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Beyond Ecological Democracy: Black Feminist Thought and The Matrix of Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959)

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ABSTRACT

On August 20, 2019 during a seminar organized by Australian National University, Tim Hollo, an environmentalist, political strategist, the Executive Director of the Green Institute and the founder of Green Music Australia, delivered a groundbreaking address titled, "Towards Ecological Democracy – A Political Theory For The 21st Century". During that address Hollo defined the concept of ecological democracy emphasizing upon the mutual dependence of human beings and negating the segregating and isolating policies of the capitalist societies which lead to the loneliness of modern man. According to Hollo's model of ecological democracy, a self-centered approach based upon personal interests takes one to nowhere rather the practice of inter-dependence gives rise to the collective uplift of human society. Keeping in view Hollo's propositions of ecological democracy, this study analyzes socio-cultural and political environment of Paule Marshall's celebrated novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). It is the story of an African-American girl named Selina Boyce. Selina's mother wants to settle in Brooklyn and buy a house, but her father wants to return to his homeland and eventually she ends up returning to Barbados. This Qualitative research, through the dialogues and incidents of the selected novel, highlights the earnest need of ecological democracy in the selected text. The matrix of the novel reflects its inclination towards Black Feminist Thought which has been described by Patricia Hill Collins that in the US society, the psychological make-up of a black woman and her definition of selfhood is greatly influenced by her socio-cultural experiences. Black Feminist Thought is



grounded in black women's historical involvement in enslavement, segregation, sexual politics, capitalism, and patriarchy. The research on the domination and segregation faced by Selina and her mother is conducted to establish the notion that in spite of the double burden of ethnic and sexual discrimination, African-American women have developed rich scholarly practices and customs that are not widely known. The essential task of this paper is to reinforce the notion that in order to make an all-inclusive community, we need to build participatory democratic processes and institutions allowing women of all race, creed and color to add their individual and unique perspective to the mainstream social mechanisms.

Key words: Ecological democracy. Black Feminist Thought. Self- definition., Participatory, process .Gender discrimination.

1. INTRODUCTION

On August 20, 2019 during a seminar organized by Australian National University Tim Hollo, the executive director of the Green Institute and former political adviser to Greens Leader Christine Milne, delivered a lecture on ecological democracy where, for the first time, he presented the arguments to establish that “everything is connected” and thus “embedded in nature” (n.pag). Hollo argues,

Disconnection and atomization is at the heart of the crisis of democracy sweeping through the Western world. What we need is a shift to ecological ecology, which is about participatory, deliberative democratic paths, embedded in nature and where everything is connected. (n.pag)

In his address Hollo places a great stress upon equal opportunities to all irrespective of race or gender for the collective progress within an all-inclusive society. This study is held to establish the notion that the matrix of Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) lacks ecological democracy which can be considered as the only practical answer to the narrative driven by Black Feminist Thought.

As per the definition offered by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), “Black feminist thought is a field of knowledge that is focused on the perspectives and experiences of Black women” (p.21). Since the narrative of the selected novel revolves around the disturbing experiences of its major female characters therefore the influence of Black Feminist Thought can be strongly felt by the reader. Prior to Collins, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) argue that “the overall content of the thought and the historical and factual circumstances of Black women are inseparable” (p.24) therefore most of the incidents mentioned in the novel can be related to majority of the colored women in a capitalist society. Similarly Karl Mannheim in *Ideology and Utopia* (1936) states, “Black feminist thought contains observations and interpretations about Afro-American womanhood that describe and explain different expressions of common themes” (p.29). This element of commonality is what presented by Marshall and is answered by this study via the theoretical framework proposed by ecological democracy.

1.1 Background of the Story

Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) is divided into four smaller books; Book 1: A Long Day and a Long Night, Book 2: Pastorale, Book 3: The War and Book 4: Selina. According to the synopsis presented by Arpita Singh:

Marshall has presented the story of the protagonist, Selina, a 10 year old immigrant from Barbados who lives in a rental Brownstone in Brooklyn with her family. Her father, Deighton, and her mother, Silla, are often at odds with each other due to Deighton's rash and unfaithful behavior. Amidst this chaos, Selina imagines herself growing up. Later, she heads out to play with her friend Beryl, where she confides to Selina about her menstruation, an idea that Selina is disturbed by but is in reality fearful of. Selina remains doubtful of her mother and this leads to a conflict between her and her sister Ina. After the death of her father, deigning to follow her own dreams, Selina begins college and meets Clive, an artist ten years her senior. She is later distraught and disappointed when she finds out that Clive never intended to elope with her. The novel ends on a melancholy note, with Selina considering her options and planning to drop out of school to return to Barbados. (n.pag)

1.2 Statement of Problem

The study is to explore the devastating effects on the psychology of Black women due to the prejudiced and discriminatory socio-cultural matrix around them as depicted in the narrative web of Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). In the light of Tim Hollo's 2019 lecture, the study is to establish that the beliefs and principles of Ecological Democracy are the only possible alternatives to the ongoing physical and psychological subjugation and exploitation of Black women in the name of either race or gender.

1.3 Research Objectives

- To explore the role of socio-cultural dynamics of a white society in shaping the psychological makeup of a black girl
- To examine the self-perception of a black girl and her definition of being a woman in relation to her experiences in an adult society
- To highlight the incidents and occurrences depicting the prevalent environmental injustice within the matrix of the selected novel
- To identify the common norms and societal practices suggesting the dire need of ecological democracy in a hybrid locality
- To highlight the imminent outcomes of an all-inclusive and participatory society in contrast to a suppressive and prejudiced milieu

1.4 Research Questions

- How do socio-cultural dynamics of a white society play an active role in shaping the psychological makeup of a black girl?
- In what ways do the societal experiences of a black girl assist her to perceive herself and define being a woman in an adult society?
- What are the different incidents and occurrences in the matrix of the selected novel which reflect the prevalent environmental injustice?

- How do some of the common norms and societal practices in a hybrid locality suggest the dire need of ecological democracy?
- What can be various imminent outcomes of an all-inclusive and participatory society in contrast to a suppressive and prejudiced milieu?

1.5 Delimitation

The study aims to conduct a qualitative analysis of Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) to assert the notion that Tim Hollo's 2019 theory of "Ecological Democracy" is the only practical solution to the environmental injustice prevalent within the matrix of the novel reflecting the influence of, as defined by Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought both on the writer as well as her protagonist, Selina Boyce.

1.6 Significance of Study

Following the contemporary model of Deep Ecology where "everything is connected" this study is an attempt to provide adaptable and practicable solutions to the environmental injustice prevalent in the matrix of the selected novel. The current readers have to understand that Marshall's writing and her characters are the specimen of Black Feminist Thought where the personal socio-cultural experiences of a woman shape her perception and psychological mechanism. Thus the study claims that instead of suppressing, discouraging rather humiliating the females of the society, Tim Hollo's principles of "Ecological Democracy" can be opted to construct an all-inclusive and participatory society where every individual, irrespective of gender, race or color is allowed to play a constructive part in the moral and social uplift. Hence the study not only highlights the loop-holes in the social network of the hybrid society, but for the future researchers it also suggests the possible solutions to the certain areas of problem within a multiracial community.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tim Hollo's conception of "Ecological Democracy" can be rooted within the revolt against the notion and practice of capitalism. While considering capitalism the root-cause of segregation within the social system, Karl Polanyi, a Hungarian-American political economist, presented the concept of "Market Society" and wrote in *The Great Transformation* (1944), "while all previous social organizing principles saw markets, land and money embedded within social relationships, capitalism disembedded them, removing any social, religious or moral constraints from the operation of the market" (p.152). Thus, monetary expansions became the basis of societal relationships, surpassing the values of human empathy and consideration. Polanyi asserted that, "Capitalism became the first social organizing principle based on selfishness, the first system to make greed, competition, non-cooperation its credo" (p.152). While talking about the technological advancement and moral degradation caused by capitalism Polanyi argues, "It's no coincidence that this era of disconnection is the era which has seen the progressive and systematic enclosure and destruction of the commons; a destruction so complete that most of us no longer understand what the commons is" (p.153). This concept of "common" sets the basis of Hollo's ecological democracy. In the words of Polanyi,

Common is an ancient concept, imbued with deep understandings of connection, to each other and to the natural world we are part of, the commons is better understood as a system than a form of property. It is a system by which a community agrees to manage resources, equitably and sustainably. (p.153)

As a commons' theorist David Bollier describes in *Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons* (2014), it is "a resource + a community + a set of social protocols [required] to rebuild our society and reclaim our shared inheritance" (p.9).

Similarly Garrett Harding in his article, "The Tragedy of the Commons", sets out how "individuals who, for some reason, can't or won't talk to each other, can't or won't cooperate with each other, will fail to manage commonly held resources. It's a description of capitalism and the disconnection and alienation at its core" (p.1243). Hence in reply to a capitalist approach, based on alienation and segregation, a contemporary all-inclusive notion of ecological democracy seems to be inevitable.

Moreover AC Grayling in *Democracy and its Crisis* (2018) insists on promoting the common interests of various strata of the society ensuring a fair play of democracy. Grayling states that "we must rescue liberal representative democracy through improving civics education, supporting public interest media, and similar necessary" (p.34). Following the tradition of the above mentioned theorists and socialists, Tim Hollo argues,

Ecological democracy presents another model that is about participatory, deliberative democratic paths, embedded in nature, based on the principle of subsidiarity, or putting control into the most local hands possible, and limiting the opportunities for domination and free-riding" (n.pag).

As compared to capitalism and socialism Hollo favors the principles of ecological democracy. In his views, "under capitalism, nothing is connected, everything is atomized, all is abstraction. Under socialism, people are connected, but often excluding the natural world, and not always sufficiently democratic and participatory. Under ecological democracy, everything is connected" (n.pag).

During his 2019 address at Australian National University, Tim Hollo reinforced that "essentially, the task [of ecological democracy] is to connect people again. To re-enfranchise ourselves" (n.pag). While presenting a prophetic vision of peaceful coexistence before his audience, Hollo has suggested that "in order to make the community, the commons, the focal point of government, we need to build participatory democratic processes and institutions at every level" (n.pag). Thus reducing binaries and promoting interconnectedness can be considered as the modern mantra of a civilized society.

In addition to Hollo, Matthew Lepori from Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore, in his 2019 article, "Towards a New Ecological Democracy: A Critical Evaluation of the Deliberation Paradigm within Green Political Theory" argues that "democracy lies not in institutional design and procedure, nor in constitutions. Rather, democracy ... occurs when ordinary people experiencing a common harm, inequality or exclusion catalyze a politics of similarity in order to build a solidaristic collective – a demos – that operates through protest and demand" (p.75). Lepori's argument reflects that even documenting the protest, denial or negation on part of the suppressed communities within a multi-ethnic society can be viewed as an attempt towards ecological democracy. Lepori further explains, "Their aim is not only to rectify the wrong done to them, but to do so through popular mechanisms, making available to ordinary people the ability to participate in decision-making

over matters significant to their lives” (p.99). Hence one can infer that giving a due share to the unheard voice can be one of the prime motifs of the advocates of ecological democracy and in this way the writings of the Black female authors inspired by Black Feminist Thought can aptly be considered a step towards the implication of the aforesaid theory.

In the same year David Schlosberg, Karin Backstrand and Jonathan Pickering in their article, “Reconciling Ecological and Democratic Values: Recent Perspectives on Ecological Democracy” clearly laid out that “to advocate democracy is to advocate procedure, to advocate environmentalism is to advocate substantive outcomes” (p.55). Their work implies that only an all-inclusive, interconnected and participatory society can lead to a sustainable and peaceful co-existence without and subjugation or injustice. They promote the conception that “environmental democracy focus on reforming existing democratic institutions to better represent environmental values or attain environmental goals” (p.58). In other words environmental or social justice is the central theme of their writing which can serve as the basis of a constructive society.

The very next year in 2020 Jonathan Pickering, Karin Bäckstrand & David Schlosberg wrote another article titled, “Between environmental and ecological democracy: theory and practice at the democracy-environment nexus” where they presented the concepts of “ecological and environmental democracy seek to reconcile two normative ideals: ensuring environmental sustainability while safeguarding democracy” (p.15). They suggested that by preserving ecological democracy, environmental justice can be attained which is prerequisite for the sustainability of any social structure.

Another article, “Radical Ecological Democracy: A path forward for India and beyond” by Ashish Kothari advocates the emphasis of ecological democracy on the core values of any society and stress upon its adherence to those values despite human or institutional antagonism. Kothari states:

The framework of Radical ecological democracy places the goals of direct democracy, local and bioregional economies, cultural diversity, human well-being, and ecological resilience at the core of its vision. Although efforts to amplify and spread such a paradigm face the enormous challenge of overcoming the resistance of entrenched institutions and mindsets, current practice suggests opportunities for making progress. (p.36)

The excerpt implies that for a progressive society, an equal and just participation of its populace is inevitable without the barriers of gender, color or creed. In this way a viable balance can be made between the emotional and practical tendencies and approaches of any socio-cultural milieu. As Kothari states, “Ultimately, the wide embrace of radical ecological democracy will require the spread of the core values guided not only by hard-headed rationality but also by a strong ethical and emotional foundation” (p.45).

Similarly Robyn Eckersley in “Ecological democracy and the rise and decline of liberal democracy: looking back, looking forward” establishes the beliefs and practices of ecological democracy as the prime requirement of futuristic social order. Eckersley manifests the diversity in opinion and application in the result of the above-mentioned theory and argues “The virtues

and problems of ecological democracy are shown to be productive in maintaining theoretical and methodological pluralism and enhancing the prospects for sustainability and a multifaceted democracy” (p.214).

The culture of ecological democracy can be promoted only if the members of any particular society themselves attempt to establish an order based on equality and justice. Neil O. Houser in his article, “Ecological Democracy: An Environmental Approach to Citizenship Education” places stress upon reforming the society from within rather than with-out. The essentials of any society can be decided only by the psychological conditioning and mutual consent of its members and cannot be dictated by any foreign agency. Houser asserts:

In spite of our efforts, contemporary societies seem ill-equipped to cope with the enormous social and environmental issues of our age. I suggest that civic education should be conducted within, rather than outside or beyond, a broader environmental context. Such an approach is imperative for the good of society and the health of the planet. (p.192)

From the perspective of Houser, Black Feminist Thought can be considered a literary movement where the writings centered upon Black females target the injustice, inequality, subjugation and suppression faced by them barring them to play an active role in the construction of a progressive society. April L. Few in the article, “Black Feminist Thought” defines the concept as “a collection of ideas, writings, and art that articulates a standpoint of and for black women of the African Diaspora” (p.104). Few further elaborates the concept of Black female identity and their perception of self within their socio-political matrix and asserts that “As a standpoint theory, black feminist thought conceptualizes identities as organic, fluid, interdependent, multiple, and dynamic socially constructed locations within historical context” (p.106).

Prior to Few Patricia Hill Collins in her 2000 publication, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, elaborated this concept in detail and explained,

Black feminist thought describes black women as a unique group that exists in a place in US social relations where intersectional processes of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual orientation shape black women’s individual and collective consciousness, self-definitions, and actions. (p.98)

Hence it is the influence of their respective sociopolitical standards and historical background which makes the Black women view themselves in a certain somewhat inferior fashion. Collins also explains that “Black feminist thought is grounded in black women’s historical experience with enslavement, anti-lynching movements, segregation, Civil Rights and Black Power movements, sexual politics, capitalism, and patriarchy” (p.99).

While defining the feminist perspective of the selected theory Patricia Hill Collins quotes an argument, originally put forward by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, that both men and women can be “Black feminists” and names Frederick Douglass and William E. B. Du Bois as the prominent examples of Black male feminists. Collins believes that, “The term Black feminist has also

been used to describe selected African-American women who possess some version of a feminist consciousness” (p.227). In the last section titled, “Black Feminism, Knowledge, and Power”, of the same book, Collins talks about the effect of shared experiences of Black females on their psychological mechanisms and claims, “Black feminist thought consists of specialized knowledge created by African-American women which clarifies standpoint of and for Black women” (p.229). Similarly in the first section, “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought”, of the same publication, Patricia Hill Collins presents a few forms of oppression faced by Black females which led to unity in their thought, perception and action. Collins states:

Although African American women activists’ sustained resistance to Black women’s victimization within interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression is well known, these women did not act alone. Their actions were nurtured by the support of countless, ordinary African American women who, through strategies of everyday resistance, created a powerful foundation for this more visible Black feminists activist tradition. Such support has been essential to the shape and goals of Black feminist thought. (p.21)

Moreover Patricia Hill Collins in one of her other articles titled, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought”, professes the claim that “Black women have long occupied marginal positions in academic settings” (p.14). With regard to this marginalization reflected in Black female’s writings Collins argues that “many Black female intellectuals have made creative use of their marginality—their outsider within status—to produce Black feminist thought that reflects a special standpoint on self, family, and society” (p.17).

In the same article Collins herself has confessed that she has described and explored the sociological significance of three characteristic themes in such thought: “(1) Black women’s self-definition and self-valuation, (2) the interlocking nature of oppression and (3) the importance of Afro-American women’s culture” (p.20). These three elements mentioned by Collins can be traced in the texts of majority of the Black female writers. After considering how Black women might draw upon these key themes as outsiders within to generate a distinctive standpoint on existing sociological paradigms, she concludes by suggesting that “other sociologists would also benefit by placing greater trust in the creative potential of their own personal and cultural biographies” (p.23).

Collins highlights the binaries and also the double subjugation of Black female prevalent in the white society and claims that “Afro-American women have long been privy to some of the most intimate secrets of white society. These women have seen white elites, both actual and aspiring, from perspectives largely obscured from their Black spouses and from these groups themselves” (p.27). Therefore, in the words of Collins:

The accounts of Black domestic workers stress the sense of self-affirmation they experienced at seeing white power demystified—of knowing that it was not the intellect, talent, or humanity of their employers that supported their superior status, but largely just the advantages of racism. These same Black women knew they could never belong to their white families. In spite of their involvement, they remained outsiders. (p.30)

Moreover in the literature review of the same article Collins quotes an example of an Afro-American text in the tradition of Black Feminist Thought and views Zora Neal Hurston's 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, most certainly the reflection of "her skill at using the strengths and transcending the limitations both of her academic training and of her background in traditional Afro-American community life" (p.25). Besides Collins another Black feminist critic, theorist and writer, Bell Hooks in her 1984 publication, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, captures the unique standpoint that the outsider within status can generate. In describing her small-town, Kentucky childhood, she notes, "living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside and in from the inside out...we understood both" (p.14).

In another article, "No guarantees: Symposium on *Black Feminist Thought*", Patricia Hill Collins highlights the need of adding more innovative perspectives to this thought because only then the true essence and spirit of this revolutionary movement can be sustained in the future. She argues that "There are no guarantees that Black feminism will persist. The richness of the different ways that these contemporary scholars read Black Feminist Thought provides important guidance for similar knowledge projects that are placed in service to social justice" (p.32).

Another Black Feminist writer, D. Soyini Madison in her article, "That was my occupation: Oral narrative, performance, and black feminist thought" explains that "Black feminist thought supports the interdependence of what are called theories of the flesh and specialized knowledge" (p.213). Madison further elaborates the dominant role of experience and knowledge in the black female writings and argues that "Theories of the flesh reflect the distinctive interpretations of the world carved out of the material realities of a group's life experiences. Specialized knowledge infuses elements and themes of black women's culture and traditions with critical interventionist thinking to provide black women with new tools of resistance" (p.228).

And lastly, Ashma Shamail from University of Dammam in her article, "Notions of Home: Re-Locations and Forging Connections in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*" comments on the disturbing experiences of the protagonist of the selected novel and establishes that "Paule Marshall's first novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), focuses on Selina Boyce, a second-generation Barbadian immigrant from the United States, whose search for her roots is informed by an inherent link to the Caribbean through an articulation of the dynamics of belonging" (p.58). Shamail argues that "Marshall grants her protagonist the space to challenge familial struggles, and reclaim her voice by re-locating to Barbados, her parental home" (p.65). After conducting a comprehensive textual analysis of the novel, Shamail suggests:

The protagonist's enigmatic journey through ambivalent interspaces enables her to reconstruct bridges to the West Indies. Marshall's examination of her young protagonist's return to the Caribbean reflects wider issues of diasporic identity and belonging connected to home spaces, ancestral lands, regions, and origins. (p.69)

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research methodology has been opted for the current study. The research structure presented by M.B. Miles and A.M. Huberman in their joint publication, *Qualitative data analysis: A Sourcebook of New Methods* (1984), serves as the guiding framework for the study. They have defined Qualitative analysis as “the analysis of qualitative data such as text data from interview transcripts... heavily dependent on the researcher’s analytic and integrative skills and personal knowledge of the social context where the data is collected” (p.23). Therefore on the basis of the dialogues and incidents depicted in the selected novel the study attempts to establish the influence of Black Feminist Thought within the socio-cultural paradigm of the text. In Miles’s and Huberman’s view, “The emphasis in qualitative analysis is sense making or understanding a phenomenon, rather than predicting or explaining” (p.24). Hence the dire need of Ecological Democracy is asserted via the psychological and practical mechanisms of the characters. A creative and investigative mindset has been adopted for the analysis, based on the prerequisites indicated Miles and Huberman involving “an ethically enlightened and participant-in-context attitude, and a set of analytic strategies” (p.24).

In addition to Miles and Huberman, Schilling’s *On the Pragmatics of Qualitative Assessment: Designing the Process for Content Analysis* (2006) has also been considered to organize different content analytic procedures. As per the definition offered by Schilling, “Content analysis is the systematic analysis of the content of a text—e.g., who says what, to whom, why, and to what extent and with what effect—in a qualitative manner” (p.28). Thus, a special focus has been placed on the dialogues of the Black protagonist reflecting her disturbed psychological state. The reason behind choosing *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) can be further elaborated in the words of Schilling when he states, “This process [of qualitative analysis] is not random, but instead, texts that have more pertinent content should be chosen selectively” (p.30). A simple type of content analysis; “sentiment analysis”, has been opted for the study, which, according to Schilling, is “a technique used to capture people’s opinion or attitude toward an object, person, or phenomenon. This analysis helps identifying whether the sample as a whole is positively or negatively disposed, or neutral towards that candidate” (p.33). Therefore content analysis has been conducted keeping in view several limitations defined by Schilling; first, the analysis is “restricted to the information available in text form [and secondly the analysis has been] done carefully to avoid sampling bias” (p.37).

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The current research primarily follows two main theories which can form its basic theoretical framework. One of the theories is of “Ecological Democracy” presented by Tim Hollo, Green Institute Executive Director, on August 20, 2019 in the seminar titled, “Towards Ecological Democracy – A Political Theory For The 21st Century”, organized by Australian National University, Canberra. In the words of Tim Hollo, the theory “seeks to apply the fundamentals of ecology to politics, articulating a vision of interconnection, interdependence, and resilience in diversity” (n.pag). Hollo laid stress upon building and sharing a “well understood conceptualization of ecological democracy, which can be defined in his own words “as something distinct – a radical political vision of deep interconnection and interdependence; rejecting capitalism’s hyper-individualism, growth fetish, and celebration of greed; beyond socialism while unashamedly of the left; intrinsically intersectional; embedded in nature” (n.pag).

The other theory is that of Black Feminist Thought first presented by Patricia Hill Collins in her 1986 article, "Learning from the outsider within: the sociological significance of black feminist thought", where she states, "domination always involves the objectification of the dominated; all forms of oppression imply the devaluation of the subjectivity of the oppressed" (p.14). Thus providing an explanation to the quest of individuality and identity among Black female writers and characters of their novels.

4. CONTENT ANALYSIS

A qualitative analysis of Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) depicts that the matrix of the novel is filled with a number of examples reflecting the influence of Black Feminist Thought on the psychology of both the author and the black female characters portrayed in the novel. At the very beginning of the novel Marshall presents the architecture and settings of the novel foreshadowing a distinct identity of Blacks, latent in their hearts and minds and on the verge of asserting itself in the face of the apparent harmony disguising environmental injustice prevalent in the white society. In the words of Marshall:

Glancing down the interminable Brooklyn street you thought of those joined brownstones as one house reflected through a train of mirrors, with no walls between the houses but only vast rooms yawning endlessly one into the other. Yet, looking close, you saw that under the thick ivy each house had something distinctively its own. [...] Yet they all shared the same brown monotony. All seemed doomed by the confusion in their design. (Book 1, Chapter 1, Pages 3)

The narrative pictures the "common" within the Black American community and the inferiority complex they suffer from as a race within a white society where their "dark" presence equates with the contamination of all pure and clean, formerly owned by the white superiors. Marshall explains the perception she had when Blacks were occupying the places previously owned by the Whites and she says:

And as they left, the West Indians slowly edged their way n. Like a dark sea nudging its way onto a white beach and staining the sand, they came. The West Indians, especially the Barbadians who had never owned anything perhaps but a few poor acres in a poor land, loved the houses with the same fierce idolatry as they had the land on their obscure islands. (p.4)

The influence of Black Feminist Thought can be traced quite evidently when the protagonist of the novel, a ten year old Selina Boyce defines her appearance through the lens of the people's opinion around her. The image she has of her body or the way she perceives her looks is similar to what society has instilled in her mind. Even at that tender age she is aware of the social indoctrination that her appearance does not match with the socially acceptable standards of a good-looking woman. In Selina's own words

...her wide full mouth, the small but strong nose, the eyes set deep in the darkness of her face. They were not the eyes of a child...They were weighted, it seemed, with scenes of a long life. She seemed to know the world down there in the dark hall and beyond for what it was. Yet knowing, she still longed to leave this safe, sunlit place at the top of the house for the challenge there. (p.4)

Therefore in order to get rid of these feelings of “otherness” she, in her solitude, imagines herself surrounded by the white people without any prejudice or discrimination. This not only provides her an escape from the harsh reality of her life but also enables her to consider herself as their equal, thus, reaffirming her identity without any shame or hesitation. In the words of the author, “And as [the white family] crowded around, fusing with her, she was no longer a dark girl alone and dreaming at the top of an old house, but one of them, invested with their beauty and gentility” (p.5).

The detrimental effect of the rejection and ridicule faced by Selina on her thinking process is unmeasurable. It is the influence of the social indoctrination that the poor child starts defining herself in the words of the people around her. A constant comparison of her appearance with her white peers fills her with destitute and aversion for herself. Her miserable psychological state is reflected in one of the incidents in the novel when she finds herself misfit in the otherwise all bright and clean surroundings. In the words of the writer, at that moment she views herself as:

A truculent face and eyes too large and old, a flat body perched on legs that were too long. A torn middy blouse, dirty shorts, and socks that always worked down into the heel of her sneakers. That was all she was. She did not belong there. She was something vulgar in a holy place. The room was theirs, she knew... [And]...As she left, her shorts, bagging around her narrow behind, defined her sadness. (p.6)

The concept and practice of “othering” is evidently present in the matrix of the novel. Selina has been made aware of her “different” body color and shape continuously throughout her childhood either by the grown-ups or by her own age fellows. The constant reminder to her of not belonging to the superior people around her can be one of the reasons due to which she can’t relate to Brooklyn and longs to return to her roots in Barbados, where she can be easily accepted by the people like herself. This “othering” is manifested when ten year old Selina’s friend, Beryl, says to her, “My mother says I’m getting black running around with you in the sun” (p.58). And the damaging effect of these lines can be imagined when Selina says, “The words were living things to her” (p.71) which is later reflected that the complex she suffered throughout her childhood stays with her all her life.

The very portrayal of Selina Boyce is the specimen of Barbadian-American girl. Her thinking mechanism, physical appearance and the ornaments she wears all represent the strong hold of her indigenous culture on her thoughts and practices. Therefore Marshall has consciously chosen her to narrate her struggle for her individuality in a suffocating and suppressing environment. Right at the beginning of the novel Marshall introduces her stating, “Slowly she raised her arm, thin and dark in the sun-haze, circled by two heavy silver bangles which had come from “home” and which every Barbadian-American girl wore from birth” (p.5). Due to the frustration and helplessness she experiences because of the constant denial and negation, her desire to assert herself becomes all the more powerful. Therefore the writer states, “She wanted suddenly to send up a loud importunate cry to declare herself” (p.6).

Marshall has paid special attention to document the incidents which shape the psychology of Selina. For instance at one point the writer pens down the irritated reaction and feelings of Selina’s elder sister, Ina, towards her and states she “had no patience with Selina and her boy’s

shape” (pg.7). Marshall further continues and quotes the exact words in which Ina addresses Selina in a disgusted, derogatory and degrading way. She says to her, “You were ugly then, you’re uglier now and you’ll get worse” (pg.7). The words are strong enough to shatter the self-confidence of a young girl of ten years old.

At another point, a bit later in the novel, Suggie, the black woman with the perfectly made-up black body tries to console Selina for her lack of womanliness in her appearance and says to her, “I gon make you a summer woman too, just for your womanishness” (p.52). The particular stress upon the physical features of the black women made them appear to be sex symbol where their fully-grown body is their only achievement and if a girl lacks it she is to be pitied anyway.

Selina calls this obsession with well grown black female body a “cult of blood and breasts” (p.61) where even a little black girl is made conscious of her physical appearance. Such an approach suppressed the mental growth of a female limiting her only to achieve an ideal body form. As a protest to this thinking Silla makes an attempt to revive self-confidence in Selina irrespective of her physical appearance but the general reaction of the people around her makes Selina think, “The mother had deceived her, saying that she was more of a woman than Ina yet never telling her the one important condition. She was not free but still trapped within a hard flat body” (p.62).

The matrix of the novel provides a detailed picture of the society with a strong hold of capitalism and without any trace of ecological democracy. The narrative highlights the racial oppression faced by the Black female in an attempt to provide a bare sustenance to their already deprived family. The writer mentions an incident of Black women where

Sometimes the white children on their way to school laughed at their blackness and shouted “nigger”, but the Barbadian women sucked their teeth, dismissing them. Their only thought was of the few raw-mount pennies at the end of the day which would eventually buy house. (p.11)

While highlighting the common experience of most of the Barbadian women the writer has pictured their daily monotonous routine and its print on the sub-conscience of the protagonist of the novel. The collective memory of the community shapes the image of its females in a particular way. As Marshall explains about Selina’s memory of her working mother. She states that:

She could never think of the mother alone. It was always the mother and the others, for they were alike—those watchful, wrathful women whose eyes seared and searched and laid bare, whose tongues lashed the world in unrelenting distrust. Each morning they took the train to Flatbush and Sheepshead Bay to scrub floors. (Book 1, Chapter 1, Page 11)

Not only Selina but her mother, Silla Boyce, also stands for the need of ecological democracy within a multiracial society. The very features of Silla whisper the ordeal she goes through every day without any break and the stern requirement of her daily routine which has robbed her of even the slightest moment of joy or relief. The face she has to put up in order to preserve balance within the otherwise unstable life has now become a characteristic feature of her

personality. In the words of the writer, “her lips, set in a permanent protest against life, implied that there was no time for gaiety” (p.16).

Silla’s character aptly represents double subjugation faced by black women within a white patriarchal society. It appears to be a part of female’s social conditioning to accept a predestined male dominance and themselves being treated like a commodity only for the benefit of their male counterparts. At one point in the novel, Silla expressed her frustration and vulnerability as a black woman when she asserts, “That concubine don know shame. Here it tis she just come to this man country and every time you look she got a different man ringing down the bell...” (p.24).

Such environmental injustice often gives rise to an existential dilemma within the black women. They start questioning their purpose of being or rather their very existence on the first place. It generates self-doubt and disbelief in the existence and compassion of God. Thus, the worldly second-class treatment forces them to doubt the equality in the eyes of God as well. This is echoed in the comment made by Silla when she states, “How things just happen and don happen for no good reason. I tell you, it’s like God is sleeping” (p.31).

The paramount degree of hostility faced by the black women snatches every drop of softness, optimism and positivity from them making them extra conscious in their everyday affairs. The fierce fight for their survival and acceptance does not allow them to desire for the luxury of love, commitment and loyalty. Therefore when Silla senses the romantic inclination of Ina, she warns her sternly, saying, “if I ever see you with any boy I gon break your neck out in the streets ‘cause, I not tolerating no concubines and I ain supporting no wild dog puppies...” (p. 42).

In the beginning of the novel one can see Selina’s preference for her father because she could spend more time with her and therefore her thoughts were greatly influenced by his theory of returning back to their roots in Barbados. But later when Selina witnesses her mother’s solitary struggle in the face of all oppression and subjugation in order to provide sustenance to her family she realizes what it takes to be a woman of color in a patriarchal society. During her visit to her mother’s work-place Selina confesses, “Only the mother’s own formidable force could match that of the machines; only the mother could remain indifferent to the brutal noise” (p.100).

Besides fulfilling the responsibilities of earning bread and butter for the family Silla is also shown maintaining the moral and psychological composure of her children. On one hand she warns Ina to be careful in her interaction with the males of the society while on the other hand she tries to recollect the shattered self-confidence of Selina. Silla is the voice of black woman’s conscience. She is aware of the fact that, “Just because your skin black some these white people does think you can’t function like them” (p.102) and she often calls the US “this man country” (p.103) still she is the one who takes up the challenge to live in that society only to provide a better future to her children.

Selina talks about suppression being a common experience of the black women in a so-called progressive but capitalist society. She often refers to “nonexistent mother’s vow and her own suppressed anxiety” (p.107). Thus lack of ecological democracy leads to criminal victimization

of black women in the selected novel. This unequal distribution of resources and respect persuades Selina to compare the chaos in her life with the order in the life of her white friend, Beryl. Therefore she says, “Beryl’s life was planned, ordered, while hers was as vague and formless as mist” (Book 4, chap. 1, p. 196). The suppression of a targeted race or community can at times lead even to the verge of dehumanization. This can be noticed in the case of Selina when at one point of time “like an animal she was conscious only of pain” (p.290).

Besides the hostility faced by the colored community and specifically the colored women, the novel also narrates the hazardous effect of discrimination on the psychology of its victims. In the words of Selina, “Perhaps everyone had his tomb: the mother hunched over the table all night might be locked in hers, her father, stretched on the cot, might have been sealed his, just as she was shut within the lonely region of herself” (Book 4, chap. 2, p. 204). Thus the inter-racial rejection further leads to intra-community segregation as well becoming one of the prime causes of dysfunctional family structures.

Despite all the injustice and inequalities faced by the black women, Marshall concludes the novel on an optimistic note where the protagonist embarks on the journey towards self-liberation and discovery. The writer has incorporated the imagery of light and laughter to depict the resilience of Black women in the face of adversities of life. Marshall writes, “A wide bar of light from the hall made a path for them and the rich colors of their laughter painted the darkness” (Book 4, chap. 3, p. 210). Thus the writer is optimistic about the rise and uplift of her community. Therefore towards the end of the novel one finds Selina saying, “All the time I was down on his floor I was saying to myself: “Lord, lemme do better than this. Lemme rise!” (Book 4, chap. 5, p. 224).

The protagonist of Marshall frees herself from the burden of coming up-to the already established standards of the patriarchal society and sets on the way towards self-revelation. It happens only because she discovers her hidden strength and the beauty of her individuality which needs no validation from an outsider. Therefore when Selina’s love-interest, Clive backs out instead of going into self-pity or depression she decides to be independent and self-sufficient in her life and decisions. Selina highlights the dark heart of a white man and prejudice as his tool to safeguard his ego and insecurities. Her last words echo her self-belief and confidence when she determinedly claims,

Her dark face must be confused in their minds with what they feared most; with the night, symbol of their ancient fears, which seethed with sin and harbored violence, which spawned the beast in its fen; with the heart of darkness within them and all its horror and fascination. (p.291)

5. CONCLUSION

Paule Marshall in *Brown Girl Brownstones* (1959) states, “It’s a terrible thing to know that you gon be poor all yuh life, no matter how hard you work. You does stop trying after a time. People does see you so and call you lazy. But it ain laziness. It just that you does give up. You does kind of die inside” (p.146). Hence keeping in view racial and gender discrepancy prevalent in the modern capitalist society, as depicted in the selected novel, this study suggests that Tim Hollo’s notion related to ecological democracy is the only possible solution that can lead to a sustainable and harmonious society. The history of Black Feminist Thought is full of disturbing

experiences of black women and in order to put an end to their double subjugation only the availability of equal opportunities in an all-inclusive society is the required break-through.

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