

The Construction of African-American's Identity in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *Praisesong for the Widow*

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ABSTRACT

In the context of homeland writing, this paper will interpret the two novels of contemporary African-American female writer Paule Marshall: *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *Praisesong for the Widow*. This paper focuses on the identity loss caused by the cultural dilemmas faced by African-Americans in various social spaces, and how they finally complete the reconstruction of their self-identity through the pursuit of identity.

INTRODUCTION

Paule Marshall is not only one of the most important contemporary black female writers in the United States, but also the spokesman of American Caribbean women. Her work "aims to discover and explore the positive and inspiring things in the experiences of marginalized ethnic groups, and to seek unique opportunities to understand these national cultures and individuals" [6]. Marshall's first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, was published in 1959. It describes the experience of a black family who emigrated to the United States from Barbados in Brooklyn in the 1940s and the growth of the heroine: Selina. Her another novel, *Praisesong for the Widow*, won the National Book Award in 1984. The novel consists of four parts: *Runagate*, *Sleeper's Wake*, *Lave Tete* and the *beg pardon*. The novel tells the story of Avey Johnson, an African-American widow who successfully entered the middle class in the mid-1970s, forgot her own national cultural tradition in the process of realizing the American dream, and then regained herself after a spiritual baptism. At present, the studies of Marshall's two works abroad mostly focus on narrative techniques, culture and religion, while domestic studies on Marshall's works mostly focus on theme, identity construction, literary genre, cultural conflict and spatial perspective, so there is still a lot of room for the study of these two works.

Home has always been the motif of literary works. "The acceleration of globalization after the second World War also led to the rise of the wave of immigrants. In this process, the traditional concept of home is completely deconstructed and reconstructed in a new time and space, which is endowed with a new meaning. On the one hand,

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immigrants reject the change and decline of their homelands and try to escape from their dilapidated homelands; on the other hand, immigrants try to reconstruct a new 'ideal home' by writing. They use this way to alleviate the problem of identity loss caused by being caught in a cultural dilemma" [4]. Therefore, there is a close relationship between the writing of immigrants' home and the reconstruction of immigrants' identity. Therefore, from the perspective of homeland writing, to explore the identity construction of African Americans in these two works and to focus on the cultural dilemma and identity reconstruction of immigrant groups in the new era is another better way to understand the identity of immigrant groups in the context of globalization. This paper will analyze the loss of identity caused by the cultural dilemma faced by African-American individuals living in this non-home home in the United States in *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones* and *Praisesong for the Widow*. And how they lose their identity from the beginning through the pursuit of identity and finally complete the process of self-identity reconstruction.

THE IDENTITY LOSS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

In the eyes of the young Selina, the protagonist of *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones*, the conflicts between parents can be shown in a form of space. Father Deighton's dream was to return to his homeland of Barbados and build his own house, while his mother, Silla, wanted to use her hard-earned money to buy a house of her own in the American community. Selina's father, Dieghton, is an ideal romantic person. He always looks forward to returning to Barbados to live a comfortable and leisurely rural life in the future. Setbacks made it impossible for him to adapt to life in the United States [3]. After learning that Silla wanted to buy a house in the Brooklyn community, instead of supporting his wife, he chose to dive into the world of musical instruments to avoid it. Under the protection of his mother, Deighton spent a happy and free childhood in his homeland of Barbados. However, after he emigrated to the United States with his wife, he not only had to work hard to earn money to support his family, but also to face a series of unfair treatment such as trampling on his dignity and disrespect for his personality in American society. Although Deighton has worked very hard, what he can always do is work that white people refuse to do. So, Deighton felt very depressed, he could not find the value of his life, and he could only accept the disdain of the American society forever. While his wife, Silla, worked hard to buy a house, Dayton idled away all day long, choosing to immerse himself in his imaginary world to forget all the injustices he had encountered in the American society. As soon as he hit a brick wall in looking for a job, he came back and said angrily to his wife and daughter, "they're all the same, girls, whether they're here or in Bimshire." They crush you just because your skin is black" [1]. However, Deighton's resentment is only short-lived, and soon he will choose to escape, either to immerse himself in the ideal world of his fantasy on the glass balcony, or to go to the streets at night. For the illegal immigrant Deighton, the land of the United States can no longer provide him with any space, whether geographically or socially. Obviously, Deighton, who was in the United States at this time, was caught in a cultural

dilemma, which led to the loss of his identity. The United States is a “unhomely” to Deighton at this time. Homi k. Bhabha believes that “the Uncanny “or “unhomely” is the key concept to understand the experience of post-colonial subjects, such as excessive localization, alienation, ambivalence and so on. “although ‘non-home’ is a paradigm of post-colonial experience, its echo can be clearly heard, if not so stable, in novels that reconcile the forces of cultural differences in a series of historical conditions and social contradictions” [8].

Selina was unable to integrate into her “home” in the United States from the very beginning. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Selina is always in a state of moving at home, always running around the house, either standing at the door of the kitchen arguing with her mother, Silla or going into the balcony to chat with her father, Deighton. The flowing state of the protagonist Selina reveals the iconic space symbolizing Silla and Deighton: neither the kitchen nor the balcony belongs to Selina. What she wants is a brand-new space that belongs only to her. Selina’s character contains both the rich imagination of her father Deighton and the perseverance of her mother. But she believes that she cannot run away like her father just because of a little setback, nor can she lose more precious spiritual wealth by pursuing material wealth as much as her mother. An American classmate in the school dance team invited Selina to her house for tea. Selina found herself the only black person present. The white classmate’s mother was so stung by her racial prejudice against Selina that Selina suddenly realized that although she felt that she had an independent personality, in the eyes of whites, these African-American immigrants always lived in transparency. The behavior of the white classmate’s mother made Selina begin to understand why her mother Silla was desperate to get a house in the United States, because it was the only thing that African-American immigrants could hold in such a non-home. Selina could not find a suitable place in the space where she lived with her parents, and she was disappointed to find that she did not have a stable habitat in the social space. The series of things also put Selina in a cultural dilemma, and she found her identity in a state of wavering, which resulted in her loss of identity.

At the beginning of the novel *Praisesong for the Widow*, Avey Johnson has been at odds with her own tradition and culture, and she has become the kind of person who lost herself in the pursuit of the American Dream. The first part of the novel describes the heroine Avey struggling in a troubled dream to resist her aunt’s persuasion to return to the towers of her ancestors’ hometown. Avey gradually forgot her childhood memories and historical and cultural traditions in her hometown in the course of her efforts to realize the American Dream. Now when all this suddenly appeared in her dream, she felt very frightened and uneasy. So, she decided to return to her home in New York and hoped to get rid of the influence of her aunt, who symbolized the black cultural tradition [7]. During so many years of living in the United States, Avey and her husband Jerome have gradually accepted the influence of the mainstream values of white Americans, but at the same time they have also gradually abandoned the historical and cultural traditions of their homeland. Jerome was at first a clever, capable and energetic young man. After forming a family with Avey, in order to get rid of poverty, he worked during the day and studied college courses at night and the rest of the time. Later, he finally got his degree and started his own company, and they finally got rid of poverty. But the happy Jerome

no longer exists and is replaced by a stern Jerome. The process mentioned above is not entirely the fault of Jerome and Avey themselves. African American immigrants need their own historical and cultural traditions as their spiritual support, which is also an important support of their independent personality. Nevertheless, the white society treats them unfairly and those African Americans have to abandon their own national culture and strive to accept the mainstream culture of the United States in order to gain a foothold in the United States. Although Jerome and Avey have settled in the United States and they have long been out of poverty, the United States does not have their spiritual home. At this time, America is a non-home for them. “from a spatial and historical point of view, the United States is supposed to be the home of many ethnic minorities, but because of racial discrimination, it is very difficult for them to have a sense of belonging” [9]. On the one hand, these African Americans have gradually abandoned their national culture to adapt to and cater to the mainstream culture of the United States. On the other hand, the mainstream American society has not accepted and tolerated these black immigrant groups. As a result, these African Americans find it difficult to adapt to the mainstream American culture, so they fall into this cultural dilemma and are unable to obtain a sense of cultural and social belonging, thus losing their identity and suffering from identity anxiety.

IDENTITY PURSUIT AND RECONSTRUCTION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, when his wife Silla reported to the Immigration Bureau that he had entered the country illegally many years ago, Deighton could no longer find a place for himself in the social space of the United States. he was then forcibly repatriated to his coveted homeland of Barbados. When faced with a series of setbacks in the United States, it was the land of his hometown that contained happy childhood memories that always relieved him. This land keeps Deighton alive, and in which he can get rid of the restrictions of race, class and other factors that cannot be broken away in American society, and be a man with dignity, dream and independent personality. He can be the real master of the geographical space of this land [5]. Through this way of self-identity pursuit, Deighton achieved the reconstruction of his desired self-identity. When the ship was about to arrive in Barbados, Deighton chose to jump into the sea to commit suicide, which also symbolized that in the struggle between father Deighton and mother Silla, it seems to end up with the victory of African-Americans who strive to adjust to the standards of white society.

Selina, the protagonist in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, cannot stand her father Deighton's negative attitude towards life and self-abandonment; nor can she accept the materialistic values of her mother Silla, who has been influenced by white society and believes in money. Based on the analysis of the experience of the previous generation and her understanding of self-identity, Selina may realize what her mother Silla could not achieve, that is, she wouldn't become a slave to white society values while maintaining personal independence and integrity. Selina also has a strong courage and determination to realize her ideals, rather than giving up her life as her father, Deighton, when

repeatedly hitting a brick wall in American society. At the end of the novel, Selina leaves her silver bracelet symbolizing her West Indies ancestors in Brooklyn, New York City, and returns to her parents' homeland of Barbados. This behavior implies Selina's decision to realize her value in the United States, but before that, she intends to return to her "roots": her homeland of Barbados, she needs to gradually seek self-identity and get rid of this cultural dilemma in her root-seeking journey. Only in this way can she complete the reconstruction of her self-identity and realize her parents' unfulfilled wishes.

In the novel *Praisesong for the Widow*, the protagonist Avey dreamed that her aunt tried to persuade her to return to her hometown Tatum. She was so upset that she interrupted her journey and planned to return to her home in New York. However, due to the fact that she missed the plane, she was persuaded by Joseph, a black old man who came across by chance, to attend the annual activities of Grenada residents to return home to worship their ancestors. For local residents, it was a grand event to return home for traditional cultural ceremonies and strengthen ties with the spirit of her own nation [7]. For Avey, the ceremony triggered memories of her childhood in the black community of the South America, and the religious rituals she attended as a child made her re-examine her life in the context of African cultural and historical traditions. She realized that she and her husband Jerome had spent most of their lives on the pursuit of material life and lost their precious spiritual wealth. She fainted and vomited and diarrhoea on the boat, which also symbolized that she has completely eliminated the filth in her body, got rid of her dirty material desires, and has become a clean body again [7]. It is only after she has experienced physical and mental purification that she can realize the heavy burden of history with her own nation, and only after she has faced the history of her nation, is it possible to realize that her pursuit is a spiritual goal rather than the pursuit of material things. That's why she eventually plans to sell her American house and move back to the house her aunt gave her in Tatum hometown and tell her grandchildren and relatives the stories she has heard about her ancestors from the elderly. In the process of self-identity pursuit, Avey completed the reconstruction of her self-identity and returned to her spiritual home by returning to her homeland of Tatum in the geographical sense and slowly picking up her national cultural and historical tradition. Deighton, Selina, and Avey respectively completed their journey to their home in their own way. Selina finally returned to the black homeland of Barbados by seeking identity from the black community and completed the reconstruction of their self-identity; while Deighton and Avey completed the reconstruction of their self-identity by returning to their black homeland to pursue the home of historical and cultural memory, and finally returned to their homeland.

SUMMARY

These West Indian blacks first emigrated to the United States not to pursue different cultures and values, but to improve their own living conditions [7]. Unable to put up with the flagging economy and racial discrimination in their homeland, they chose to seek a

better life in the United States. But they soon realized that hard work alone could not necessarily lead a good life, and that they had to follow the concept of “Money is paramount” in order to effectively improve their living conditions. However, this materialism is an erosion of their spirit, which truly reflects the cultural dilemma faced by African Americans in the West Indies when they are in the United States. Black Americans such as Deighton, Selina and Avey have completed their geographical and spiritual journey to their homeland in their own way. In this process of self-identity pursuit, they gradually completed the reconstruction of their self-identity and got rid of the cultural dilemma and identity loss they faced in the United States. Paule Marshall tries to write the common historical tradition and spiritual core of African Americans, so as to remind them not to forget their own cultural identity and national cultural traditions in the process of pursuing wealth.

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