

From Sin to Redemption: A Cultural Critique of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*

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Abstract

Black characters' social life is bothersome; its study in fiction is a comprehensive concern for various literary critics. But because of the complexity of this study, researchers are much more interested in their behaviors and actions. The study of Paule Marshall's text is in line with this perspective. In this novel, American capitalism is so influential that it compels black characters to sin by repudiating their culture to the detriment of material. But after realizing that their integrity and dignity remain rooted in their cultural heritage, they decide to redeem by undertaking a saving process of cultural reconstruction. To better comprehend these sociocultural features, the use of cultural criticism will help to examine the way cultures are performed by *Praisesong for the Widow*¹.

Keywords

Social Life, Psychological and Sociocultural Disorder, Cultural Reconstruction, Spiritual Regeneration, Acculturation, Cultural Awareness

1. Introduction

Paule Marshall's fictional work is aesthetically meaningful; some critics are interested in the cultural and historical aspects of her novel; others examine the spiritual and materialistic ones. Indeed, Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown focuses on the movements of Marshall's black characters, "[whose purpose is cultural] reclamation and subversion" (Billingslea-Brown, 1999). And through a socio-historical approach, Deonne N. Minto shows that "slavery and colonization (...) divided Africans physically and psychologically from their homeland and from one another" (Minto, 1999). Also, Thierno Ngom reveals that "without a good spirit, it is impossible to satisfy the body. [Material is important, but it

¹For any other references, we will use *Praisesong*.

needs to be combined or associated with spiritual values to guarantee individuals' social well-being]" (Ngom, 2016). Through Thierno's analysis, we discover that material alone does not satisfy Marshall's black characters' needs. Besides, in "Dressing Psychic Wounds: Clothing as Metaphor in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*", Angela D. Tartaglia indicates that "Marshall's Jay and Avey Johnson embody the types of characters Morrison has in mind, whose sense of self succumbs to a misplaced value system" (Tartaglia, 2009). As we can see, this review of literature is not exhaustive, but it provides some valuable insights into Marshall's novel.

In terms of advancement and contribution, these above-mentioned critical works explain the historical background of *Praisesong*, which is narrowly linked to slavery and transculturality. These works reveal the consequences of colonization on Blacks, inter alia acculturation, marginalization, reification, and dehumanization. Moreover, this review shows that Marshall's literary project is embedded in black cultural reconstruction; it incorporates the values associated with culture, material, and spirituality. But despite its brilliance, the themes of sin and redemption, which remain dominant in this novel, need to be re-examined for further understanding. Clearly, these themes are profoundly metaphorical and symbolical. This means they still embody implicit values that need to be questioned.

In other words, the purpose of this study is to dissect the cultural significance of sin and redemption. Dealing with sin always requires the consideration of biblical history; sinning entails breaking a divine rule. Likewise, the issue of redemption underpins the presence of a sinner, ready to redeem himself/herself through a spiritual commitment. This is a kind of repentance to the extent that the sinner makes a thorough criticism of himself/herself and asks for forgiveness from God. Also, he/she promises to comply with the bans previously broken. When the commitments made are meritoriously respected, the redeemed individual (character) regenerates spiritually. The act of getting rid of his/her sin is therefore a spiritual regeneration/rebirth, which frees him/her from evils. Obviously, the common denominator of sin and redemption is religion.

In accordance with the preceding view, it should be noted that the revitalization of the ancestral values by Marshall's black characters shows the spiritual implication of her novel. On the one hand, there is a repudiation of black cultural identity. Metaphorically, this act can be seen as a sin and on the other hand, there is awareness among the acculturated individuals (black characters). As the story unfolds, they realize that by denying their culture to the detriment of another considered as promising, they have sinned against the "Old Parents" or ancestors and that it is crucial for them to reconcile with themselves and their ancestors—these African descents undertake a journey to their ancestral lands (Grenada & Carriacou) to learn more about their tradition and appropriate the related teachings. This cultural redemption protects them from troubles, such as psychological disorder and acculturation.

To further these cultural occurrences, this study will be guided by Lois Tyson's conception of cultural criticism. To her, "cultural criticism analyzes the operations of oppression [...] (it) views oppressed peoples as both victimized by the dominant power structure and as capable of resisting or transforming that power structure" (Tyson, 2006). Explicitly, the use of this approach will help to analyze African descents' situation; its main purpose is to decipher the literary values associated with sin and redemption considering African descents' social condition, regressive behavior, and cultural awareness.

2. African Descents' Social Condition

The study of African descents' social organization is one of the main interests of this section. In *Praisesong*, America is depicted as a host land for African descents. The latter live in that place against their will. Indeed, the legend called the "Ibos Landing" reveals that Blacks arrived on American soil as slaves. This means Africans came to America as deportees. Aunt Cuney, one of Marshall's mythical characters relates: "It was here that they brought' em. they taken' em out of the boats right here where we's standing. (...) And the minute those Ibos were brought on shore they just stopped, my grain' said, and taken a look around. A good long look (...). And they seen things that day and me don't have the power to see. 'Cause those pure-born Africans was peoples my gran' said could see in more ways tem one. The kind can tell 'bout things happened long before they was born and things to come long after they's dead" (Marshall, 1983).

Ostensibly, the following past participles "taken", and "brought" refer to the passive voice. Also, the personal pronoun "they" refer to the white colonists who deported Blacks from their homeland (Africa) to an unknown destination (America). *Praisesong* makes this deportation elliptical; the wrongdoers are not openly named or blamed. And yet, the drawbacks of this deportation are awful. In terms of significance, Marshall's novel has a sociological and historical scope—it vivifies Blacks' colonial experience and serves as a collective memory to African descents. Indeed, after several months on the slave ships, Blacks reached the American coasts. Later on, they were scattered and dispossessed from their cultural identity; their contact with the New World was troublesome. For instance, Lebert Joseph, one of Marshall's traditionalist characters, relates this dark period as follows: "The Bongo? Have you heard of that one maybe? Is the one I like best, oui. The song to it tells what happened to a Carriacou man and his wife during the slave time. The smallest child home knows the story. They took and sold the husband—the chains on him, oui—to Trinidad and later the same day they put the wife on a schooner to Haïti to sell her separate. Their two children the people that owned them kept behind in Carriacou. Is a true thing, happen during the slave time. Both of them cry so that day we say it' their tears whenever there's a big rain" (Marshall, 1983).

These Blacks gradually lost their ancestral language because of their contact

with other cultures. In their discourses, this is apparent; they mingle black dialect with colonists' language (English). The following textual clue is illustrative: "Goddamit, din' I tell ya don' mess with me this morning!" (Marshall, 1983). Importantly, American society is multicultural, but its environment is hostile to Blacks; it destroys their culture and contributes to their acculturation and dehumanization. As a melting pot, American society welcomes various cultural groups, which contribute to its cultural development. In *Praisesong*, colonization and immigration remain the main cause of this multiculturalism. But in this socio-cultural context, Blacks are not autonomous; their culture is unable to impose itself. Black culture is undervalued and has no influential scope.

In terms of value, the colonists' language (English) remains the crucial communicative tool; English is the norm, the benchmark language—Blacks and Whites use it as a channel to interact. Sad to say, the prejudices incorporated in colonial discourses, especially the inferiority of Blacks and their cultures, keep on influencing their social conditions up to now. Economically, equal opportunities are seldom for them. As a result, they work in the informal sector; they remain dependent on Whites. The narrator discloses their misery as follows: "Two jobs for the salary of one" (Marshall, 1983). Clearly, Blacks are insignificantly paid. This means their wages do not enable them to fulfill themselves.

In accordance with the details displayed above, one can assert that American political and economic system is exclusive; it overrides black characters. The narrator avows: "In no time they're pulling down a good job" (Marshall, 1983). As depicted in *Praisesong*, Blacks do not have descent activities. Accordingly, they have a meager socioeconomic situation. The above passage is illustrative. Indeed, poverty coerces them into settling in precarious neighborhoods, because they do not have a reliable income; Jay Johnson and his whole family feel compelled to settle in Halsey Street. Through the portrait of this black family, *Praisesong* highpoints Blacks' sufferings in America. In other words, this society does not promote black culture. As a proof, when in Halsey Street, Jay Johnson and his family used to listen to blues in their house. That place is isolated from the outside realities—what happens inside remains unknown to the society. From a symbolical point of, black culture and tradition are less popularized.

Obviously, America promotes individualism; it influences black characters so much that they feel stressed. Under this pressure, they forget their cultural heritage and are more preoccupied with the search for immediate solutions to their problems, which beset and poison their living conditions. Black characters work for their own survival. Marshall's novel describes American society as follows: "That street in Brooklyn accounted for the raft of insurance policies it took out to cover everything—fire, theft, life, loss of land—that might happen to them or the house" (Marshall, 1983). Through this portrait, the promiscuity in which Blacks live seems more apparent. Faced with this poor social context, Blacks feel obliged to appropriate the cultural realities offered by the host society. By adopting American cultures (behaviors and habits), they turn acculturated. To

Redfield, Linton and Herskovits, “[acculturation is] the process of cultural change that occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come into prolonged, continuous first-hand contact with each other” (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936).

In *Praisesong*, acculturation embodies an ambivalent value. As a social process, it has some outcomes. It certainly impacts on black culture, but it also has positive orientations. Indeed, in Marshall’s text, this enables Blacks to appropriate white cultural values (behavior, habits, and knowledge). For instance, Blacks acquire linguistic resources (English). This helps them interact and socialize. Importantly, the process of acculturation helps black characters (Jay Johnson and Avey Johnson) feel emotional and psychological satisfied. Indeed, after improving their socioeconomic situation, the members of Jay Johnson’s family experience a certain economic independence. Thanks to this social mobility, they move from Halsey Street to North White Plains. In terms of negative aspects, this cultural shift jeopardizes black culture provoking psychological troubles and leads to the loss of Blacks’ bearings. Marshall advocates a policy of enculturation to avoid eventual dramatic experiences in Blacks’ life. To this novelist, material and ancestral values should be combined to guarantee Blacks’ cultural integrity, social dignity, and financial independence.

To go ahead, let us say that in postmodern literature, the notion of space is heterogeneous. It can be aerial, nautical, terrestrial, and textual. Its study is always crucial, since it embodies heterogeneous meaning. For example, it can serve as a dwelling place for fictional beings (black characters). In terms of *effet-valeur* (Jouve, 2001), space has a double function; it can contribute to the individuals’ integration or constitute an obstacle to their achievement. Indeed, a close glance at Marshall’s novel enables us to discover this double dimension. From the beginning of *Praisesong*, there is a hostile situation; the black characters, such as Avey Johnson and Jay Johnson move from one place to another “whose model in the world [of the real reader] is well-known” (Thumerel, 2002) (Translation mine). The geographical space where these characters move is America; its multicultural aspect is pointed out through the following toponyms: New York, Brooklyn, North Harley, North White Plains, and Tatem. These places show us that Marshall’s novel describes American society. Certainly, other geographic spaces, namely Carriacou (Caribbean) and Ghana (Africa), are also portrayed in *Praisesong*, but the characters’ permanent dwelling is America. This toponymic heterogeneity shows that Marshall’s fiction is realistic; it is rooted in Blacks’ experience. In this novelistic universe, White and Blacks share the same society. As far as Caribbean land is concerned, it is a space of cultural regeneration and spiritual reconnection.

Furthermore, *Praisesong* depicts two cultural groups. The encounter between them is not exclusively harmonious; this creates a cultural conflict, since each group tries to impose its culture. Indeed, Halsey Street and New White Plains are two distinct areas. The former is occupied by the black community and the

latter welcomes the white community. In terms of social status, one is poor and the other is well-off. In Halsey Street, the standard of living is dreadful, but the white community remains unconcerned. Even the Blacks who, after acceding to financial mobility, settle in North White Plains, adopt the same contemptuous attitude. In the following textual clue, the narrator provides a tangle illustration: “You must want to wind up back where we started. He meant Halsey Street. Whenever there had been a discussion between them about money, whenever they had argued, in fact, he had never failed, no matter what the argument was about, to bring up the subject of Halsey Street, holding it like the Sword of Damocles over everything they had accomplished. He never referred to it by name. It is always ‘back where we started or back you know where’, refusing to let the name so much as cross his lips although his refusal only served ironically to bring the street and the fifth floor walkup where they had lived for twenty years painfully to mind” (Marshall, 1983).

By refusing to name his former neighborhood, Jay Johnson implicitly expresses his contemptuous attitude towards the inhabitants (black community) of Halsey Street. To him, his stay in that place was a real nightmare. That is why he tries to get rid of any reminiscences linked to Halsey Street. With reference to the relationship prevailing between both cultural groups, it can be argued that Whites holds Blacks in contempt, since their culture is regarded as a threat. Examining the issue of tension between cultures, Jean François Lyotard avows: “Traditions are opaque to one another. Contact between two communities is immediately a conflict” (Lyotard quoted by Zima, 2002) (Translation mine).

Clearly, Blacks are not mere adventurers, but descents of black deportees; so, it is difficult for them to thrive. Indeed, African descents, such as Jay Johnson and Avey Johnson are confined in a hostile environment (America). This “creeping” antagonism initiated by Whites, offers no opportunity to Blacks. On the contrary, they are constrained to carry out various informal jobs, hoping to satisfy their daily needs. Jay Johnson and Avey Johnson’s situation is a tangible illustration; their efforts to improve their family’s social situation are considered as “marathon efforts” (Marshall, 1983). Jay Johnson and Avey Johnson’s commitment is compared to a race. This means it requires patience and courage. In relation to the above details, one can assert that America does not promote a successful integration for Blacks, because their identity is flouted. This means they cannot really define their own cultural identity. So, they are compelled to take into account their African and American roots. But this double identity named “African-Americanity” does not offer them a stable and autonomous status. Addressing African descents’ hybrid identity, Ceron L. Bryant avows that “Avey Johnson’s identity is both a fusion and a separation of the African, African American, and Caribbean cultures” (Bryant, 2012).

Significantly, black characters can be regarded as tricky beings. Indeed, they evolve in a hostile environment, there is an obvious antagonism between them and Whites. Both communities are separated from one another by a virtual de-

marcation line that keeps Blacks in a dominated status and Whites hold the leading position. In other words, the emergence of inequality between both groups worsens their relationship. That is why Keith A. Sandiford indicates that “*Praisesong* dramatizes the antagonism for African-Americans between the claims to identity of African mythology and of Euro-centric historicity. This reading plays out through the conflict staged in Avey’s dreams between her locations in Tatem, in Brooklyn, and in North White Plains” (Keith quoted by Felix, 2011).

This social inequality offers no chance to Blacks to improve their living condition. The existence of discriminatory barriers between them and Whites defines the perilous nature of American imperialism or capitalism. It is an unequal and exclusive policy that enables Whites to strengthen their domination over Blacks. Accordingly, a suspicious relationship prevails between both cultural groups. Blacks openly express their discontent. For example, Marion finds her mother’s trip with Whites (Clarice and Thomasina Moore) less advantageous and considers it as a retrograde deed. The following passage describes her anger: “Why go on some meaningless cruise with a bunch of white folks anyway, I keep asking you? What’s you? What’s that supposed to be about? Couldn’t you think of something better to do on your vacation?” (Marshall, 1983).

As depicted in the above quotation, Marion dislikes her mother’s relationship with white individuals, but the latter rejects her daughter’s opinion as follows: “Girl, where you get off talking to me like that?” (Marshall, 1983). Ignoring the cultural scope of her daughter’s message, Avey Johnson embarks on an excursion with her white comrades. When on journey with her comrades, she abruptly leaves the Bianca Pride (boat) without giving the reasons to them. This disembarkation can be seen as the rejection of her white comrades. The latter are surprised at Avey Johnson’s sudden change: “Do she look sick to you, I ask? (...) Ain’ not a thing wrong herself these couple of days. Well, what’s ailing her? What’s her complaint?” (Marshall, 1983). Here, the question one might ask is: “What is the cause of this improvised disembarkation?” In terms of geographical space, Avey Johnson and her comrades are no longer on American soil; they are now in Grenada, (Caribbean society). This means the sociocultural realities are quite different from those of America. This means in the Caribbean Isles, American society has no cultural influence over Blacks. On the contrary, the ancestral power is still present and has a strong hold over the inhabitants. Indeed, the ancestors realize that one of theirs is going astray and that she needs to be saved.

Thus, they create a psychosomatic malaise in Avey Johnson’s body to impel her to disembark and initiate a process of reconciliation with her past (ancestral heritage). This sudden pain that arises in Avey Johnson’s body shows the difficulties undergone by the other Blacks who did not take part in the Annual Excursion. This abrupt separation denotes the hidden hatred prevailing between Blacks and Whites. To Michelle Miesen Felix, “the three different homes Avey [Johnson] recalls articulate how Avey’s African American ancestral identity is

under siege from the United States national discourse” (Felix, 2011). In American society, this hatred is more or less hidden—it is purely ideological, i.e. the citizens do not directly exert brutal force on each other, but the economic and political systems worsen the relationship between the individuals. In short, the preceding section is interested in Blacks’ difficult conditions in America. To learn more about the cultural repudiation, the following section will analyze Blacks’ regressive behavior.

3. Blacks’ Regressive Behavior

To begin with Blacks regressive behavior, let us indicate that American society influences African descents ideologically, forcing them to deny their African and Caribbean traditions to adopt those of America. A critical study of Marshall’s characters helps to reveal a change in their behavior. Indeed, the tough social conditions in which Blacks evolve, lead them to instability, pushing them to leave their dwelling place in search of insurance and credible identity. Unable to withstand pressure and competition, African descents give up their ancestral heritage and embark on the quest for material. This shift epitomizes their acculturation. As a result, they think like Whites and behave as if they were Whites. The passage below described the vision of some Blacks who have completely absorbed the social values belonging to the host society: “Just look at ‘em! Not a thing on their minds but cutting up and having a good time. (...) If it was left to me I’d close down every dancehall in Harlem and burn every drum! That’s the only way these Negroes out here’ll begin making any progress! (Marshall, 1983).

Clearly, Avey Johnson and her husband (Jay Johnson) are ideologically/culturally metamorphosed. By ceasing to listen to African music, they affirm their Americanness—they have acquired the values of American imperialism. The textual pattern below underlines this change. Jay Johnson and his wife (Avey Johnson) are nostalgic for the time they used to listen to blues in Hasley Street. The narrator reveals: “Moreover (and again she only sensed this in the dimmest way), something in those small rites, an ethos they held in common, had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay’s to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible. And this link, these connections, heard in the music and in the Praisesong of a Sunday. ‘... I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were/young...’, had both protected them and put them in possession of a kind of power” (Marshall, 1983).

In a sense, by adopting American culture, this black couple breaks the economic and racial barriers existing between Blacks and Whites; a satisfactory economic situation is created, improving their social situation. Indeed, Avey Johnson’s movement with her family from Halsey Street to North White Plains symbolizes their financial mobility. In terms of social status, Jay Johnson and his wife are no longer poor; now, they consider themselves as white citizens. Living with Whites in the same neighborhood (North White Plains) attests that they are accepted by Whites. But both Avey Johnson and Jay Johnson are aware that their

cultural heritage has been sacrificed. Avey Johnson is rueful—she measures the sacrifices made to acquire this social status: “The closing for the house was in New White Plains had taken plain, the actual move was only weeks away when suddenly she found herself thinking not much on the new life awaiting them but of the early near back on Halsey had lasted through the birth of sis. And in the face of Jay’s marathon effort and her own crowded wearing day’s, such thought’s seemed a betrayal” (Marshall, 1983).

Noticeably, Marshall’s text shows how the desire for material constrains African descents to adopt the renegades’ behaviors in American society. They give themselves new identities because of their social change. Implicitly, this illustrates self-denial. In *Praisesong*, Jay Johnson and his wife gives up their ancestral names. The former takes “Jerome” and the latter chooses “Avey.” To them, these new names help them be integrated. In other words, the new names offer them a possibility of social integration, which is a sign of social rebirth. But practically, these names neither guarantee freedom nor cultural identity to them. On the contrary, they jeopardize their cultural identity and dignity. By giving up their culture, they compromise the very essence of their being. Through the image of these characters, the whole black community is demeaned and its dignity is tarnished. As a result, white culture proclaims itself as a “culture of reference”, i.e. a model to be followed.

Moreover, cultural repudiation leads to cultural disconnection—African descents’ disobedience to the ancestral rules is the main cause of their trouble. Indeed, Avey Johnson’s refusal to bear her true identity (Avatara) becomes a source of misfortune for her. Her body is defiled; she suffers from a psychological illness whose causes remain unknown. Even her excursion with her white comrades ends very quickly in Grenada. By adopting American culture without mastering its features, Avey Johnson’s social well-being is affected. Her abysmal desire for materials leads her to chaos. The narrator posits: “She had completely lost her self-possession, just as she had yesterday when the old man on the Lido had grabbed her skirt. Her behavior just now. The irrationality of yesterday. She no longer recognized herself” (Marshall, 1983). The sanction imposed by the ancestors constrains her to disembark in Grenada where she begins a process of regeneration. Her mind goes back to the old woman (Aunt Cuney) who used to tell her the story of the Ibos Landing. Analyzing Avey Johnson’s cultural restoration, Kathleen Gyssels writes: “She will take stock of her life and understand her mistakes and betrayals, both with regard to her husband and children and even with regard to her community. Completely Americanized, having sacrificed everything to climb the socio-racial ladder of New York society, having blamed her husband for not assimilating with the dominant white class, Avey Johnson will be confronted with a retrospective so painful that she will abandon her cruise” (Gyssels, 2002) (Translation mine).

Jay Johnson is less fortunate than Avey Johnson; his desire to acquire fortune in order to overcome the antagonism prevailing in his host society is fatal for

him. Indeed, Jay Johnson failed to respond the ancestors' call. Consequently, he underwent the ancestors' sanctions as predicted by Lebert Joseph: "They's vex with you over something. Oh, they can be disagreeable, you see them there" (Marshall, 1983). Physically exhausted by his works and harassed by the ancestors' curses, Jay Johnson dies leaving his wife (Avey Johnson) in an inconsolable situation. Thus, the need to sing melodious songs for her arises. Semantically, the title of Marshall's novel is meaningful; it can probably be articulated as follows: "Praise Song for the Widow". Explicitly, this is a hymn addressed to a widow. In this novel, Avey Johnson is the widow; she has lost her husband (Jay Johnson) and is culturally disconnected; she suffers from a double pain. These confusing experiences worsen her life. As depicted in *Praisesong*, the individuals who can relieve her sorrow are the ancestors. But, this spiritual support is impossible in American society. So, Avey Johnson has to undertake a spiritual journey to the Caribbean Isles where her memory is supposed to be restored.

Once in Carriacou (Caribbean Isles), she realizes that material is important, but cultural values remain the objective ingredients of human integrity and dignity. She could have declined her ancestors' call and experienced the same fate undergone by her husband, but she adopted a humble attitude and decides to take part on the Annual Excursion. The narrator reveals that her journey is full of meanings; she reconciles with her past: "She had recovered somewhat by now and was gazing around her with a look almost of humility" (Marshall, 1983). Thanks to this journey, Avey Johnson pays tribute to her ancestors and discovers who she is and enriches her identity. Examining the relevance of cultural enhancement, Pauline Amy de La Bretèque asserts: "Avey's identity can change and develop through the confrontation with others. Straying from expected courses, identities leave room for encounters and relations" (Bretèque, 2019). Apparently, when visiting the Caribbean, Avey Johnson connects with her relatives; she learns from them her history and tradition.

Shortly, the preceding section has dealt with the influence of American imperialism on Blacks. Being unable to provide an effective counterbalance, the latter adopt American culture. Faced with this severe blow, Blacks decide to reconnect with their past (ancestral heritage). To comprehend this process of reconstruction, it is relevant to scrutinize Blacks' cultural awareness.

4. Blacks' Cultural Awareness

To question Blacks' cultural awareness, it is essential to consider the attitudes towards their ancestral heritage. Indeed, African descents' desire to reconnect with their culture symbolizes their deep love towards the ancestors; the desire to vivify their ancestral heritage is also a spiritual burst that can be defined as a cultural redemption. The preceding section has shown that Blacks reject their cultural values to the detriment of material. They believe this can improve their standard of living and enables them to be considered as full American citizens. Despite Blacks' struggle, they realize that their condition does not shift an inch;

therefore, they initiate a process of reconciliation, which helps them move from their unstable/precarious situation to a more stable one. To Pauline Amy de La Bretèque, “Avey [Johnson] is finally able to reconcile her multiple cultural influences and develop a sense of belonging to several places at the same time” (Bretèque, 2019). This sociocultural change is apparent in *Praisesong*. Indeed, after disembarking from Bianca Pride in Grenada, Avey Johnson meets Lebert Joseph, an old man who is deeply connected with his ancestral heritage. The latter convinces Avey Johnson to take part in the Annual Excursion.

This journey opens her mind and enables her to discover her “self” and extended family (ancestral tribe). Indeed, she realizes that “the ancestors functions as a cohesive factor” (Ige, 2006). During her stay in Carriacou, she receives some secrets (significance of the ancestral names) from her elders. To Lorna McDaniel, the name Lebert Joseph is culturally significant, because in the Caribbean mythology, it is attributed to the griots (holders of ancestral values); the individuals who bear it are intermediaries between the ancestors and the young generations (McDaniel, 1998). They are spiritual guides, as such they master the cultural heritage. In *Praisesong*, Lebert Joseph embodies the traditional wisdom and collective memory. He is endowed with divine powers, which enable him to communicate with the ancestors. Clearly, he is the one who transmits the ancestors’ teachings to the younger generations.

The encounter between Avey Johnson and Lebert Joseph is advantageous for both character, because the former suffers from a cultural disconnection that is solved by the latter. Indeed, Lebert Joseph is a spiritual figure who offers some rum to Avey Johnson. After drinking it, she feels a metamorphosis in her body that helps her regenerate; her words become expressive: “Papa Legba, ouvri barriere pou’ mwe ” (Marshall, 1983). This statement sounds more French than English. If we take into account “the semantic field [or scope]” (Habermas, 1985) (Translation mine), this dialectical statement means “Papa Legba opens barrier for me”. In other words, Avey Johnson implores the old man to help her enter the ancestral universe. But this can only be possible if she agrees to take part in the Annual Excursion (spiritual journey). Without hesitating, Avey Johnson agrees to go to Carriacou where she undergoes a cultural healing process.

Once in Carriacou, Avey Johnson feels uncomfortable and starts vomiting. Symbolically, the rum offered to her in Grenada, thrills her body and immediately starts a healing process. Also, some Caribbean inhabitants (Parvay Rosalie and other women) sprinkle water on her head. The moment that follows, is significant –Avey Johnson introduces herself and is able to “call her nation”. She remembers her past; her mind goes back to the visits she used to pay to Aunt Cuney in Tatem. Her body is purified. As an initiated individual, she dances the Beg Pardon (ancestral dance). Avey Johnson realizes that “the darkness contains its own light” (Marshall, 1983). As we can see, by leaving the Bianca Pride, Avey Johnson gives up her materialistic desire; she figures out that material is essential in life, but it should be associated with the ancestors’ veneration. She also under-

stands that deviations can occur in life, but one has to be persistent in the construction of cultural identity. Indeed, by deciding to accompany Lebert Joseph, Avey Johnson shows that she is ready to change.

In accordance with the spiritual bath offered to Avey Johnson, it can be said that *Praisesong* reveals the metaphysical scope of water. Indeed, the kind of water Rosalie Parvay sprinkles on Avey Johnson's head and the rum Lebert Joseph offers to Avey Johnson are sanctified with rituals. These ritualistic virtues give a spiritual power to Rosalie Parvay's bath and Lebert Joseph's rum. This ritual power cures the disconnected individuals from their cultural iniquity. A critical glance at African or Caribbean traditions reveals that rituals are meaningful and helpful. When well-mastered, they become a catalyst in the healing process. Describing the positive result of this spiritual power, Alama Jean Billingslea-Brown avows: "[Avey] undergoes a ritual of healing and cleansing performed by Lebert's daughter, Rosalie Parvay. After she is physically and spiritually cleansed, Avey's disjointed states of mind are brought together in spiritual and psychic wholeness when she joins in the Nation Dance, the ritual through which she discovers and reconnects to African traditions and customs, the 'source' of her being" (Billingslea-Brown, 1999).

This spiritual force also helps disconnected characters communicate with their ancestors. That is why, once in Carriacou, the Pilgrims give up English to the detriment of the Caribbean Patois. This language enables them to connect with their ancestors and contributes to their socialization. As indicated above, by incorporating this cultural reality in a literary text, Marshall valorizes black identity. Similarly, the journey to Carriacou shows the relevance of the ancestors in the construction of black history. When in Carriacou Avey Johnson realizes that the Caribbean inhabitants are her relatives. The quotation below attests how African-Americans are bound up with Caribbean inhabitants: "Just because we live over this side (grand Anse) don't mean we're from this place, you. Even when we're born here we remain Carriacouan people. And I don't mean just the Josephs (his family) now but every Carriacouan you see, bout here. And come time for the excursion we gone! Everybody together. We don't miss a year" (Marshall, 1983). Significantly, a true identity is biological; it is linked to blood/lineage. Avey Johnson was certainly born in New York (America), but her parents are from Barbados. By accepting her traditional name "Avatara", she recognizes and appropriates her cultural identity. Indeed, this cultural aspect of Marshall's novel is reminiscent of the double identity of African-Americans: one is by naturalization and the other by blood.

Let us mention that African descents are always deprived of their cultural identity. A close glance at Marshall's black characters shows that they are socially oppressed. Under such circumstances, they are impelled to initiate a process of cultural reconstruction that restores their dignity. For instance, by accepting her name "Avatara", Avey Johnson climbs the sociocultural ladder and subsequently gets rid of her mask (stereotypical identity); she acquires her dignity or integrity.

To Kimberly Roe Connor, “[by] becoming Avatara, by assuming the convert’s pose of humanity before divine and ancestral power, Avey has finally become herself” (Connor, 1999). The ancestral name is central in black characters’ life. This improves their sociocultural well-being and perpetuates their collective memory.

Thanks to the ancestors’ assistance, Avey Johnson succeed in restoring her memory. The ancestors are a unique spiritual force that guides African descents. In Carriacou, Avey Johnson appropriates the ancestors’ teachings when attending the Beg Pardon, she merges with the dancing crowd. Her successful integration deceives the vigilance of the Carriacouans (inhabitants of Carriacou). Clearly, Avey Johnson’s initiation is essential for her as well as the whole black community. To Senior Alder Grant, “Avey’s journey to the island of Carriacou is not only a physical one, but also a psychological one. It is the journey of an alienated subject in search of identity. She hopes to heal the division, the fracture in herself, through the return to an ancestral homeland. The spiritual journey of self-realization is, however, the major concern in the novel, which requires an Orphic journey of reaffirmation back to the African roots in search of liberation from her trauma of non-identity. Avey’s initiation, baptism and rebirth are symbolic of a movement away from white patriarchal control and advancing towards renewal and change” (Grant, 2010).

Clearly, *Praisesong* describes some African descents who embark on a quest for material, but American capitalist system prevents them from fulfilling their dream. In spite of climbing the socioeconomic ladder, they remain socially marginalized and culturally oppressed. So, the only way out they have is to undertake a journey towards their homeland where they appropriate the ancestral/cultural heritage. This value restores their integrity and dignity.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine two themes, namely sin and redemption. This work considered the act of repudiating the ancestral values as a sin and the desire to reconstruct and promote the ancestral heritage as a redemptive deed. After analyzing both themes, it should be noted that Marshall inaugurates an innovative writing. Her novel acquires cultural and spiritual meanings through the aforementioned themes. This study leant on the principles of cultural criticism; they helped to reveal the importance of material in the construction of African descents’ social mobility. But despite the acquisition of material, Blacks still suffer from cultural disconnection and social marginalization. So, to restore their cultural dignity, they embark on a process of cultural reconstruction. Thanks to their cultural reconnections, African descents overcome any forms of oppression and acquire their integrity and dignity. The journey to the Caribbean Isles contributes to their spiritual and cultural achievements. Through their return to the ancestral roots, they restore their collective memory. Apparently, this study defined the Caribbean space as a meditative and regenerative location. As

we can see, the use of cultural criticism has been helpful. This helped to contextually explain the themes of sin and redemption; nevertheless, *Praisesong* remains a codified novel—it incorporates various other textual clues that need to be examined, inter alia myths, cultural hybridity, linguistic heterogeneity, transculturality, and interculturality.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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