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**11<sup>th</sup> National Conference on Nature, Culture, Language and Literature: Narratives and Critical Practices** held on 16th and 17th April 2018 at **The Department of English, SRM University**, Kattankalathur, Chennai, Tamilnadu



### **Existence in Frustration: An Analytical Study of Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones***

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#### ABSTRACT

*Brown Girl, Brownstones' is about the story of the coming of age of Selina Boyce, growing up in a small black immigrant community. Her mother Silla Boyce's only desire is to own a brownstone house in the Brooklyn street. Though she doesn't have the source to buy it, she keeps on trying to own and so she feels that she gets recognized. This paper focuses on how Silla and Selina struggle to fulfill their desire due to environmental influence.*

**Key Words: desire, brownstone, house, land, unfair, sell, dilemma, community, buying**

Desire is a sense of selfishness or lust that people experience when there is a darkness in their mind due to repression or resistance oneself. The mind desires to have something that is not to be reached easily. It is motivated mainly by the circumstance and society. Desire is what we must manifest in the world and in our lives. It is rooted with deep knowledge understanding ourselves especially where our passion lies. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Silla has a strong desire to own a house in the Brooklyn street as a status symbol for which she struggles and uses all strategies she knows.

*Brown Girl, Brownstones* is, first and foremost novel of a family life with highly individual characters, who are the products of environmental influences. Brownstone houses were very famous in Brooklyn Street because of its beauty and comfort. It brings the status symbol to one who owns it. These houses were built by Dutch-English and Scottish Irish. But The White people owned these houses for a long time generation after generation. The white people started selling and moving these houses in 1939. When they go away, the West Indians come in. Barbarian never owns anything except a piece of land. They love these houses very much. Selina a ten year old girl lives in the Brownstone house that she feels as it belongs to her

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family. The Barbadian women are teased for their blackness. When white children are on the way to school, seeing the blacks with their working dress, they laugh and shout at them calling nigger. But they never give any response to this criticism and suck their teeth dismissing them. Their only expectation is “few raw –amount pennies” for their job as salary. Deighton is a day dreamer who is always fond of having well dressed.

Silla becomes the representative of all Bajan women in her community. In her family, there has been a continuous question raised by her to sell the land. Listening all these, in day and night, Selina gets irritated. The novel focuses on having a Brownstone house in Silla’s life. Selina as a child enthusiastically involves in her family and community for the betterment. She also seems to be older and wiser. The very title of the novel signals the life of Selina is irretrievably engulfed by three inevitable contexts. Barbara Christian observes “By emphasizing brown and girl in the novels name, Marshall signaled to us her primary focus, that this work is about both the racial,cultural and gender elements of her protagonist. And by placing brownstone directly next to brown girl, she reiterated the importance of content, of environment. . . . In giving her first novel its title, Marshall reminds us that personal human development is inseparable from history, culture and environment” (35)

Selina's growth, therefore, constitutes challenging confrontations with each new wave of external influences. Her hard and manipulating mother, whose only dream is to buy a home of her own, rather than running a boarding house in which the Boyce family lives. Silla, on the contrary, begins to maneuver to get him to sell the land so that the money can be used for advance payment for the brownstones in which they presently live. Selina attempts to keep her mother from forcing her father to sell the property.

Brown Girl, Brownstones presents a clash of cultures not only for the young protagonist Selina Boyce, who struggles between her father's love for Barbados and her mother's desire to succeed in achieving the American dream. This strong, bitter, frustrated, disappointed woman, who keeps striving in the face of all disappointments, is certainly one of the most complex black women characters in the contemporary American literature. She makes constant attempts to blend into the mainstream of American society as quick as possible, but her long felt American dream ends with a fiasco. She feels not only estranged from her family but also from the society. She has valid reasons for believing so. Certainly, the aftermath of the Great Depression has intractably played a role in the construction of Silla's self and identity. Adam Clayton Powell



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probes with a subtle observation “Her lined along the walls each morning she finds dejected, tattered young and old Negro women, many of them mothers, begging to be employed. Garrulous, mercenary females haggle with them over the price per hour, driving their bargains as shrewdly as slave traders of old, often luring these women for 12 and 15 cents an hour” (160).

The Black culture is a bit aversion for Silla and her family. In a way, Silla's status as an immigrant does not find a place among the whites. The blacks always look at her as different and strange, but Silla believes that she is so much greater than the Blacks around her. Although Silla sees herself as apart from the Blacks, her day to day frustrated existence can be explored in a form that is peculiar to the black culture. She lives with worries, which epitomizes the condition of the American Blacks. For instance, Silla's relationship with her husband, Deighton is not smooth. She blames Deighton for taking their young son out for a ride in his automobile. Further, it aggravates the weak heart and kills him. So, she withdraws her affection from her husband. For years, they are only the married parents of children. They are not lovers with mutual understanding. They do not share the same bed. She thus lives in a state of perpetual loneliness, losing love underneath her roof. Therefore, she lives with a sense of frustration and she never experiences an emotional or physical release. Even when she is alone, she is the picture of frustration. When she comes to know that Deighton's sister in Barbados has left him almost two acres of land which she will try to get him to sell to get money for a down payment on a brownstone in Brooklyn.

She does not stop to consider the possibility of a happy resolution to the problem of selling the land. That begins Silla's long worrying which makes it impossible for her to escape her frustration. Through scheming, she does manage to get Deighton's property sold. He spends more than nine hundred dollars, playing the big man in all the shops on Fifth Avenue, buying gifts for his family. Later, an accident at work causes him to leave his family and join a cult, an action which leads Silla to have him deported. He dies on the way to Barbados. At night, she tries, again and again, to exorcise her demons always unsuccessfully; she desires to experience a psychological comfort in what she does. But it remains a question. She sleeps out of exhaustion but with not from peace. Moreover, Selina's life is mainly formed by her parents, Deighton and Silla Boyce. With herself at the centers, she struggles against intricate dynamics to reconcile the conflict between her parents. It is this family conflict that is directly related to her emerging identity. Therefore, her individual identity is cornered by the family conflict.

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The opening pages of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* reveal that Selina, a ten-year-old daughter of Deighton and Silla Boyce, is a divided self. Selina shows a person who strikes a total discord and disharmony with herself and her surroundings. She feels alienated and estranged from the very beginning of the novel. For Selina and the Barbadian - American community the brownstones are not merely the geographical locales but a real metaphor of self. She holds a fractured story of her life about her place and her community. Selina, growing black and female, feels as if she "carried the weight of winter in her body." Having such a state of mind, Marshall examines the sickness of the female psyche damaged by the society.

Selina's relationship to her father greatly influences a strong oedipal attachment. It is a fundamental importance that the phase of the parents' greatest antagonism towards each other occurs the state of her adolescence. The first stirring sexual feelings are directly towards her father, and her mother is considered as an inconvenient, even sinister and malevolent rival. Throughout the novel, Selina exhibits a strong inclination to see her father as a heroic figure, while her mother damages her possession of her husband. In the midst of this inferno, Silla appears competent and deft. Just as she connects with a machine, Silla represents the antithesis of nature and sexuality. Finally, in wanting to buy her brownstone, Silla resembles many other Barbadians who are content with an all but faceless group identity and purely material values. Buying a house for Silla means confirming one's membership and dignity in a hard, narrow, intolerant and immigrant ethnic group.

Selina lives in two worlds and travels back and forth between them in a literal sense. The first one is the old and familiar one of her Barbadian neighborhood, the Association of Barbadian Homeowners and Businessmen. She has always felt contempt and pity for the younger Barbadians who fail to rebel, or to rebel successfully against the narrowness and materialism of the older generation. The conventional and cultural confines always disrupt the growth of her personality and make herself be relentless all the time. In this regard, Troester makes an appropriate observation "Other mothers provide a safety valve and sounding board and release the teenage girl from the confines of a single role model. They can be gentle and affectionate where the blood mother must be the stem and demanding thus showing the diversity available to Black womanhood".(97)

Selina is not a marginal figure at the center of the stage when she performs her dance at her college. She feels that she has a sense of communion, of being truly part of a community at

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last. So, the context of this dance is particularly significant for Selina's development. It is a typical cycle of life that she enacts. She is not primarily a child of immigrants, or Barbadians, or black, or female, but a human being. Eugenia Collier sums up the point more succinctly “The gesture, then assets a synthesis-Selina is Barbadian, American African: she is one with the people stolen from their homeland and with those remained, one with the survivors of the dread ships, Selina is all of these. Selina has traversed a rugged path from alienation to oneness with her people and the flying bangle goes to testify that wisdom of hers”. (19)

The development of a black girl child growing black and female must take place not only in psychological terms but also in the race and hostile social environments. For a black girl child, sense of identity or self-fulfillment means an identity and fulfillment drawn not in isolation but the context of her culture and community. Selina must resolve the crisis of simplicity of vision, through accurate understanding and knowledge and address the dilemmas arising out of flawed perceptions about her mother and the community she lives. She must abandon the world of illusion and embrace the world of reality, no matter how painful and agonizing they are and must emerge as her woman, neither Deighton's nor Silla's but a capable young woman conscious of her Bajan heritage, her Afro - American status and her bitterly contested independence. She must, in brief, create a world of coherence, unity, wholeness, and harmony and the world that allows her whole being to come into free play. However, being too immature and innocent at this age, Selina cannot achieve such an achievement.

In Selina's eyes, her father is nothing less than a tragic hero fallen too disdainful enemy and this image play a significant role in Selina's bitter internal struggle. She loves her father's passion and imagination. As her father, she loves his vision of home in Barbados. However, she also sees those dreams die. Moreover, she hates her mother's crimes of forgery and deception, yet she cannot help admiring her practicalities. They see it as a risk. This resistance against opening the group to African - Americans denotes not only their fear of losing the power they believe they now possess but also their fear of losing the value system that differentiates them from other ethnic configurations in New York..

The conflict between Deighton and Silla is not over to own a house at all, but over what sort of house to own. It is the type of home that ordinary brown skinned people in Brooklyn own. As a fictional character, Silla Boyce bears little resemblance to Nora in Ibsen's feminist classic, A Doll's House. Even at the end of Brown Girl, Brownstones Selina has not lost her sympathy

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with her father's dreams. However, she places the most favorable interpretation of his behavior, identifying his male fantasies with the spirit of human endeavor in general.

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