

Race, Cultural Memory, and Demarginalization in the Selected Novels of Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall

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Abstract—This paper explores the interconnected themes of race, cultural memory, and demarginalization in the selected novels of Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall, two writers whose works offer profound insights into the lives of Black women within African American and Caribbean diasporic communities. Their fiction vividly portrays racial discrimination, patriarchal dominance, economic precarity, emotional displacement, and historical trauma, yet it also reveals the psychic strength, cultural continuity, and communal intelligence through which women resist erasure and reclaim identity. Drawing upon Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Standpoint Theory, the study demonstrates that race in these novels is not an abstract sociological term; rather, it shapes everyday movement, emotional well-being, access to opportunities, and the formation of self-image. A comparative reading of *Mama Day*, *Bailey's Café*, and *The Men of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor and *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones*, *Daughters*, and *The Fisher King* by Paule Marshall shows that cultural memory functions as a stabilizing force, offering psychological grounding and ancestral continuity in the face of displacement and marginalization. The paper argues that demarginalization is a sustained process, not a single moment of liberation. It unfolds through storytelling, spiritual engagement, intergenerational bonding, cultural belonging, and critical self-reflection. While Naylor grounds this process within African American communal and spiritual traditions, Marshall frames it within diasporic, transnational, and post-colonial contexts. Despite these differences, both writers imagine Black women as ethical anchors, cultural bearers, and historical witnesses, whose agency disrupts narratives of victimhood. Their works collectively affirm that identity is reconstructed rather than inherited, and that the journey from marginalization to empowerment is deeply connected to memory, culture, and collective resilience.

I. INTRODUCTION

Race remains one of the most enduring and complex elements shaping modern social life. In societies

marked by slavery, colonialism, and segregation, race becomes a structuring principle of power and belonging, determining who speaks, who is heard, and who remains invisible. Literature has therefore become a vital space in which writers from marginalized communities reclaim suppressed histories and interrogate dominant narratives.

Within this context, Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall hold a significant place in Black women's writing. Both authors write about women who exist at the crossroads of oppression and self-realization, yet their works do not romanticise suffering. Instead, they depict ordinary women negotiating hardship with extraordinary courage and moral clarity.

This paper examines three key dimensions of their writing:

1. Race as a lived structure shaping daily existence
2. Cultural memory as a source of psychological and historical continuity
3. Demarginalization as the gradual reclaiming of voice, identity, and space

A comparative approach enables us to see how African American and Caribbean diasporic histories intersect yet diverge. Naylor's world is grounded in Black American neighbourhoods shaped by slavery legacies and urban neglect, whereas Marshall's fiction highlights migration, cultural duality, and post-colonial identity struggles. Despite these differences, both writers foreground Black women's endurance, communal values, and ethical wisdom.

The significance of this study lies in its insistence that Black women's narratives are not secondary or peripheral, but form a crucial lens through which we understand the emotional and cultural impact of race and displacement.

II. UNDERSTANDING RACE: THEORY AND EXPERIENCE

2.1 RACE AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND POWER STRUCTURE

Critical Race Theory insists that race is a political invention rather than a biological fact. It functions as a hierarchy, placing some lives as more valuable, visible, or credible than others. In the societies depicted in Naylor's and Marshall's novels, race influences:

- where one lives
- what work is available
- how one is policed
- whose pain is recognised
- who receives justice

Thus, race is embedded in material and institutional reality rather than isolated in personal prejudice.

For Black women, this racial discrimination is compounded by gender oppression. They often perform hidden, emotional, and domestic labour, yet remain unrecognised. Their experiences challenge the misconception that gender and race operate separately instead, they intersect to shape complex realities.

2.2 THE EMOTIONAL AND CULTURAL IMPACT OF RACISM

Racism in these novels produces feelings of vulnerability, insecurity, anger, self-questioning, and at times isolation. But Naylor and Marshall also highlight the inner resilience that emerges from such struggle. Black women develop:

- self-protective emotional intelligence
- heightened social awareness
- a collective ethic of care
- creative coping strategies

Racism therefore becomes not only a destructive force but also a catalyst for cultural solidarity and critical consciousness. Characters often experience an awakening realizing that their struggles are not individual failings but systemic injustices. This realization marks the beginning of demarginalization the psychological refusal to internalize inferiority.

III. CULTURAL MEMORY AS RESISTANCE AND IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION

3.1 THE ROLE OF MEMORY IN DIASPORIC IDENTITY

For communities uprooted by enslavement and migration, memory carries history in the absence of archives. Cultural memory is expressed through:

- storytelling
- song and rhythm
- spiritual belief
- oral wisdom
- rituals and family narratives

In Paule Marshall's fiction, memory travels across Caribbean villages, Atlantic crossings, and American cities, shaping characters who live in between-worlds -neither fully Caribbean nor fully American. Memory becomes the medium through which they anchor themselves psychologically.

In Gloria Naylor's novels, memory links generations of African American women, connecting the past of slavery and oppression to the present of urban struggle. It prevents cultural rupture and maintains a sense of belonging even in hostile environments.

3.2 MEMORY AS PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALING

Many characters carry hidden grief, shame, or silenced trauma. Through acts of remembering - sometimes painful they begin to process emotions that were previously buried. Memory offers:

- clarity
- release
- moral interpretation
- self-forgiveness

It is through storytelling that trauma becomes bearable and shared rather than isolating. Memory becomes both medicine and mirror- a way of recognising selfhood despite erasure.

Thus, cultural memory transforms from a passive past into an active tool of self-definition and survival.

IV. DEMARGINALIZATION: FROM SILENCE TO VOICE

4.1 DEFINING DEMARGINALIZATION

Demarginalization means re-entering social, emotional, and cultural space from which one has been excluded. For the Black women in these novels, it involves:

- refusing shame
- resisting dehumanization
- articulating one's truth
- rejecting imposed stereotypes

- rediscovering inner worth
- taking moral and emotional responsibility

This is a gradual journey, often marked by setbacks and internal conflict. Yet it results in self-recognition, the moment when a character realizes that her life has meaning beyond social labels.

4.2 THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY AND SISTERHOOD

Unlike Western narratives that emphasise individual autonomy, Black feminist writing stresses collective resilience. Identity develops through shared labour, empathy, humour, storytelling, and spiritual kinship. Women mentor one another, building spaces of safety within oppressive structures. Community becomes a form of protection as well as political presence.

Even when communities contain conflict, they hold memory, culture, and moral support, making demarginalization a shared victory rather than a solitary achievement.

V. GLORIA NAYLOR: RACE, MEMORY, AND COMMUNITY SURVIVAL

Gloria Naylor's novels portray Black urban life with honesty and compassion. In *Mama Day*, the island of Willow Springs becomes a symbol of ancestral rootedness, where African spiritual traditions remain alive. The spiritual authority of *Mama Day* reveals that wisdom is not always institutional -it is communal and inherited.

In *The Men (and Women) of Brewster Place*, the housing estate becomes a metaphor for containment and marginalization, yet also a site of shared resilience and emotional bonding. Women confront violence, abandonment, and poverty, yet they sustain themselves through compassion, humour, endurance, and collective strength.

In *Bailey's Café*, the café itself becomes a liminal healing space where wounded individuals find dignity through storytelling. Naylor shows how voice heals silence wounds.

Across her fiction, Naylor teaches that self-definition is inseparable from cultural community.

VI. PAULE MARSHALL: DIASPORA, MIGRATION, AND IDENTITY

Paule Marshall foregrounds migration and cultural duality. Her characters move physically and

psychologically between Caribbean homelands and U.S. cities, struggling to reconcile conflicting values.

In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Selina must navigate maternal authority, community ambition, and American individualism. Her identity forms through conflict, reflection, and emotional honesty.

In *Daughters and The Fisher King*, Marshall turns toward political history, racial alienation, and intergenerational memory, showing how the past lives within the present.

For Marshall, healing arises when characters reconnect with their cultural inheritance- not to live in the past, but to understand themselves more fully in the present.

VII. COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS

A comparative view reveals that both writers:

- centre Black women's consciousness
- expose institutional racism
- critique patriarchal power
- celebrate community-based survival
- value memory as identity
- transform pain into cultural wisdom

But they do so through different cultural routes — one African American, one Caribbean-American. Together, they broaden our understanding of Black womanhood as multiple, layered, and evolving.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that race, cultural memory, and demarginalization are central forces shaping Black women's identity in the selected novels of Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall. Race operates not simply as prejudice, but as a system influencing space, dignity, security, and belonging. Cultural memory acts as a stabilizing force, preserving history where written records fail. Demarginalization unfolds as a gradual journey from invisibility toward recognition, guided by community bonds, storytelling, spirituality, and emotional courage.

Both writers challenge literary traditions that ignored or distorted Black women's lives. Instead, they place Black women at the heart of moral, cultural, and intellectual inquiry. Their fiction reveals that while oppression attempts to silence identity, identity can be

rebuilt strengthened by memory, grounded in community, and sustained by resilience.

Ultimately, Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall affirm that Black womanhood is not solely defined by struggle, but by the enduring will to live meaningfully, ethically, and creatively despite it. Their novels remain powerful testimonies to the fact that dignity survives and often thrives in the very spaces where society attempts to deny it.

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