

The Womanhood Embraced by Paule Marshall in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*

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Abstract

The present research highlights womanhood attributes and characteristics in Paule Marshall's first novel "Brown Girl, Brownstones". It analyzes the various women characters in the novel and sheds light on different attributes of womanhood in them. This is done through Selina's life experiences. The present research offers a female perspective on conflict, racism, grief, love, greed, and the bitter truth of discrimination under the lie of American inclusivity mentioned in the novel. It shows the journey of Selina from division to oneness towards her family, friends, and community, from being a girl to becoming a woman. The research talks about an environment depicted in the novel where all womanhood features sometimes coexist in peace while they conflict with each other in other instances.

The research ends with the identification of the protagonist's characteristics as inferred from the novel. The identified characteristics are Assertiveness, Empathy, Imperfection, Power and Courage, Self-Esteem, and Confidence.

Keywords: empathy, womanhood, assertiveness, community

1. Introduction

Paule Marshall was a renowned American novelist, known for her fiction writings. Her writing style usually revolves around strong black women characters. One such remarkable depiction of a woman character is in her novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Selina Boyce- the protagonist in the novel is a powerful woman, an artist, a dancer, and an independent woman. The storyline revolves around her being a Barbadian immigrant. She shifted with her family to the United States in the 1940s and lives in a Barbadian community named Brownstones. Throughout the novel, Selina explores different shades of womanhood in her and the women around her. Paule Marshall embraces womanhood in all aspects, be it cultural, physical, or emotional in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. The present research will discuss the various features of womanhood revealed by various characters in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.

In America, any West Indian immigrant woman suffered more than a Black, a foreigner, and a woman combined. Her sufferings became invisible and no steps were taken for the welfare of this community (Bambara). The depiction of this phase of West Indian immigrant women in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* makes it even more special from a social point of view. This novel talks about a group of women who came to the United States from Barbados in the 1940s. This marked the first big West Indian immigration, where thousands of Black Americans from the rural South traveled North (Sutton and Chaney). The novel illustrates the mental sufferings of brown immigrant women and their desire to make a better life for themselves.

In an ecosystem where genders are always in conflict, one cannot limit womanhood understanding only through some pre-defined attributes decided by society. Whether it is physical appearances, personality traits, or society-bound roles for women, womanhood is an unexplored area of human behavior. The present research focuses on highlighting these women-centric attributes and features as described by Paule Marshall in her novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.

The book *Brown Girl, Brownstones* has been divided into four books. Each book describes different phases of Selina's life. Each book presents a different maturity level for Selina. In Book One, *A Long Day and a Long Night*, readers are introduced to Selina's family. They understand the reason why all the family members are always at odds with each other. In Book Two, *Pastorale* shows Selina's journey from being a girl to becoming a woman. In Book Three, *The War* illustrates the widening rift between Selina's parents. Finally, in Book Four, *Selina* engages the readers in Selina's journey where she grows as a person, as a woman to be precise. It beautifully depicts how a mature woman Selina comes to terms with her cultural identity against all odds, winning the fight with her 'self', and recognizing oneness.

Selina can be seen experiencing and dealing with a completely transformed woman inside her as time passes and she grows older. She observes different aspects of life and deals with them by developing different womanhood attributes in herself. For example, in the first book *A Long Day and a Long Night*, Selina is shown to live in Brownstones where the women's community has a very orthodox and traditional view of womanhood. Here, Selina wants to be a part of the community but her inner virtue conflicts with the community's belief system. Though Selina wants to be 'one of them', at the tender age of ten, she understands the part of her that is reluctant to be one of them. This portrays the presence of an independent girl inside her, an attribute of womanhood. This attribute of being "independent" makes her different from others, someone who thinks, introspects, and takes decisions for herself. Hence, Selina Boyce's involvement in the community is full of tension and problems (Traylor).

2. Shades of Womanhood in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*

Each of the four books highlights various attributes and characters of womanhood (Parry). These characters have been presented to be sometimes in conflict while sometimes in alignment with each other. Various characters in the novel depict certain behaviors of womanhood, such as:

- **Silla Boyce:** Selina's mother and Deighton Boyce's wife. She is a *fierce* woman who wants to create a better life at Brownstones for herself and her family. The character of Silla Boyce is a **strong-willed** woman with steel nerves. She is a lady who is ready to fight anyone who stands in the way of fulfilling her dreams. This can be supported by an incident in the book where she is cheated on by her husband. She then plots to have his land sold behind his back, which she successfully does. She then plans to use the money to fulfill her dream of buying Brownstones.
- **Miss Thompson:** Miss Thomson is an *empathetic* woman who is Selina's confidant and acts as a **motherly** figure for her. She also confronts Silla about acting behind Deighton's back.
- **Miss Mary:** One of Selina's closest friends and another tenant of the same Brownstone she lives in. She passes away just as Silla is about to evict her wherein it is mentioned that Silla harassed Mary to death.
- **Suggie:** An *assertive* woman who leads her life on her terms and conditions. She is also one of Selina's closest friends who lives in the same Brownstone. Marshall says Suggie governs her happiness and pain through the choices she makes. Further, she is very **critical** of the community rules and regulations. This aspect of Suggie's thought process can be supported by the instances wherein she warns Selina to beware of the community's women. Even though Suggie is a part of the Brownstones community, she is very open-minded and has a very different perspective towards life which was considered odd by other women of that time.

The novel talks about the female body and sexuality very openly. It also talks about the effect it has on Selina's life on a personal and community level. One of the earliest examples is Selina's sexual maturation, which is directly linked to her joining the Brownstones community. Selina's mixed feelings about puberty make her hesitant to join the Brownstones community. This is further demonstrated in two scenes where this difficult relationship between sexual development and community is visible. The first is in book two, *Pastoral* when Selina and Beryl travel to Prospect Park. Beryl enlightens Selina about "*where babies come out*" and explains menstruation to her. Selina's response to her awaiting physical changes is a recipe for refutation and misery. She also denies ever having children saying, "*I'm not having any*". However, she also feels gloomy as she can't join "*the cult of blood and breasts*" that connects Ida, Beryl, and eventually all the other women of the Brownstone community. Since Selina is sexually immature, she can't join the female community. This incident describes a phase of womanhood wherein the female body is physically ready to explore sexuality inside itself. However, mentally, the woman inside is not. It depicts the tug of war that occurs inside a woman, between physical desires and mental immaturity.

One instance from book three, *The War* associates Selina's adolescent state of mind and body with her connection to the community. Herein, Selina is reluctantly introduced to the sorority of "*the mothers*". It is extremely problematic to associate Selina with the group here as well. The novel mentions a struggle that occurs between Silla and Deighton in the Boyce kitchen. Silla vows "*her whole self*" to sell Deighton's land. She then threatens Selina that she will murder her if she discloses this to anyone. Seeing Selina's fright, Florrie Trotman tries to calm her down. The underlying reason for this was also to emphasize her silence. Her request for Selina is based on Selina's evolving "womanliness," which bonds her with her mother. She tells Selina, "*You're near a full woman like us now that you're filling out.*" She then tells her to "*hold [her] tongue like a woman*". Following that, to establish authority and seal the deal, she "*brushes one of [Selina's] small breasts*". This move provoked a "*cry of outrage*" from Selina and she rebelled violently. After that day, Selina is occasionally "seized by a frenzy of rejection". She occasionally runs to the bathroom to "rub[s] her breasts until pain coursed through her body", struggling to wipe away the "indelible ... imprint".

Selina's rejection of Florrie Trotman's "touch" is also the initiation of Selina's rejection of becoming a part of the female community. To Selina the community represents two things: firstly, it says "You have to get pregnant sometime" and this "rite" did not make her "one" with Florrie and Virgie Farnum, but this meant her being "one" with the "big breasts and pregnancies" that she links these women with. Second, her being a part of this community means being "party to the mother's dark vow" and to her, it felt like selling her soul to her mother. Later this feeling troubled Selina that her physical growth and maturity, as acknowledged by Florrie, will take away her freedom to act according to her understanding of right and wrong; from now she will have to follow the code of the community (Traylor and Griffin). Now Selina's uncertainty about her sexuality and physical attributes also shows her hesitance about the association in the community and the uneasiness she is having at the idea of being a part of it.

Following are four narratives derived from the above four novels in the book series. These narratives highlight some specific aspects of womanhood in Selina that were ingrained in her as she grew older (Pettis).

- Narrative – 1- The first narrative shows ten-year-old Selina playing in Brownstone where she lives with her family. Her father dreams about moving back to Barbados and buying a house there while her mother is ambitious about making a life in Brooklyn. This ambition gradually creates a rift between her parents. This eventually led to her father's death. Selina blamed her mother and called her a "Hitler". These turns of events left a mark on Selina's life and made her bitter about

her mother and her community. The narrative depicts Selina's rebelliousness even in her teens. Further assertive behavior by Silla is illustrated. The narrative also presents Selina's blind love for her father at that age.

- Narrative – 2- The second narrative shows her playing with her best friend Beryl. They walk in the park where Selina reads poems to Beryl while Beryl sleeps in her arms. It is shown that Selina is very comfortable with Beryl. To the extent that it is noticed that they love each other or at least are sexually attracted to one another. Meanwhile, Selina is happy to be with Beryl. She is also pained by Beryl's ethics and acceptance of the community.
- Narrative – 3- The third narrative shows Selina's interaction with Suggie. Suggie also influences Selina when she tells Selina to be independent in life and cautious of the community's women and businessmen. Apart from Beryl, Suggie is the only other woman to whom Selina is attracted sexually. Suggie gives her physical and emotional sustenance every time they meet. Selina's closeness to Suggie is unacceptable to Silla and she evicts Suggie from the community. This in Selina's eyes makes the community very rigid and self-righteous, making it a terrible place to live in. This narrative highlights Selina's love and passion for Suggie and later depicts empathy when Suggie gets evicted.
- Narrative – 4- In the fourth part, Selina returns to college. She is bitter toward her mother and her community. However, Miss Thompson, an advisor, persuades her to come to a meeting of the Barbadian Homeowners and Businessmen Association to understand the community. The meeting does not come down well with Selina, who insults a community member and leaves. Selina then meets Clive Springer, whom she loves. Selina secretly dates Clive and joins a dance club. Silla learns about Selina's secret. Eager to save Clive and get away from her mother, Selina agrees to become part of the Association to win a scholarship. With the money, she plans to run away with Clive. This narrative shows Selina's **courage** as she runs free with Clive for a better life. Also, indirectly, the narrative shows Silla's **love** and **care** for Selina.

3. Racism and Its Implication

The book series talks about discrimination faced by Black people living in the US. It also talks about the impact it has on Selina's life, her political views, and her decisions (Lindberg-Seyersted). This novel presents a female perspective on conflict, racism, grief, and the bitter truth of discrimination under American inclusivity. In Book Four, *Selina* presents Selina's first experience of discrimination against a white woman. One night after Selina and Clive's dance, where Selina performs superbly, she comes across a racist white woman. This spoils her achievement and forces her to question her integrity in devising a plan to steal the scholarship money. Selina declines her winnings, tells her mother about her plans, and leaves Brooklyn. In the future, she hopes to become a performer on a cruise ship. This incident changed Selina's life view. This incident brings maturity to Selina. She starts to contemplate her decision about the scholarship and runs away from her community with Clive (her lover). She looks at community members with empathy and rebuilds her relationship with her mother. Selina's discrimination instigated a series of emotions in her mind and body and changed her perspective on womanhood. She develops a sense of respect for the women in her community and understands the reasons behind their decision. She was ignorant of these aspects before the incident. This changed her political outlook and also her outlook on life. She began to understand her mother's desire to stay in Brooklyn and her father's unfaithful behavior. It shows the journey of Selina from division to oneness toward her family, friends, and community.

4. The End

According to Paule Marshall, the ending of "*Brown Girl Brownstones*" is more of a realistic positive ending which can also be called the "*end of love*" (Marshall, "Paule Marshall: *Brown Girl, Brownstones*"). The ending in *Brown Girl Brownstones* presents Selina's maturity from her desire to strike out on her own. She can understand other community members' situations and forge her path in life. This is despite all the hardships she endures throughout the novel. Selina's life was in endless chaos that was directly connected to her mother Silla's continuous interference. Her mother had Deighton deported (causing him to commit suicide), harassed Miss Mary to her demise, and expelled Suggie in her mission to firstly acquire the Brownstone as her property and secondly ensure that there were no obstructions to Selina's academic/professional progress. Selina told Suggie when she was being expelled, "*It's just that I'm to have no one, that's all*" (211). Selina said this as she submitted to her mother's attempt to govern her life, but Selina was her mother's and father's child. She learned openness to life from Deighton and an understanding of situations' limitations from Silla. Even though Silla did not approve of her willingness to dance while in college, or date Clive, she did both things. She left Clive when she realized that it wasn't going to work, unlike her mother and father's relationship. She "*detached his key from her key-ring-fumbling like someone blind..., she left*" (297). Silla's swift decision-making was more of a quality. Selina didn't want to be like her mother as she believed she was cruel, merciless, and evil. During a conversation with Miss Thompson, Selina said she would "*never want to understand*" (215) her mother. But in the end, she started to mend her relationship with her mother along with the rest of the community members and tried to understand her perspective as well. Through the conflict of various characters and finally coming together, this novel illustrates all aspects of womanhood.

5. Conclusion

Womanhood characteristics discussed here will be outlined in the following lines (Beechey).

Assertiveness: Making a point even when cornered (Selina shows assertiveness when attending the Brownstone Community meeting).

Empathy: Listening and understanding what others want to say, their needs and feelings, and desires. The first time Selina faced discrimination, she felt empathy for her community and all black women; she became one with them.

Imperfection: Selina embraces her flaws when with Beryl and Suggie as they still love her despite her insecurities.

Power and Courage: A sense of power is shown in the character of Silla (Selina's mother) when she decides to move forward to make her life better despite her husband's different plans for going back to Barbados. Selina gets the same courage once she moves to college and runs away from the community.

Self-Esteem and Confidence: Uplifting yourself and others. Suggie continues to live her life and make her own decisions even when the community disapproves. Even if it led to her eviction from the Brownstone community.

The novel ends with an understanding that it's up to the individual to decide whether to imitate society or retain personal life views. The novel by Paule Marshall backs the idea of womanhood individualism and rebellion against imitation (Hawthorne). The main character is a young girl with extraordinary opinions and strategies. This research paper examines this novel from numerous standpoints: plot, characters, composition, and their effect on various features of womanhood. The research has tried to elucidate the social role of every character and examine relationships among them. It also talks in detail about the ethnic struggle of women and how they try to overcome those struggles.

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