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Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*: A study of impact of Racial and Gender Politics

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Abstract

Racial and gender discrimination- these two issues have been the hallmark of writing of black women writers. Writing a literature of protest, these writers have explicated the various facets of the problems and challenges which black women have to face on account of these factors. Paul Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* highlights how relationships of black people are adversely affected by the interplay of racial and gender discrimination.

Keywords: Racism, Gender Discrimination, Relationship, Protective, Strong, Self- dependent.

Paule Marshall, along with James Baldwin and Amiri Baraka, was considered one of the aspiring young black writers in the 1960s. But her work remained obscure and unread because black women writers were ignored as insignificant until the late 1960's. It was the decade of feminism that brought Paule Marshall to our attention. However, Marshall along with her

predecessors Zora Neal Hurston and Gwendolyn Brooks must be given credit for setting the stage of black women's literary renaissance that came into fruition in 1970's. In *Brown girl Brownstones*'1, she depicts the complex existence of ordinary dark-skinned woman and various challenges she faces in a racially prejudiced society. She vividly portrays how black women's life is adversely affected by the interplay of racism, sexism and class discrimination.

The issues of race and class are of great importance in the context of black family and their relationships. Since family life and society are closely inter-twined, families cannot be separated from the racial, class and ethnic elements that influence them. Acknowledging the fact Gloria I. Joseph says that black "mother/daughter interaction must be discussed within the context of the black family network."² She further states that in the discussion of life of "discussing black women, it is absolutely essential to speak of their roles and functions within the black community and the community's relation to the dominant white society."³ Thus it is clear that in order to understand black womanhood in all its complexity variable such as race, gender, history, social as well as cultural context

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and black family have to be taken into account. Black woman is twice burdened on account of double jeopardy, i.e being black and female. Gloria Wade -Gayles observes, 'Regardless of class, black women are defined in this nation as a group distinct from black men and distinct from white people only by the double jeopardy of race and sex.'⁴

The impact of black women being in double jeopardy can clearly be seen in the way black mothers bring up their daughters. Socialization becomes an important aspect of their relationship as black mothers employ multiple strategies in preparing their daughters "for the demands of being black in oppressive conditions."⁵ Black women "do not socialize their daughters to be passive or irrational. Quite to contrary, they socialize their daughter to be independent, strong and self-confident... They are determined to mold their daughters into whole and self-actualizing persons in a society that devalues Black women."⁶ In their attempts to socialize their daughters in the above said manner, black women have often been criticized as being suffocatingly protective and domineering. But actually, black women are not overly protective. They try to protect their children "from the dangers of the larger world until they are old and strong enough to function as autonomous being."⁷ They not only try to shield their children from racism and sexism but also teach them how to protect themselves against these

factors. It shows that though black women are often described as strict disciplinarians and overly protective, they adopt the required amount of strictness in order to raise children who become self -reliant and assertive.

In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Paule Marshall present a turbulent, intense yet occasionally tender relationship between Selina and her mother, Silla Boyce. Racial discrimination, socio-economic as well as cultural contexts, position of women in the family, relationship between parents all these factors play a significant role in shaping relationships in this novel. In order to understand the nature of the relationship between Silla and her daughters, it is necessary to take notice of certain basic facts about their life. Silla Boyce is a black immigrant from the Caribbean Island of Barbados and lives in Brooklyn and her daughter Selina is the first generation Barbadian American. West Indians are black but different from black Americans. They have a strong sense of themselves as a distinct group. They have their own values, life-style, rituals, dreams, problems and a passion to acquire property. Acquisition of the property is the common goal of the immigrant Barbadian community because it symbolizes stability and identity as a middle-class home owner in an otherwise hostile world. As Gloria Wade-Gayles observes, "To be Barbadian and to own a brownstone is to possess status and security – to have arrived in 'this mahn's land.'⁸

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Silla works as a maid and like all Bajan (Barbadian) women “took the train to Flatbush and Sheepshead Bay to scrub floors” (p.11), Silla’s only thought is of the “few raw -mout ‘pennies at the end of the day which would eventually buy house’”(p.11). Every Saturday, she makes Barbadian cakes and other delicacies and sells them in order to make little extra money to buy a house. But she is unable to save a penny for the house because she has to run her household on her own. Her husband, Deighton Boyce, does not shoulder the responsibility of being the head and therefore the provider of the house. He makes no financial contribution in the house. He works as a labourer in a factory and spends his little income on his silk shirts, fancy shoes and concubine. Silla is not only angry but also frustrated due to his non-cooperation in running the household. Despite her repeated requests, he does not save a single penny for the down payment of house. Finding no support from him, she starts working in double shifts and takes up a job in a factory which makes armaments.

Silla has two daughters -- Ina and Selina. Ina, the elder one, is a submissive girl who follows her mother’s order obediently. On the other hand, Selina has a love-hate relationship with her mother. In the beginning of the novel, Selina is ten years old, with wide full mouth, a small but strong nose and eyes which have “something too old lurking in their centres”

(p.4). Her eyes seem to be weighted “with scenes of a long life. She might have been old once but now, miraculously, young again- but with the memory of that other life intact” (p.4). Selina’s relationship with her mother can be better analysed if she is perceived as, to use J.J. Mitchell’s terminology, an “early adolescent”⁹ who is slowly entering into the wide, practical world without knowing much about its double-standards and bitter reality and here comes in mother’s role and responsibilities.

Silla’s relationship with her daughter is greatly influenced by the necessity of her being a working woman. The work done by her in providing the economic resources essential for the survival of her family affects her relations with her daughter in a contradictory fashion. In contrast to “the cult of true womanhood, in which work is defined as being in opposite to and incompatible with motherhood,”¹⁰ She faces the tough reality of being a black woman in America. It means apart from other things, that she cannot “afford the luxury of motherhood as a non-economically productive female ‘occupation’.”¹¹ Silla’s necessity of being a working woman has an adverse impact on her relation with her daughters. In her struggle to fulfill the mundane requirements of her daughters, she has no time and energy left for the fulfillment of their emotional needs. The burden of responsibilities coupled with hostile circumstances and poverty takes its toll on

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the soft aspect of Silla's personality. Her desire to be soft and emotionally dependent get thwarted by her husband's non-cooperative attitude. As a result, not only the soft aspect of her personality is suppressed but also she finds herself alone in shouldering the responsibility of her two daughters in the face of a racist society. Racial discrimination, poverty, lack of any support system, loneliness, tension of providing a roof over the head of her daughters- the cumulative impact of all these factors on Silla is that gradually she becomes harsh, tough, and indifferent. The impact of her condition on her relation with her daughters is that Silla never finds herself in a state of mind which allows free-flow of emotions. Though she loves her daughters, being a victim of circumstances, she is unable to take care of their emotional needs. She is not able to establish a strong emotional bond with them because expression of emotions is the pre-requisite for it. But Silla is so exhausted, physically as well as mentally, by the time she reaches home that she is unable to shower her affection on her daughters.

Selina feels an instinctive as well as intuitive bond with her mother but this bond is overshadowed by her adolescent tensions. Though she loves her mother, yet she is unable to form an intimate bond with her due to her wintry, harsh and indifferent attitude. That is why she can't believe that the young woman in the family photograph is her mother. The reason of disbelief is that

the mother in the photograph "had a shy beauty, there was a girlish expectancy in her smile" (p.8). This aspect of her mother's personality is alien to Selina as she has never seen her mother like that. Her shyness, softness, smile and hopes have vanished under the strain of harsh circumstances. As Selina has always witnessed a harsh, indifferent and stern persona of her mother, this image of her mother is totally opposite of the mother in photograph.

Selina's attitude towards her mother can be understood in terms of egocentrism. "Egocentrism," according to J. J. Mitchell, "is the tendency to see the world in terms of one's immediate frame of reference, and to understand what we see in terms of what we already know. It is a perceptual, emotional and intellectual filtering without the realization that the filtering process dictates the experience."¹² Adolescent Selina views each of her mother's action in terms of her immediate frame of reference and that is comparison with her carefree and dreamy father. And in comparison, with her father, her mother turns out to be harsh wintry and indifferent. Being an adolescent, Selina has not acquired the tendency to observe and analyse the others' point of view systematically, and because her vision is covered by egocentrism, she is not able to go back to the past and trace the origin or reason of her mother's wintry self. It is not only the comparison of parents that leads to

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Selina's resentment towards her mother. In fact, it is her unconscious desire for a sentimental, cosy relationship with her mother in which there is a flow of emotions from both sides, the desire to have a mother who shows enough openness and warmth in her behaviour that she can connect to her on mental and emotional wavelength. The unfulfillment of this basic desire leads to her resentment and hostility towards her mother. Engrossed in her efforts to manage the household responsibilities, Silla fails to notice and hence understand this desire of her daughter. Selina's resentment and hostility infuriates her mother. She too expects her daughters to understand her hardships and create minimum possible nuisance to her.

But Selina is not mature enough to understand the harsh realities in all their complexity and magnitude. Though Selina is aware of the existence of racial discrimination in the society, she is not able to understand its deep impact on the personality of her mother and its role in making Silla tough, harsh and wintry. It is only after a few years when Selina herself comes face to face with the menace of racism that she understands its domineering presence and magnitude, and it is only then that she understands its role in shaping the personality and behaviour of her mother. Silla's inability to shower affection on her daughters and Selina's craving for it generates a tacit tension in their relationship. Many times, this tension erupts

at unexpected moments.

This eruption points to the fact that Selina is badly in need of a loving relation with her mother. Like any other child, she too wants unconditional love, affection and emotional support from her mother. The promptness of her reaction emanates from her frustration with her mother for having failed to establish a loving relation. Thus Silla's being a working mother results in the emotional starvation of her daughters. Ina, being the elder one, understands the condition of her mother and also acknowledges her efforts as well as sacrifice for them. But Selina, being younger and hence immature, fails to understand the reality and harbours grudges against her mother for being so harsh and cold.

Silla is a typical black mother who tries to protect her daughters from the hostile world till they are ready to face it. She makes protective barriers around them in the form of certain rules. She herself faces racism but tries to become a barrier between the hostile world and her daughters. She never discusses her bitter and humiliating racial experiences with them. Perhaps, she considers them too young and tender to discuss such a grim issue with. M.F. Peters, in her seminal work on racial socialization, report that half of the parents interviewed on the topic "intended to discuss issues surrounding race when their children were older."¹³ But Silla fails to notice that like many other black

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adolescent girls, her daughter Selina too is getting influenced by racial stereotypes. She too comes to understand that black is ugly, unwanted and therefore not valued. It is the cumulative outcome of her personal understanding, influence of peer group and popular cultural stereotypes. Like Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, Selina too is influenced by the white parameters of beauty. She harbours a wish to be like white people, to be a part of their world.

Both Selina and her mother are victimized by racism and hostile circumstances and result is the strained relationship between the two and Selina's sense of alienation. Selina's mother is too involved in her struggle for survival to notice the sense of alienation and self-hatred that was afflicting her daughter's psyche. Moreover, the lack of an emotional bond between Silla and her daughter prevents Selina from sharing her feeling of inadequacy on account of colour with her mother. As Silla was not aware of her daughter's turbulent mental state, she could not provide any counselling regarding racism, though she herself is a living epitome of the defiance against racism.

The constant tension over the issue of land coupled with already existing poverty and hardships tend to prevent healthy communication between child and parents, especially the mother as she is the most vexed at the issue. Absence of proper communication is their biggest problem. They don't have a habit of sitting together

and sharing each other's problems and feelings. A child or for that matter an adolescent too, needs initiation and encouragement in order to express her feelings unhesitantly. She needs reciprocity of feelings, warmth of emotions, reassurance of safety and security. But these requirements of young Selina are not fulfilled by her mother and strain builds up in their relationship.

For Silla, the wellbeing of her daughters is her priority and like any mother, she too is concerned about their safety. She expects her daughters to understand her concern and take care of themselves in her absence. R.R. Troester points out, "The currents that flow between Black mothers and their daughters are often tumultuous, deepened and intensified by the racism and sexism of White America."¹⁴ But this protectiveness on the part of mother often causes the relationship to become fraught with an emotional intensity which may be "destructive, especially during adolescence, when a young woman necessarily struggles for independence."¹⁵ Selina's visit to her mother's workplace proves remarkable, as it gives her an opportunity to assert her individuality in more than one ways. Silla expects her daughters not to do anything that threatens their security or makes them susceptible to any kind of danger. That is why when she finds fourteen-year-old Selina in the factory at night, she is shocked. "The mother turned, frowning and as she saw Selina, her

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body stiffened with shock, some word of exclamation died on her lips” (p.100). When she comes to know that Selina has ventured out of house in the night without any urgency, she fumes at Selina’s non-seriousness about her safety and her non-acknowledgement of her (Silla’s) concern for her: “just came to see me!” She shouted and caught herself. Her voice dropped to a menacing whisper. You mean to say that you came through these dark streets alone, as much murder and rape as goes on in this place?” (p.101)

Selina’s visit to the factory makes her mother aware of the fact that now onwards she will be venturing out in this hostile racist world alone, and as an individual, she has to face this world on her own. Hence she must be prepared for it. As a mother, she feels that her daughter must be equipped with the knowledge of certain facts which will be helpful to her in facing in the world boldly and wisely. She wants to make certain facts clear to her daughter before she takes a plunge into this world of sordid realities. She wants to alleviate her doubts and misconceptions. She wants to inform her that there is no fair play in this world and they (the Bajans) are not given equal opportunities. She asks Selina not to repeat the mistake of her maternal grandmother by assuming that “the world put here for she... the world ain here for a blast!.... That’s the first thing you got to understand. Second, you got to know what you about before putting yourself up in

things” (p.102).

Silla, for the first time in fourteen years, talks about racial discrimination with her daughter. She says, “Just because your skin black some these white people does think you can’t function like them” (p.102). Though Selina is aware of this fact as she has witnessed her father repeatedly being rejected for good posts, theoretically, the reason has been uttered for the first time. Silla does so not only to inform her of the prejudice but also to prove its hollowness by her own example. “Take me on this job, for instance. When I first came they wun put me to work on the lathe.... But when they finally decide to try me I had already learn it by watching the others” (p.102). Silla has no feeling of inferiority on account of colour and she wants to instill the same feeling in her daughter by her own example. She knows that her daughter will have to face the discrimination, but she wants to make it clear to her that racial discrimination is not the result of any kind of inferiority or weakness is them. Rather it is the result of ideology of the dominant culture and the (the Bajans) are as good as white people, no less than them.

The wedding of Gatha Steed’s daughter proves to be a significant occasion for Selina to understand certain aspects of her mother’s personality and point of view. She comes to understand the reason of her mother’s adherence to the values of her community which Selina despises so much. For the first time in her life, she feels the

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importance of their psychological support of her mother. Bajan Community takes its members into its fold and provides them a sense of belongingness and security in an otherwise hostile world. Bajan community makes certain rules as a mechanism of defense against racism and demands its members to follow them in lieu of its support. This knowledge makes her understand her mother's adherence to the values of community and her insistence on buying a brownstone.

Selina learns some important facts about herself as well as her community that her mother has already learnt and accepted. Selina realized that she is a part of Bajan community though she does not wish to be and feels no connection with it. Selina understands the power of community in the dance when it forms a defense wall to protect its members from unwanted elements like her father Deighton, who negates its values and creates problems for its members. Another fact that Selina learns is that her community steps into the personal life of its members if necessary. It punishes its members who threaten its basic values and refuse to follow its rules. That's what she and her mother witness during the dance in the wedding.

Selina realizes a softer and humane aspect of her mother's personality in the way she handles her after her father's accident. Silla's behaviour shows that like a wise mother, she acknowledges her adolescent daughter's assertiveness and

gives her due importance. When Silla's husband leaves the family to join a religious cult which makes it obligatory for its followers to sever all worldly ties. Silla and her daughters feel hurt, lonely and let down. When Silla reminds him his duty as a father, he calmly says, "Father will provide" (p.177). At this, Silla who was "too bruised inside, too spent for anger," said dully to Selina, "Look, look how you did waste love!..."(p.178). Deighton leaves forever. But Silla can't take it easy. His act of renunciation of his responsibility as father torments her beyond the limits. She had tolerated his silly and hollow ideas, his successive failures, his non-cooperation at financial front, his concubine, his breach of trust, his gross mistake to throwing away almost a thousand dollars. But his leaving her and her daughters, his renunciation of his role as father-this is beyond her tolerance. She has suffered and sacrificed so much for the sake of her daughters. For her "the drive for material success is as much bound up with her children as it is with her community."¹⁶ She is unable to understand why Deighton can't think on the same lines, why his daughters are not his priority.

Silla understands the importance of education in order to move ahead in life. She wants to provide her daughters opportunity which she herself could not get due to poverty. Silla's desire to give good education to Selina and thus help her make a good career is evident in her emphasis that she should join college along with her

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friends. In order to save money for Selina's higher studies, Silla evicts both of her tenants-Miss Mary and Suggie Skeet. She rents the house to the roomers who pay more. Selina's visit to the meeting of Barbadian Association proves beneficial for her as she gets a chance to know about the psychological condition of her mother. She comes to know of her feeling of guilt and remorse. As she starts paying attention to the conversation of Silla and her friends, she finds herself face to face with a world of conflicting realities, which hitherto has been unknown to her. As she listens carefully, she comes to know about her mother's compulsions, her agony of doing something she did not want to, her remorse. Along with it, she also comes to know of the wicked ways of the world. She finds her mother saying in a very low, pained voice, "people got to make their own way. And nearly always to make your way in this Christ world you got to be hard and sometimes misuse others, even your own. Oh, nobody won admit it. We do talk about it, but we do live by it- each in his own way" (p.224). Here it becomes clear to Selina that her mother did not want to cheat her husband. In other words, Selina feels the admission of her (Silla's) guilt for cheating her husband and her remorse as well as helplessness at the way things happened as she wanted them to happen in a different manner.

As a result of this realization, she can understand some of the compulsions which

made her mother lost her softness, exuberance and liveliness and become rude, harsh, wintry and indifferent. But Selina is not able to accept this realization easily as it also involves negation of her concept of reality. When Selina finally understands Silla, she does so not just as a mother but as a Black woman in all her complexity. As Mary Helen Washington points out in an afterward to the novel: "When Selina comes to the full knowledge of Silla, she sees not just the mother but the wild teenager dancing herself into a frenzy, longing for a better life, the passionate and mysterious lover, to scorned wife, the community leader, and above all that ancient African woman whom the entire western world has humiliated and despised."¹⁷

Thus, Marshall presents the challenges faced by black women in a racially prejudiced society. She probes and presents various facets of their struggle under similar kind of social set-up and circumstances. She deeply analyses the impact of various socio-psychological factors on human relationships and very skillfully weaves a pattern reflecting the same.

References

¹Paule Marshall *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959; rpt. New York: The Feminist press, 1981). All the subsequent reference to the text of the novel are from the same edition and page numbers in all such cases have

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been given within parentheses following the quotations.

²Gloria I Joseph, "Black Mothers and Daughters: Traditional and New Perspectives," *Double Stitch*, eds. Patricia Bell-Scott, et al. (Boston : Beacon Press, 1991), p.98.

³Ibid, p.97.

⁴Zillah Eisenstein, A Personal Response, *No Crystal Stair: Vision of Race and Sex in Black Women's Fiction* by Gloria Wade-Gayles, (New York : The Pilgrim Press, 1984), P.XX.

⁵Patricia Hill Collins, "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships," *Double Stitch*, eds. Patricia Bell-Scott et al., p.55.

⁶Gloria Wade -Gayles, quoted in Patricia Hill Collins, "The meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships," *Double Stitch*, eds. Patricia Bell-Scott et al., p.55.

⁷Rosalie Riegle Troester, "Turbulence and Tenderness: Mothers, Daughters, and 'Othermothers' in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*," *Double Stitch*, eds. Patricia Bell-Scott et al., p.163.

⁸Gloria Wade-Gayles, *No Crystal Stair: Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984), p.86.

⁹ John J. Mitchell, *Adolescent Psychology* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), p.19.

¹⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, p.48.

¹¹ Patricia Hill Collins, p.49.

¹²John J. Mitchell, p.19.

¹³M.F. Peters, quoted in Pamela P. Martin and Harriette Pipes McAdoo, "Sources of Racial Socialization: Theological Orientation of African American Churches and Parents," *Black Families*, ed. Harriette Pipes McAdoo (California: Sage Publications, 2007), p.137.

¹⁴Rosalie Riegle Troester, p.163.

¹⁵Ibid

¹⁶ Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), p.94.

¹⁷Mary Helen Washington, Afterword, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. By Paule Marshall (1959; rpt. New York: The Feminist Press, 1981), p.315.