



Empowerment And Identity: Exploring The Complexities Of Black Women's Experiences In Paule Marshall's *Daughters*

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Abstract:

Paule Marshall, a prominent contemporary Black woman novelist, focuses on capturing the complexities of Black women's experiences and self-perception in her works. Her novel, *Daughters* (1991), explores the agency and empowerment of Black women in both the United States and the fictional Caribbean island of Triunion. The novel presents a vibrant and intricate portrayal of the Mackenzie family and their extended network, with the daughter at the narrative's core, a professional Black woman making a life and career for herself in New York. Through the journey of protagonist Ursa Mackenzie, the novel delves into themes of identity, family dynamics, and resistance to patriarchal domination, ultimately culminating in Ursa's quest for independence and self-discovery.

Key words: identity, resistance, patriarchy

The novel *Daughters* is divided into four books, "Little Girl of All the Daughters", "Constellation", "Polestar", and "Tin Cans" and "Graveyard Bones", each with its own distinct setting and themes. The narrative oscillates between the United States (New York and New Jersey) and the fictional Caribbean island of Triunion, reflecting Ursa's dual identity and her journey towards self-discovery and empowerment.

The novel *Daughters* delves into the complexities of post-colonial mentality in the island of Triunion and its intriguing reflection in American urban cities. The narrative revolves around the life of Ursa Mackenzie, daughter of Primus Mackenzie, a British-educated Triunionite politician, and Estelle, a politically astute African-American woman from Connecticut.

In Paule Marshall's novel *Daughters*, protagonist Ursula Mackenzie embodies the spirit of her island's female ancestor, Congo Jane, as she challenges the corrupt and paternalistic colonialism represented by her father, Primus Mackenzie. Ursula's dual heritage, with an American mother from Connecticut and a Caribbean father, informs her complex identity and fuels her struggle to reconcile with her family, particularly her father.

The novel explores Ursula's journey towards independence and self-discovery, as she confronts the subtle seduction and domination that have characterized her relationship with her father. Upon her return to Triunion, Ursula takes decisive action to break free from her father's hold, culminating in a dramatic conclusion.

Through a non-linear narrative structure, employing double exposures and multiple perspectives, Marshall reveals Ursula's growth and the community's increasing awareness of social injustices. Ursula's experiences expose the harsh realities of impoverished neighborhoods, racism, and corrupt politics.

Ursula's upbringing is marked by her parents' complex relationship and her own experiences navigating multiple cultures. Born on the island of Triunion, Ursula spends her formative years in Connecticut with her maternal grandparents before returning to Triunion and later moving to New York City. Her professional life takes her to Midland City, New Jersey, where she works for Sandy Lawson, a politician who follows in her father's footsteps.

Throughout the novel, Primus Mackenzie, also known as "PM," emerges as a tragic figure, driven by contradictory impulses that ultimately lead him to redirect his community through political strategies. Despite initial hopes for change, Primus becomes a symbol of the debilitating effects of post-colonialism over the course of the novel's 34-year span.

The legacy of Will Cudjoe and Congo Jane, Triunion's slave rebels and national heroes, looms large over the narrative, serving as a powerful reminder of the island's history and its connection to the broader continuum of Western hegemony.

Ursula's proposed master's degree project which aimed to explore the complex lives of slaves in the 'New World' and their collective resistance to enslavement was met with rejection by her Euro-American advisor, Professor Crowder. He deemed her topic, sources, methodology, and thesis unacceptable, particularly her assertion that male and female relationships during slavery were misrepresented and that resistance was a collaborative effort rather than a solitary male endeavor.

This rejection not only derailed Ursula's academic prospects but also left her feeling lost and uncertain. As she reflected on Crowder's intransigence, childhood memories resurfaced, including visits to the Monument of the Sculpture of slaves holding muskets. Her mother had encouraged her to touch the toes of Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe, symbolizing her connection to her heritage.

Seeking comfort, Ursula retreated to her mantra, Ke'ram, repeating it to ground herself in time and space. This nostalgic refuge reminded her of happy moments with her father, such as mango-dipping, and provided a sense of solace amidst her uncertainty. Ke'ram is..

...nothing more than a sound designed to quiet the mind and suspend all thought. Peace; be still. Ke'ram, that when it's working, takes her in her head down to Triunion and a beach there that's her favorite in all the world. A two-mile stretch of sand, sea and sky that's so perfect and peaceful no thoughts can reach her there (p.17)*.

Ursula's memories of her father, Primus, are bittersweet, oscillating between fond recollections and painful realities. She cherishes memories of their seaside trips, where they'd dip mangoes in the saltwater, symbolizing a harmonious bond. However, this idyllic image belies the complexities of Primus's character and his conflicted relationship with Ursula.

Estelle, Ursula's mother, initially envisioned her marriage to Primus as a union of romance and politics, inspired by the legendary Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe. Yet, as Primus's self-contradictions become apparent, Estelle seeks to provide Ursula with an alternative value system by sending her to Connecticut for education and having her live with her maternal grandparents.

Estelle instills in Ursula a strong sense of community and historical resistance, taking her to pay respects to the statues of Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe. Meanwhile, Primus's rise to power dominates the narrative, with his charm and charisma masking his dependence on others. His well-intentioned desire to transform Triunion for the better is choreographed to win over Estelle, but ultimately, his complexities and contradictions come to the fore.

He tells Estelle,

...If only we could throw off all that, come together and start thinking "get up and do", you wouldn't recognize Triunion. The place would actually begin to live up to its name. and what that would mean for the rest of these little islands! We might all finally come together - French, Dutch, English, Spanish - all O' we one! So that even Big Brother would have to respect us. It's the dream that keeps me going, Estelle (p.144)*.

Primus Mackenzie's character is marked by a contradictory fixation on symbols of imperial power, such as investing in a lavish resort to attract tourists. Marshall highlights the depth of Primus's contradictions through a pivotal incident: the traumatic witnessing of a mare's rape by an aged horse, Borak. This event has a lasting impact on Primus, who re-enacts the spectacle of power and domination by hooking child servants and animals with a cane-shaped stick.

The mare's rape serves as a metaphor for Primus's adult behavior and his relationship with his community, characterized by stark polarities of dominance and subjugation. Marshall also employs abortion as a pervasive metaphor, signifying ruptured relationships and the loss of potential in personal and communal contexts.

Three women, all connected to Primus Mackenzie and linked to Triunion and American urban ghettos, undergo abortions that hold thematic and structural significance. Astral Forde's abortion, in particular, symbolizes the wasted potential of poor island women exploited by gender and class. The violence of this exploitation is underscored by Astral's experience of date rape, echoing the earlier incident of the mare's rape. Astral's relationships with her lovers, including Primus, are marked by a pattern of exchange, where she must offer her body in return for advancement in the workplace.

The novel explores the theme of abortion through the experiences of three women: Astral Forde, Ursula, and Estelle. Ursula's abortion, in particular, serves as a symbol of her loss, rejection, and disappointment in both intimate relationships and broader contexts. This experience is juxtaposed with her deteriorating relationship with Lowell Carruthers and childhood memories of her father.

In contrast, Estelle suffers a series of miscarriages, which may be linked to her concerns about life in Triunion and the everyday struggles of its people. Her experiences are also deeply affected by Primus's betrayal of his principles and the instability of political affairs on the island.

The abortions experienced by these women highlight the themes of radical indeterminacy, lack of closure, and the possibility of change. Their different experiences also underscore the comparative living conditions and the detrimental effects of racism and sexism.

Furthermore, Marshall critiques the ways in which black individuals can perpetuate systems of oppression. Ursula's research project reveals that Sandy Lawson, a black mayor, has compromised his values and bowed to the white power structure. Despite his position, Lawson fails to enact legislation that benefits black citizens,

instead prioritizing the construction of an expressway that isolates the black community. This narrative thread highlights the political and economic disappointments that arise when black individuals fail to support one another, often due to forces beyond their control.

The lives of individuals in Triunion and the United States are severely impacted by issues such as substandard housing, drug abuse, unemployment, and inadequate healthcare. In the US, Lawson's actions mirror those of Mackenzie in Triunion, with both characters prioritizing their own interests over the well-being of their communities.

In contrast, Justin Beaufils, an Independent candidate running for Mackenzie's seat in Triunion, advocates for people's rights and acknowledges the significance of class and color. Beaufils' campaign focuses on Mackenzie's betrayal of his community and predicts his downfall.

The experiences of Ursa, Estelle, and Astral with abortion serve as a metaphor for the ways in which Mackenzie and Lawson have abandoned their responsibilities to their communities. By prioritizing corporate interests, they have effectively stifled progress in areas such as the South Ward black community and Armory Hill, where the most impoverished individuals reside.

Estelle, however, takes a different approach. She successfully organizes the construction of a roofed market shed, providing shelter for female vendors who walk long distances to sell their goods. This initiative establishes decent working conditions and challenges the notion of colonial philanthropy.

In Brooklyn, Viney Daniels fights against institutionalized violence and police brutality, particularly after her son Robeson is unjustly arrested. Viney's efforts aim to protect individuals from institutions that disregard civil rights.

Ultimately, Ursa comes to realize that her father has compromised his values and surrendered to US corporate interests, abandoning the spirit of Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe. This revelation prompts Ursa to reevaluate her father's actions and consider a new path forward.

Estelle and Ursa reach a turning point and take decisive action. Ursa provides crucial information to Justin Beaufils, her father's political opponent, exposing her father's betrayal of his constituency. By doing so, both women embody the courageous legacy of Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe, prioritizing community resistance over personal interests.

Ursa's bold move against her father paradoxically liberates her from his oppressive influence. Her emotional liberation enables her to redefine her relationship with her father and her community. Ursa's journey ultimately secures Justin Beaufils' election, paving the way for decolonization and her father's downfall.

Through Ursa's transformation, Marshall highlights the value of individual service to the community. Ursa emerges as a strong, empowered woman, connected to a lineage of women who have shaped her identity. Literary critic Jean Carey Bond praises Marshall's exceptional talents, noting her mastery of storytelling, craftsmanship, scholarly devotion, and conceptual versatility. Marshall's work presents a bold and nuanced vision of Black life, achieving her goal of portraying its fullness and complexity.

Reference:

* Marshall, Paule, *Daughters* (New York: Atheneum, 1991).