke in Brooklyn, New York. Her mother Ada and the father Samuel Burke was emigrated from Barbados after World War I. She was highly influenced by West Indian culture. As a Caribbean-American immigrant, she explored the conflicts and issues of Caribbean-American immigrant families in her writing. Her first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* was about a young Caribbean-American girl growing up in an African-Caribbean community. The protagonist struggled to search herself, but community resists her attempts. She educated from Brooklyn College. She was graduated cum laude in 1953. In this year, she began working for a small African-American magazine and with this she began her writing literary work.

Her writing career was very impressive. She explored the major themes in her works which reflects her own issues and problems in life. The major themes include a search for identity, the struggle for self-definition, homeland and need for female empowerment. Her use of language and words reflected the West Indian culture because she was grown up in a bicultural environment. This environment was rich in language and folklore of Barbados. She examined the issues and experiences of Caribbean-American Community. Paule Marshall won a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010 from the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards. She was a well-known author in African American Literature who explored the issues of black women and their struggle in society.

### Concept of Self-Definition

The self-definition was a person's own identification about self. The realization of self-definition leads a person towards the clarification of his own life. The person became aware of his aim to live his life. It was prime important that every person must think about own self-definition and live purposefully in his life.

### Self

'the personality or character that makes a person different from other people: the combination of emotions, thoughts, feelings, etc., that makes a person different from others.'<sup>1</sup>

The self was person's own experience of his perception, emotions, thoughts and feelings. These experiences were different from the other person, and this realization made an aware about self-definition.

### Self-Definition

- Self-definition is being able to know who you are and what your purpose is in life.
- *An example of self-definition is when you know you are a strong, capable, confident teacher and husband.*<sup>2</sup>
- The understanding or determination of one's own nature or basic qualities.<sup>3</sup>
- The definition of one's identity, character, abilities, and attitudes by oneself.<sup>4</sup>

The self-definition provides a confidence to tackle every problem in life with knowing own nature and basic qualities. It gives a positive way to live. Through this identification of self, we can create our future. We can erase the bad things in our life and nurture our life with the good things.

### Struggle for Self-Definition in Paule Marshall's *Daughters*

*Daughters* was a great and extraordinary novel by Paule Marshall. *Daughters* was a story of Ursa Mackenzie, a young girl, the main protagonist of the novel. Ursa Mackenzie was needed freedom as her status in a global context. She was bi-national and bi-cultural. Her mother was, Estelle, American born and her father was Primus Mackenzie, the leading politician. Ursa was 30-year-old. Early fourteen years in her life, she lived in Triunion and later years in the United States. She had traveled to both places. She caught between two cultures, the USA, and the Caribbean as well as she must find her own way. She was left the well paid corporate research job and assisted the African-American candidate for mayor in a nearby city. Her father was a powerful Triunion politician known to everyone as 'PM'. He disliked this job, but her mother was pleased. Ursa in her life was not comfortable with her parents. She also had unsuccessful in a love relationship with her lover. She only succeeds to maintained friendship with her best friend and guide, Viney Daniels. She was an assistant vice president at Metropolitan Life. Viney always supports to Ursa for her struggle. She always motivated her to search

<sup>1</sup> "self." Definition of self by Merriam-Webster. Retrieved on 26 Apr. 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Your Dictionary definition and usage example, LoveToKnow Corp., Retrieved on 26 Apr. 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Webster\_New World College\_Dictionary, Wiley Publishing, Inc., Cleveland, Ohio, Retrieved on 26 Apr. 2015.

<sup>4</sup> The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 5th edition Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, Retrieved on 26 Apr. 2015.

herself. Viney warned her,

'You can't hear your own self, your own voice trying to tell you which way to go, what to do with your life.' (112)

The novel opened with the main protagonist of the novel Ursa. She was thirty years old, an unemployed research analyst. She was slowly leaving an abortion clinic and returning her home at Manhattan's Upper West Side. Her thoughts shifted from one person to the next: her friend Viney, her lover Lowell, her parents but where she was. *A Daughters* was a powerful novel, carefully constructed around the young black woman, Ursa Beatrice Mackenzie. Her life was a mirror of worlds of Triunion, a fictional Caribbean island- nation, and New York City. The novel begins with her departure from a New York City clinic feeling guilty about having had an abortion. The abortion explored her failed dreams and ruined lives, a legacy of slavery, colonialism, and racism in the Americas. *Daughters* examined the role of black women in the New World, who must, because of the effects of slavery, racism, and sexism, found the courage and resourcefulness to act alone. Black women were must lead the struggle to be free and whole whether it was West Indian or New York African American.

Marshall's novel *Daughters* (1991) was about self-definition. The novel centers on a young woman, Ursa Beatrice Mackenzie. She was living in New York City and removed from the Caribbean Island of Triunion. She caught in typical American middle-class problems: education, career, and a love affair. When she visited Triunion, she realized her life and spirit. In this novel, Marshall explored the struggle of women for their self-definition. They women included; the first was Estelle Harrison, P.M.'s wife, and Ursa's mother. The second was Celestine, P.M. and Ursa's Creole 'nanny'. The third character was Astral Ford, P.M.'s long-time mistress, and manager of his resort and Ursa herself. Ursa was a represented to all young black women who struggled for own self-definition. Ursa needed to control her own life in her own way. Through her struggle, she wanted to become complete, happy and independent person.

Although the novel related to the major theme of slavery and racism, Marshall was highly focused on the struggle of Ursa and other woman characters for their self-definition. Ursa as a black woman struggled a lot in her life. She was alone and not decided what to do in her life. She was confused in her life. She was thinking about her emotions, thoughts, and feelings, and this was the beginning of her struggle for self-definition.

Another woman character was Ursa's mother, Estelle. She knew the importance of self-definition. She encouraged her daughter toward the total freedom. She always appreciated Ursa's decision and supported her in her struggle for self-definition. Though she was unable to found herself, she motivated Ursa to found her own way. Estelle highly influenced by Congo Jane and her consort Will Cudjoe. They immortalized in a heroic group sculpture called the National Monument. Estelle often takes Ursa to the monument. Through this incident, Marshall connects the leadership of the black woman, the necessity of struggle, and the figures of Ursa and Estelle. It shows the Estelle's devotion to struggle for her self-definition. At the college, Ursa's thesis proposal was rejected. The proposal related to study the black men and women as represented by Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe. This rejection showed the struggle continued.

Celestine was another self-sacrificing woman in this novel who lived her entire life for other people. She was devoted to first for Mis-Mack and then for Primus and his only child, Ursa. She was alone in her life and abandoned by her family. She was not having the friends, lovers or relatives. Celestine truly devoted to her family. Once Estelle suggested that Celestine should go to the movies with Estelle and Ursa, but Celestine refuses. Her devotion and loyalty towards

family comes first. Astral Forde was a daughter who bound to status and security. She engaged with some football players on the beach. This relationship ended with unwanted pregnancy and abortion. After this incident, she was also very much aware for her self-definition in her life. She chooses only those lovers who can help her achieve financial and emotional independence.

The women were a battle against the obstacles for their realization of themselves. Celestine Marie because of her intelligence and loyalty became housekeeper and family retainer. Astral Forde, an ambitious country woman, became Primus' long-term mistress; loyal and intelligent. She and Ursa bond in a powerful scene after Mackenzie's defeat. Viney, Ursa's New York City friend, was a determined single mother. Marshall explored Ursa's struggle for her self-definition through her breaking up with her lover Lowell and she quits a prestigious job.

Paule Marshall's *Daughters* was gained respect and popularity since its publication. *Daughters* continues Marshall's exploration of women, often living in two cultures, who came to know themselves as free women, as individuals, and as members of the African Diaspora. Marshall highly influenced in language, politics, and life by her mother and the other Barbados women who sat and talked in her mother's kitchen after working long days cleaning other people's houses. Her novels are tributes to the women who scrubbed so their daughters could write. Many significant and important themes explored throughout the novel. Abortion symbolized women's dependency and their helplessness. The statues of slave woman Congo Jane and her lover, Will Cud Joe were symbolized the struggle and resistance of black women.

Marshall explored the psycho-social and intellectual development of young women of Caribbean American Community. *Daughters* based on the female development of self-realization. Main protagonist faced many conflicts throughout their journey. Marshall constructed Estelle and Ursa both are strong women who struggle to identify themselves. Estelle struggled against her husband's political and sexual betrayals. Estelle did not have the courage to struggle openly so; she encouraged Ursa to struggle for her self-definition. Ursa had strength and equality to struggle for self-definition. In the process of struggle for self-definition, Ursa and Estelle increased their understanding and decrease their racial prejudices and preconceptions. Both women are struggling to establish own identity. Ursa's story suggested that dependency can be broken. Through the other woman characters like; Estelle, Astral, and Celestine Marshall explored the material reality of dependency continues to operate. She showed through these characters that dependency remains and that the need persists to confront entrenched structures of power.

Through Ursa's struggle for self-definition Marshall represented those women who also struggled with their life. Marshall was used language and dialogue very aptly throughout the novel that reflects the social environment and struggles of the characters. All characters are well defined. Ursa was an inspirational character in this novel.

## CONCLUSIONS

Marshall beautifully wrote and strongly weaved this powerful story into an easily understood. Marshall explored Ursa and other woman characters' struggle for self-definition in this novel. Through their, struggle Marshall had drawn the harsh realities of African American life. Ursa and other female characters struggled for their self-definition. They went through many difficulties, but they had the strong will power for achieve their own identity in society. Many people all over the world were living without any purpose, motivation and aim. They did not define the self and did not know what to do in their life. Self-definition achievement was succeeding to give a clear, confident acceptance of oneself to person. A

person often allows the acceptance of their self plays an important role in their life. It always leads to an increase in self-confidence, positive psychological adjustment and decreases the negative perceptions. It was an extraordinary novel that enlightened the other black women to redefine themselves.

## REFERENCES

1. Boyce Davies, C. *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. London: Routledge, 1994.
2. Chin, T. S. *Re-figuring “home”: displacement, identity and questions of the postcolonial in the narrative fiction of Paule Marshall*. Dissertation, 1992. University of Michigan. Print.
3. Marshall, Paule. *Daughters*. New York: Plume, 1991.
4. Singh, P. *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004.
5. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paule\\_Marshall](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paule_Marshall)
6. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/self-definition>

