The Chosen Place, The Timeless People: Race, Colonial Power and The Absence of Sisterhood

by

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Paule Marshall’s The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, first published in 1963 to general acclaim, offers an examination of Caribbean historical and socio-economic development presented through the relationship between two women, one black, one white, whose legacies and destinies are bound with the peculiar history of gender relationships characteristic of slavery and the plantation. Marshall, born in the United States of Barbadian parents, offers here a novel only possible from someone with a deep understanding of Caribbean and American cultures, as it links the Caribbean historical experience to the racialist ideology of the American South and the Northern entreprenurial spirit that profited directly from the slave trade.

The two female protagonists of The Chosen Place, The Timeless People - Merle Kimbona, a wounded and vulnerable black woman born and bred in the ‘despoiled’ reality of the fictional Caribbean territory of Bourne Island; and Harriet Shippen, the anglo-saxon patrician wife of Saul Amrom, a scholar heading a research and aid project in the village of Bournehills - seem at first glance to be destined to the expected fates attending literary clashes between black and white women in slave or post-slavery societies, where the white woman, whose whiteness guarantees her social pre-eminence, triumphs over the black or mulatto woman. In Merle we find a black woman whose personal history is bound with Caribbean historical reality, heiress to a past of colonial abuse and miscegenation, tottering on the brink of emotional collapse; in Harriet we have an intelligent, cultured, rich, well-meaning white-woman, a WASP heiress accustomed to emotional and financial control. Through their confrontation, the text unveils the race/class dichotomy that characterizes both foreign interventions in Caribbean affairs and the ensuing relationships between foreign (white) and black or mulatto Caribbean women.

Paradoxically, Merle is presented in the text as the embodiment of both the determination to endure of the people of Bournehills and of their profound wounds. She is an emotionally fragile and vulnerable woman, haunted by a past of co-option by the white colonial establishment that led to her losing her daughter, now in Africa with the child’s father. Her personal history is representative of the colonial and self-sufficiency issues that permeate discussions of Caribbean cultural and socio-historical development, as Merle must unshackle the bonds created by neo-colonial reality and plantation social structures just as the Bournehills villagers must) before she can embark on a fully autonomous destiny.
The complex family history Marshall has devised for her character is typical of the pattern of ‘family’ relationships created by the plantation patriarchy, a pattern rooted in miscegenation, exploitative inter-racial, inter-class relationships, and the white father’s neglectful treatment of the coloured children born of them. Merle is such a quintessentially Caribbean child; she is the ‘outside child’ of a formerly powerful white planter who died without legitimate heirs, leaving Merle both the house and what was left of the land of the original family estate. Her personal history is also emblematic of the peculiar relationships between women characteristic of plantation social structures, where the white wife’s rage over the favoured coloured mistress often led to abuse and murder. Merle’s mother, murdered when her daughter was two years old, was thought to have been the victim of the anger of her father’s legal “high coloured” (i.e. nearly white) wife, believed to have either killed or hired someone to kill her husband’s black favourite. Marshall sets the stage for the text’s climactic confrontation between Merle Kimbona and Harriet Shippen through the initial depiction of Merle’s mother as victim of the rage of her lover’s wife, an aspect of plantation life emphasized in studies of slave narratives in the American South, where sexual jealousy is presented as a leading cause of white women’s violence against black or mulatto women. Often in these narratives,

the white women’s sexual jealousy becomes perverse cruelty, and the black women are victimized again and again by their mistresses’ displaced rage at their husbands’ lechery ... In their jealous depravity, these white women become spectres of slavery itself .. (and) as depicted by their female slaves, become evil creatures, nurtured by the institution that allows them and their husband’s absolute power over other human beings. 3

As a child of miscegenation and racist neglect, Merle stands uncomfortably balanced between the white planter world of her father and the black downtrodden peasant world of her mother. Her path, however, lies in the alliance with the interests of the peasant masses, an alliance cemented through her own symbolic gesture of distributing the lands of her inherited estate among the peasantry. As is the case with many of the planter heroines created by Caribbean women writers, 4 Merle uses the power she acquires through her inheritance of the estate that formerly exploited her family and her people to attempt to destroy that power by dismantling the plantation. ‘The people of Bournehills are depicted by Marshall as being caught in what Sylvia Wynter has described as

a collision and a clash that was inherent and in-built, and still is, between the plantation system, a system, owned and dominated by external forces, and what we shall call the plot system, the indigenous and autochthonous system 5; Merle uses her inherited power to resolve the struggle in favour of the ‘plot’ system, clearly establishing herself on the side of the peasantry in the struggle between
planters and peasants for control of the land that has characterized Caribbean history. Thus, keeping the house, now turned into an inn from which she ekes out an income, she sells the land in small plots to people in the village, turning it from plantation to plot. As Allen Fuso explains to Saul Amrom, the Jewish scholar heading the Bournehills project:

(Sh) probably just gave (the land) to them since it's unlikely any of them would've had the money to pay her. But she didn't want it to fall into the hands of the Kingsley group, who owns practically the entire district.6

Other details of Merle’s background solidify her identification with the aspirations for identity and self-determination of the oppressed peoples of the Caribbean. Sent to school in London before her father’s death, Merle established a connection to Africa - a connection vital to the development of Caribbean cultural identity - in the form of a marriage to an African student with whom she had a daughter. Her marriage was severed by her husband’s discovery of the ‘wild life’ she had led in London prior to her marriage, epitomized by her lesbian relationship with an upper class white woman on whom Merle had depended financially and from whom she had continued to accept money after her marriage. The Englishwoman’s single-minded determination to destroy Merle, which culminates in her malicious revelation of Merle’s past to her husband, reasserts Marshall’s depiction of white women as foes to coloured women, particularly in the context of economic dependence and colonial relationships. The ensuing flight of Merle’s husband, taking with him their daughter, brought about a mental breakdown from which Merle has never entirely recovered since it left her prey to “episodes’ during which she lies comatose for days or weeks, disconnected from reality. The "episodes" stand symbolically for her inability to reconcile all the losses of her life: that of her mother, victim of the peculiar lack of sisterhood promoted by the racist hierarchy of plantation society; 7 that of her father, who, having left her to grow up without his notice or care, later uprooted her from her murdered mother’s realm without truly accepting her into his own; that of her husband and child, severing her from the self-sustaining connection to Africa. Marshall’s characterization of Merle rests on the overwhelming losses suffered by the character, losses that have their root in the peculiar structures of plantation society and slavery and are linked directly by Marshall to the racist relationships between women engendered by slavery. Merle’s losses, as Marshall repeatedly underscores in the novel, are inflicted on her by white or nearly-white women, who emerge in the text as the representatives of the negative forces of racism, colonialism and exploitation over which Merle and the people of Bournehill's must triumph in their quest for an autonomous future.

In contrast to Merle’s vulnerability and to her struggle to muster the strength to overcome her profound sense of loss, Harriet stands for Anglo-Saxon control and for the neo-colonial philanthropy showered on places like Bournehills, backed up by fortunes made through the exploitation of the slave trade and the plantation system. Harriet’s moneyed, white-establishment background has provided her with the sense of assurance and certainty Merle is struggling to achieve. Where Merle is portrayed as vulnerable,
hovering precariously on the verge of collapse, Harriet is depicted as “a true WASP, sure, self-controlled, well-organized, unsentimental.”

Marshall has given Harriet a family background that links her directly to the Caribbean’s history of colonial exploitation, revealed in the text through her connection to the Institute funding her husband’s research and aid project. The Institute’s largest contributor, the Unicor Corporation, is a conglomerate of old family businesses in Pennsylvania. (Harriet’s among them) whose fortunes had been made through the shipment to the Caribbean of ordinary staples such as cornmeal, flour, lumber, candies, cloth, and the dried salted cod that had become the staple of the local diet. An early female forbear of Harriet’s had launched the family’s wealth by her “small-scale speculation in the West Indies trades, which in those days consisted of taking a few shares in a number of sloops making the twice-yearly run between Philadelphia, the West Coast of Africa, and then back across the Atlantic to the islands.” Harriet’s historical connection to the slave trade is made explicit in the text:

In a stained, faded ledger still to be seen in a glass display-case at the Historical Society, the widow had kept careful account in a neat furbelowed hand of the amounts of flour and salted cod, cornmeal and candies that went out on the sloops, the number of slaves taken on in Guinea and then just how much her portion of that cargo, both human and otherwise, had brought in crude sugar, rum and molasses in the islands.

Having established Harriet’s ties with the slave trade and the support of the plantation system and its exploitation of African slaves, Harriet’s questionable family background of collusion with a racist establishment is underscored through her mother, a “hopelessly superficial latter-day Southern belle” from whom Harriet inherits a planter class ideology based on the conviction of the inferiority of black people. It is through her mother’s relationship with her objectified long-serving black maid Alberta that Harriet learns the lessons of plantation-bred relationships between black and white women. Her mother’s tone when speaking to Alberta “had casually assumed her to be a lesser person,” leading Harriet to assume that Alberta had been turned black by the fairies “because of something naughty she had done when little!” Marshall is consistent in her indictment of white women when she makes Harriet’s legacy of racism and her links to slavery a direct inheritance from her female forbears.

Harriet’s uneasy relationship with Merle’s cousin Lyle Hutson, a prominent Bourne Island black lawyer and statesman, is indicative of how the feelings spawns by her mother dominate Harriet’s relationship to black people. Her reaction to Lyle’s placing his hand on her arm approaches revulsion - as it invokes her view of blackness as a taint, of blackness as tantamount to guilt:

(As) she glanced down somewhat disconcertedly ... at that black hand, she had had the impression, strange
and fleeting and scarcely conscious, that it was not his hand resting on her, or any part of him, but rather some dark and unknown part of herself which had suddenly, for the first ever, surfaced, appearing like stigmata or an ugly black-and-blue mark at the place he had touched.12

Harriet’s reaction to Lyle’s touch both obliters his physical presence, thereby de-sexualizing his touch, and reasserts the link between blackness and guilt by recalling Harriet’s childhood conviction that Alberta’s blackness was the result of a wicked deed. Harriet’s feelings are a manifestation of what Lyle himself calls in another context “those deeply rooted, almost mystical beliefs that appear to lie at the heart of (the American) racial dilemma,13” and which in American culture are so closely connected to the interdiction against relationships between black men and white women. The particular power of these beliefs is seen most clearly in the connection between lynching and accusations of rape of white women by black men so prevalent until fairly recently in the American South.14

Lyle becomes a foil to Harriet as she, given the static notions of the place of blacks in society to which she adheres, cannot reconcile herself to what she terms “his proprietary airs:” the custom made Saville-Row suits he wore, the large silver gray Humber Super Snipe he drove, the Oxonian accent he affected at times, the fact that “he would stride onto the verandah of the guest house as though he owned it and everyone else”15. It is significant in our context that Harriet emphasizes his sense of ownership and entitlement as the aspect of Lyle’s character she most resents. She is offended by his proprietary attitudes towards the people around him, and particularly by the possibility of his ‘ownership’ of her implied by the (to her) presumptuous touch of his hand on her arm and by the sexual proposition he makes to her shortly before her death. Lyle is also the one to bring home to Harriet her historical relationship to the reality of Bournehills. Hearing Harriet deplore the horrid diet of “awful rice and dry, bad-smelling cod” which Bournehill's people consume, Lyle smilingly reminds her that that “food fit for a slave” was foisted upon them by the metropolitan masters, making the fortunes of “some people up your way in the process.” For Harriet, a character with little historical consciousness, this brings to mind the ledger at the Historical Society and “the whole questionable legacy which (she) had long ago ruled from her thoughts.16

This racial attitude is further underscored through Harriet’s inability to individualize the mass of black faces that surrounds her unless they’re willing to recognize her essential superiority to them. Her ministrations to the women and children of Bournehills have a lot in it of the plantation mistress’ role as “massa’s helpmate and ruling lady.” Marshall’s depiction of what Harriet perceives to be her position as Saul’s wife is reminiscent of the descriptions of ladies of the American South ministering to members of the slave community offered by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese:

When (slaveholding women) attempted to extend their charitable obligations beyond the immediate circle of
their family, white and black, they preferred to do so on terms that reinforced their positions as ruling ladies. Condescension was inseparable from charity. 17

Harriet’s dismay at not having her self-perceived predominance acknowledged is at the centre of her ultimate betrayal of the people of Bournehills, expressed in her petty scheming to destroy the project in order to satisfy her need to separate Saul from Merle. "The inability of the Bournehill’s villagers to act as mirrors to her exalted image of herself ultimately leads to her rejection of them since what they required - that she become one of them as prescribed in the carnival motto of ‘all of we is one’ - entailed a negation of the role of benevolent mistress she had sought to play:

And there was - Harriet became convinced - something deliberate in the failure of Gwen, the children, and everyone else in the village whom she sought to help, to respond in even the slightest way to her efforts. She sensed in it a subtle but firm rebuff. What was it they wanted? She could not have said. But it was too much, of that she was certain. She could not give it, whatever it was, without being herself deprived, diminished; and worse, without undergoing a profound transformation in which she would be called upon to relinquish some high place she had always occupied and to become other than she had always been. 18

The people’s inability to acknowledge her very presence is at the heart of Harriet’s traumatic experience during carnival as she, weary of the long march with the Bournehills group in a masque representing the story of Cuffee Ned’s successful bid for independence and freedom, leaves it to seek the refuge of the Cockerel Club. As she makes her way towards the Club she is borne away towards the bay by a raucous green-clad guerrilla band of would-be revolutionaries brandishing toy guns and cardboard machetes and smoking cheap cigars. In a scene that mocks her ‘natural’ commanding role as a white woman in a black colony, she orders them desperately, for their own good, to turn away from a course that would lead to their sure deaths in the bay, only to realize, in a moment of sheer panic, that this army is oblivious to her presence. The scene is a beautifully orchestrated mock epic of American neo-colonial power being swept away by Castro-like guerrillas:

They hadn’t heard her. Nor, she suddenly realized, had they really seen her. But how could this be? She was unmistakable among them with her (blond) hair ... and her face, which despite her tan was still nonetheless white. But even the ones closest to her, the ones bumping in and pummeling her as they rushed past, appeared totally unaware of her presence. 19
Her response to this inability to be 'recognized' is to withdraw from the people of Bournehills and to cease to be able to distinguish one black face from another:

After the long weeks spent in the beginning carefully separating out the individual faces from the all-engulfing blackness that had at first made it impossible for her to distinguish them one from another, the faces had begun to merge and blend again, moving together to form a solid bloc against her.20

Harriet's biases are most evident when confronted with miscegenation and interracial sexuality. They are brought to the fore initially by witnessing Lyle's affair with Dorothy Clough, the English wife of the local newspaper editor, but more poignantly when she learns (from Lyle) about Saul's affair with Merle. Her racist feelings are evident in her belief in the race and class advantages that make her, in her own eyes, such a formidable opponent to Merle, whom Harriet sees as nothing but a 'hopeless convulsive given to emotional outbursts ... who had been unable to stand up to life.21 Her initial response is to implicitly demand that Saul disregard the affair as 'a little wild post-holiday fling,' the result of too-much carnival, the contemporary equivalent to a harmless tryst in the slave quarters - a response that implicitly confirms Harriet's superiority as massa's white wife as it dismisses Merle in her uncompromising blackness as incapable of inspiring a 'grand affair of the heart.' Failing to receive from Saul that validation, two scenes ensue which underscore the racism that Harriet embodies in the text. The first, the continuation of her confrontation with Saul regarding the affair, concludes with Harriet openly acknowledging her dismay at the thought of Saul's "touching someone like that," thus betraying her perception of Merle's blackness as the quality that should make her readily dismissable as a rival. Saul's unwillingness to dismiss Merle and her blackness - better yet, his stating his fondness for Merle while equating Merle's blackness to Harriet's purebred Anglo-Saxoness, which from his own Jewishness seems "equally as exotic" - lies at the core of Harriet's defeat.

The second scene finds Harriet offering Merle the money she would require to leave Bournehills and remain away, at least until Saul's project is completed. Claiming their 'oneness' in their mutual concern for "how much the project means to him...", Harriet asks Merle to set the amount: "You could consider it as a gift or, if you like, a token of appreciation on our part.22" As she waits for the amount to be named, Harriet watches Merle's body with intense fascination. Her gaze wandering to the "ludicrous bisque-colored heels and toes," she recalls Alberta's pink palms and the young Harriet's puzzlement at their having been "spared." She finds the feet and legs "surprisingly well-shaped," an "anomaly" given the rest of Merle's "altogether undistinguished body with its "totally unaesthetic throat" showing in its crease a lingering trace of white talcum visible against the dark skin. The scene successfully conveys the beauty Harriet fails to see while exposing to the reader the racial contempt that blinds her to Merle's allure.
Harriet’s sentiments concerning Merle’s body echo the views frequently expressed in the writings of white women in the American South, which often reveal an intense jealousy, often marked by expressions of disgust and vituperation, of the sexual ‘freedom’ and the bodies of black women, feelings that stem from their inability to comprehend why black and mulatto women were often preferred by white men. It reflects what Audre Lorde calls the “entrenched loathing and contempt for whatever is Black and female” that marks white American society, and which resulted from the pernicious and persistent denial of black womanhood fostered by the institution of slavery. "In the face of what was constructed as the overt sexuality of the black female..." argues Hazel Carby, “it was the female slave who was held responsible for being a potential, and direct, threat to the conjugal sanctity of the white mistress.”

This confrontation between Harriet and Merle provides the climax of the novel as it brings crashing against each other two spheres of will and power that had hovered near each other throughout the novel, connecting only through Saul. In Merle’s sphere, there was the need to reconcile the “disunity within herself” and to find an outlet for her energy and talents. She had described herself to Saul as being “like someone bewitched, turned foolish. It’s like my very will is gone.” Merle’s bewitchment recalls Eric Williams’ assessment of the impact on the Caribbean of the emergence of the market economy, represented in the text by Harriet and the vengeful Englishwoman. which left the region “still enchanted, imprisoned, deformed and schizophrenic in its bewitched reality.”

Merle, like the region, sees herself as awaiting some undefined event that would accomplish the release of the dormant essence they have lost, reawakening the zest for “life persisting amid the nameless and irrevocable losses” sustained by both Merle and Bournehills.

In direct opposition to Merle’s (and Bournehills’) need to emerge from the oppressive depths of neo-colonial reality is Harriet’s propensity to take charge of people’s lives and be the force that propels their work, an attitude that characterizes the American neo-colonial establishment she represents and which often accompanies patronizing American aid projects in the Caribbean. This quality is an integral part of her relationship with Saul, who describes her as having decided, ‘for God knows what reason, to rehabilitate (him), to get (him) moving again" after the prolonged period of inactivity that followed the death of his first wife. But his need to “do” for people also has its dark underside since it is bound with her need to exercise power, to control and manipulate people. It is a tendency Saul tries to combat by repeatedly entreating her not to interfere with the project, emphasizing over and over again its importance to him and to the people of Bournehills. Saul’s efforts to contain her tendency to meddle always seem to crash against Harriet’s unquestioning certainty that she knows what’s best for everyone.

The warning is repeated most poignantly after an incident involving fresh eggs which Gwen, a header in the cane fields whom Harriet befriends, was saving to fulfill a bartering agreement with a neighbor and which Harriet, without inquiring as to their purpose, made into an omelette upon finding Gwen’s children hungry at home. Faced with Saul’s entreaties not to interfere again, stressed by his stating that “there’s this thing in you which makes you want to take over and manage everything and everybody on your own
terms," she argues in her defense the irrationality of selling perfectly good, nourishing eggs to buy the awful rice and salted cod Bournehills people eat, thereby underscoring her lack of real empathy with the ways of Bournehills and her colonist tendency to impose her ways on the native population.

It is the recognition of Harriet’s need to control and manage those around her that leads Merle to identify her with the Englishwoman in her past, preparing the ground for the confrontation between them that will allow Merle to exorcise ‘that face ... which had attached itself like an incubus to her mind, sapping her strength and purpose over the years, debauching her will. Merle’s recognition of this quality of Harriet’s is present from the first encounter between the two women, when Merle falters momentarily before greeting Harriet with an explicit acknowledgment of the similarities she perceives between these two upper class white women secure in their sense of racial and economic superiority: "Why, if you don’t put me in mind of someone I knew in England years ago. The identification is emphasized again later when, in her rage at being powerless to do anything about the broken roller at the Cane Vale factory—an incident that brings home to Merle and the people of Bournehills the helplessness of their neo-colonial situation—she lashes out at Saul:

Blast all of you. You and Sir John and Hinds and the Queen and that smooth high-toned bitch of a wife you’ve got and that other bitch who tried to turn me into a monkey for her amusement. 28

This identification of Harriet with the Englishwoman is crucial to the resolution of Merle’s emotional impasse, because it allows her to exorcise in their confrontation the demons that had sapped her energy, freeing her to resume a meaningful life, as evidenced by the determination to see her daughter and demand her rights as a mother which marks the end of the novel. Harriet’s offer of money, the acceptance of which had previously led to the loss of her husband and child, affords Merle the opportunity to assert her changed self, a self that no longer accepts handouts, thereby ‘delivering’ her from the shackles of her past.

Merle’s deliverance is also credited in the text to Saul Amrom’s ability to empathize with her plight and that of the people of Bournehills. Saul’s empathy is depicted as an integral part of his Jewishness, which allows him to identify with Merle and the Bournehill villagers as ‘fellow sufferers’ who understand persecution and exploitation. Saul’s Jewishness offers a sharp contrast to Harriet’s WASP insensitivity, and is portrayed as the quality that allows him to act as mediator between the patronizing condescension of Harriet’s American establishment and the aid owed to the people of Bournehills by that very establishment created through the exploitation of their labour and that of their ancestors.

Saul’s empathy with Merle is expressed in the text through Judaic motifs and imagery. His first impression of Merle is of her shrugging her stole-draped shoulders in what he terms ‘the gesture of a Jew .. Prayer shawl and all. Full of that almost indecent love of the dramatic." The connection between Merle and Saul’s Jewishness is further developed through his identification of Merle with his own mother as he listens to Merle’s
endless, sustaining talk, seeing them both as women condemned to spend their lives retelling the story of some unspeakably inhuman act they had witnessed. But, it is shown most clearly in Saul’s need to atone for his guilt through his commitment to Merle’s healing, in his wistful hope that by seeing Merle through the trauma caused by the Cane Vale broken roller incident, in seeing her through her life crisis, he would in some way make up -for having failed his first wife, who had bled to death after a miscarriage in the jungles of Honduras after surviving the horrors of a concentration camp. In both their needs to atone and expiate guilt - Saul that of the death of his wife, Merle that of her abasement in the hands of the Englishwoman and the resulting loss of her husband and child—they are joined in the image of a senile old man, wearing a soiled tallith, a childhood neighbour of Saul’s, who spent his days at his window beating his chest with his fist, atoning for the sins of the world.

The need for atonement also binds Merle to the people of Bournehills, as Merle’s struggle to reconcile the “disunity within herself” and to forge a path to an autonomous future becomes one with the struggle of the Bournehill’s villagers to find a way to re-establish the sense of communal oneness that they had briefly enjoyed under Cuffee Ned and which they had lost through succumbing to petty squabbles. The villagers’ confrontation with the officials of the Cane Vale sugar mill over the broken roller parallels Merle’s confrontation with Harriet, since in their determination to see their canes ground the villagers regain their oneness of purpose, the sense of community they had kept latent through their yearly recreation of Cuffee Ned’s story in their carnival masque.

The parallels between Merle’s “long and painful process of outgrowing her haunted past” and “her nation’s long and equally painful process’ of achieving the unity needed for meaningful independence” confers great political significance onto Merle’s relationships with white women. If seen as symbols of their places of origin, Merle’s experiences with the Englishwoman and Harriet are a direct extension of the relationships that exist between a fragmented Caribbean looking for unity, and colonial and neo-colonial forces looking to defend their economic interests at any cost. In this sense the offers of money that loom so large in Merle’s relationships with the two women function as metaphors for colonial and neo-colonial relationships, where the possession and control of wealth in white hands perpetuates social and economic structures rooted in the exploitation of slavery and the plantation.

It is in this context that we must examine the parallels between Merle’s relationship with the Englishwoman and Caribbean relations with England, as they are based on the economic dependence of Merle/the Caribbean, leading to the perpetuation of ties with the Englishwoman/England as possessors and exploiters of wealth. It is significant that the Englishwoman’s manipulation of Merle’s economic dependency was used to deplete Merle’s emotional resources, leaving her utterly “despoiled,” “her substance taken,” and severing her connection to her husband and daughter (and thus to Africa), in the same way as English colonial control left the West Indies ravaged, forcing the destruction of family ties and severing the enslaved population’s vital cultural and familial roots in Africa. Marshall stresses this aspect of colonial relations in the Caribbean through the gratuitous
vindictiveness displayed by the Englishwoman in the face of Merle’s attempts to assert her independence through a self-sustaining connection to the African husband who had restored her to her true self. Similarly, Merle’s relationship with Harriet must be seen in the context of Caribbean relations with the United States. As Joseph Skerret Jr. points out, “Merle’s triumph is over what Harriet represents - abusive, neo-colonial economic power”. The triumph rests on Merle’s assertion of her resolve to break the cycle of economic dependence that had led to her ignominious defeat by the Englishwoman. Harriet’s offer to buy Merle’s absence in the interest of her own superior claim to remain in Bournehills with Saul, is met with a cry which signals Merle’s freedom from shackles rooted in neo-colonial assumptions:

I don’t like people ordering me about like I’m still the little colonial. I’ve had too much of that. So when they say gee now, I haw. When they say go, I stay.  

It is a sentiment echoed by Saul, in his own confrontation with Harriet after her betrayal of him, when he reiterates Harriet’s identification with the American establishment. After reminding her of the damage she has done to him by taking away from him the one thing he had wanted to do in years, and to Bournehills, by interfering with something that in the long run might have perhaps made life a little easier for them, he asserts his identification with the people of Bournehills in their common betrayal by Harriet and her “kind”:

What is it with you and your kind, anyway? .. If you can’t have things your way, if you can’t run the show, there’s to be no show, is that it? ... You’d prefer to see everything, including yourselves, come down in ruins rather than ‘take down,’ rather than not to have everything your way ..

As female representatives of the forces confronting each other in relations between the Caribbean and the American establishment, however, Merle and Harriet invert the results expected of such confrontations. As Merle, initially on the brink of madness (and perhaps suicide), moves purposefully towards control and the transcendence of her shattered past, Harriet moves from strength and authority to a suicide brought about by the realization of the limitations of power. The reversal is ironic in that Harriet’s power - once removed from its source in the American establishment and confronted with well-articulated, self-affirming resistance-becomes ineffectual and self-destructive; whereas in the case of Merle, her renewed contact with her people and the determination to leave her tormented past behind offer the power to transcend the oppressive neo-colonial circumstances that had limited her possibilities of positive socio-political action.

For Merle, the future holds a renewal of her ties to Africa, a healing of the wounds of separation, and the possibility of a political role as Bournehills representative to the Island’s legislature. Her search accomplished, the obstacles to her self-fulfillment gone, she will be free to take a stand, to seek an outlet to her multiple talents in the bettering of her
people’s lot. That the obstacles she confronted in reaching these goals had to be embodied in other women from whom she was divided by virtue of her race and class is one of the most pernicious legacies of the peculiar institution of slavery.

NOTES


2. Marshall is claimed just as often by American critics as an American writer as she is claimed by Caribbean critics as a Caribbean author. The focus of most of her work on Caribbean reality and Caribbean migration would, in my opinion, give the greater weight to the claim of the latter.


4. For examples of heroines who use their power to destroy the plantation or plantation-bred social structures see Rosario Ferre’s Maldivo amor (Rio Piedras: Ediciones Huracan, 1988; available in English as *Sweet Diamond Dust*, New York: Ballantine, 1989); Ada Quayle’s *The Mistress* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1957); Marie Chauvet’s *Amour* (in *Amour, Colere et Folie*, Paris: Gallimard, 1968); and Phyllis Allfrey’s *The Orchid House* (London: Virago Press, 1982).


7. In ‘Merle,’ a novella based on *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* published in 1983, Marshall underscores the roots of Merle’s mother’s death in the social structures of the plantation: ‘You can’t hold yourself responsible for what happened to your mother. Because you know as well as I do that her death, as well as her life, the way she was forced to live, her relationship with your father, even the way he treated you when you were little, all go back to the same goddamn inhuman system that began before you were born, here in Bourne Island, in my country, all over the hemisphere. You know that. So how can you blame yourself for her death? That’s like blaming yourself for the entire history that brought it all about.” *Merle, a Novella and Other Stories* (London: Virago Press, 1983), 178.


10. Marshall, 37-38


12. Marshall, 96-97. Near the end of the novel, as Harriet keeps her pre-suicide watch, she thinks of the mark as a Rorschach inkblot that would reveal her inner self, spreading in a stain that would soon cover her entire body, turning her in effect into a “dark person.”


14. For a detailed analysis of lynching and the political manipulation of black male and white female sexuality, see Hazel V. Hazel V. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 110-116: “...white men used their ownership of the body of the white female as a terrain on which to politically oppress the black male. White women who felt that caste was their protection aligned their interests with the patriarchal power that ultimately confined them.”


“...though Marshall’s characters often perceive others as facets of deities, only Harriet has the egotism to perceive herself as a saviour. Her paradigm also, of course, casts the islanders as sinners, inferiors, in need of saving. ‘Me great redemptive myth of Christ has become the white colonizer’s flattering mirror’ (46).

24. Carby, 27.
25. Wynter, 95.
29. Marshall, 64.
31. Skerret, 72.
32. Marshall, 442.
33. Marshall, 454