

*Trevor Peters*

**“THE GREAT WRONG”:  
THE COLLUSION OF FORMER COLONIALS AND  
THE NEO-COLONIALS IN PAULE MARSHALL’S  
*A CHOSEN PLACE, A TIMELESS PEOPLE***

• • •

“Once a great wrong has been done, it never dies. People speak the words of peace, but their hearts do not forgive. Generations perform ceremonies of reconciliation but there is no end.”

Epigraph, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*

In her novel *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, Paule Marshall deals with the “great wrong” of imperial atrocities perpetrated against formerly colonized nations. Published in 1969, *The Chosen Place* is set on Bourne Island, a fictitious Caribbean island that was once a British colony. On Bourne Island there are three groups of people in particular around whom the story revolves: the rural villagers of Bournehills, the urbane, neocolonial power brokers of New Bristol and the Euro-American economic development specialists who represent the economic interests of the former colonists. In presenting members of these three groups, the novel examines the residual effects of colonialism within the Caribbean and the struggle to define a self-empowered Caribbean future.

The first section of the novel is entitled “Heirs and Descendants” and throughout the novel, Marshall presents the descendants of the colonial system who have inherited “many of the basic problems and conflicts which beset oppressed peoples everywhere”

(Shaping 111). The heirs and descendants of Bourne Island suffer from the effects of the “great wrong” that shapes character and influences the social and political relationships that obtain on the island. In order to understand the colonial tensions that drive the novel one has to understand the social groupings and the individual characters that the social groupings produce. As the characters emerge, they have to deal with the legacy of slavery and colonialism that contribute to their position in the social hierarchy of the Island.

The first group of people is the Bournehills villagers who are rural-dwellers. They are, for the most part, poor working class people who have a strong economic reliance on their former colonial source of income -- farming sugarcane. Life in Bournehills has an unsettling sense about it, which derives from the place’s long history of oppression that provokes those living there to confront their past or suffer destruction. The Bournehills residents are mostly descendants of African slaves, who hold on strongly to their legacy of resistance against enslavement. In particular, they are most proud of the fact that Bournehills was once home to Cuffee Ned, a powerful figure who led the most successful slave revolt in the Caribbean islands. After careful planning, Cuffee Ned managed to usurp his colonial master’s power over much of the island for up to three years. Although the British captured and then beheaded him, Cuffee Ned became a symbolic figure to the residents of Bournehills. As a symbolic figure, he instilled in the Bournehills residents the qualities of hope, unity, “peace, freedom, and the refusal to allow [themselves] to be violated” (Harris 66).

The second group of people is the New Bristol residents who are mostly politicians and other higher-level professionals that control the island’s politics and economy. These professionals are descendants of African slaves and the former colonial rulers or sometimes descendants of both. Like the former colonial masters who built their economy on slave labor, these professionals strive to amass wealth at the expense of the lower classes of Bourne Island, while catering in particular to the needs of foreign business interest. As the urbane, neo-colonial elite of the island they eschew the past and envision a future for the island based on “poor planning, [a] condescending attitude ...[and a] failure to include the villagers directly in the process” that can lead to meaningful social and economic reform for the island. (Marshall 157)

The third group of people is the white visitors to the Island. This group includes expatriates, who are representing British economic interest on the island, and two main characters, Saul and Harriet Amron, who are Americans on the Island to establish an economic development project in Bournehills. An important feature of this group is that it is comprised of individuals whose families amassed wealth from the business of enslaved Africans that occurred on Bourne Island. In a patronizing attempt to uplift the residents of Bournehills, the white visitors work in tandem with New Bristol neo-colonials and ignore the specific history and cultural claims of the villagers.

The collusion between the former colonials and the neo-colonials, actively resisted by the proud villagers, is a fulcrum around which the characters relate to one another and compete to re-present the history of an island that is ostensibly independent of its colonial overlords. The figure of the rebel slave leader, Cuffee Ned, is crucial to this historical re-presentation and each group comes with an ancestral background that determines its response to Cuffee Ned. The story of Cuffee Ned acts as a prism that reflects the individual characters' political positioning with respect to the historical trajectory and the socio-political reality that should govern the island and its peoples. His rebellion haunts the social paradigm represented by the three groups and makes him a link between the past and the present, and the consummate embodiment of the revolutionary struggle against colonialism and slavery. It is this political positioning vis-à-vis Cuffee Ned that shapes character development in the novel and establishes the different ways that descendants with various legacies relate to each other to support or subvert the neocolonial paradigm.

## **Women in the Novel**

The women in the novel present the opposite extremes of the social and ideological spectrum as it pertains to colonialism. They are characters that represent competing viewpoints on their colonial inheritances and ancestry. Merle is a Black Caribbean woman and Harriet is a white American married to Saul Amron, one of the economic developers sent to the Island by an American charitable foundation. The two women are at odds with each other in much the same way that colonialism and the revolutionary fight for freedom are inherently at odds with each other. Specifically,

Harriet as a descendant of colonialists adheres to the ideals of colonialism and seeks to re-inscribe colonial politics in every space that she encounters. Merle on the other hand, is an adamant protester of colonialism and centralizes her energy to inject in Bourne Islanders the revolutionary fervor needed to liberate them from the holds of the post-colonialist machinery.

## **Merle Kinbona**

Merle, the novel's protagonist, is a descendant of both the African slaves and their colonial masters; however, she is more at one with her African heritage and demonstrates this in her compassionate love and interest for the African descendants and heirs of poverty around her. Her compassion serves as her means of countering the lingering effects of the "great wrongs" perpetuated by colonialism. So intense is her compassion that she often falls into a depressed state (this sometimes because of her personal problems) whenever chaos ensues in or for the Bournehills district. Nevertheless, Merle disallows this from hindering her resistance and reaches out to the people of Bournehills in various ways. She reads to the poor children of the Almshouse, showing them that they in their poverty have not been forgotten. She is an outspoken critic who condemns the Governments' devouring of public resources for private gain. Moreover, and more symbolically, Merle as a part time teacher introduces the Cuffee Ned legacy into her classroom to teach an alternate history of the Island to her students.

Apart from her compassionate rebellion, Merle's other prominent attribute is that she is a noisy person. She speaks almost unceasingly and loudly as a way to mask her personal problems and to constantly communicate her resistance. To this effect, in regards to her communicating resistance, Merle seems to move always within the ambiance of the noise made by an armful of bracelets that she wears always. These bracelets are similar to the bracelets worn by the women of Bournehills when they perform an annual re-enactment of the Cuffee Ned rebellion. In the re-enactment, the women use the bracelets to create a loud clanging noise, a symbolic show of resistance against oppression and oneness with the human qualities that Cuffee Ned represents. Thus, by wearing her bracelets Merle makes a symbolic show of resistance at all times.

Merle is a descendant of one of the more prominent white, planter families on the Island, and is also an heir to her own contradictory and complicated personal history; a common phenomenon for life in the Caribbean. She is a dark-skinned woman with strong African-features, and very light brown eyes that are a throwback to her European roots. She wears talcum powder almost as a paint to mute her color. Her mother was murdered in her presence but she is unable to identify the killer for the authorities, a fact that haunts the woman who believes in the power of remembering. Her father's money gives her access but not acceptance at a posh boarding school where she grapples with the abuses she receives from half-white pupils. In a search of a mother figure she has a lesbian affair as the kept woman of a wealthy, white patroness while she is a student in London. This relationship leads to a repeat of maternal loss when later her husband, unaware of her previous lifestyle, leaves her and takes their daughter to Africa.

Having to deal with her problems, however, Merle becomes a reflection of the physical space she inhabits. She is a noisy as the hysterical sea that she sees from the big house inherited from her father. She becomes a reflection of the village of Bournehills and the novel describes her face, the visual characterization of her problems, as one that has been “despoiled...in much the same way as the worn hills to be seen [in the village]” (Marshall 5). Interestingly enough, the “hills” in question are those utilized to plant Bournehills' main source of income—sugarcane, the king of crops during slavery.

The persistence of the suffering of slavery means that Bournehills residents are the inheritors of continued domination by the colonial system even in the historical moment after colonialism. In using Merle as the transitory medium to equate colonial legacies with contemporary problems, the novel suggests that Merle is also the contemporary form of resistance for the Island as was Cuffee Ned in his time. The personal issues that Merle grapples with takes a toll on her ability to function as an integral unit of her social surroundings. By the end of the novel she regains her confidence, hope, and resolve and sets out for Africa to reestablish contact with her lost family. Additionally, she resolves to enter politics on her return to Bourne Island as a means to continue her revolutionary campaign to dissolve the “great wrongs” of colonialism and afford Bourne Island a greater degree of independence from its former colonial master. The novel's narrator articulates Merle's transformation as a

harmonization of the contradictory forces within her when she is finally “unburdened restored to herself” (Marshall 463). The talcum powder that “seemed to mute her darkness” is gone, and like the sea that bemoaned the slaves who died in it found restoration and ceased its moaning, so Merle becomes a quieter woman.

## **Harriet Amron**

While Merle finds her peace by reconciling the contradictory parts of herself, Harriet suppresses contradiction altogether. As an American woman who grew up in the South with a Black nanny, Harriet is steeped in absolute racial values that she cannot articulate. As a child Harriet thought that her nanny, Alberta, was turned black as a punishment for some wrong that Alberta had committed. With such an upbringing, Harriet finds the contradictory principles that Merle represents are equivalent to an unwanted contamination of the social ideologies to which she adheres. Harriet is an heir to wealth accumulated in the business of enslaved Africans that specifically took place on Bourne Island. She has trouble remembering, deliberately suppresses her history, and constantly worries through out the novel that others will know of her past.

It is axiomatic that those who do not remember the past are doomed to repeat it. Harriet suppresses her colonial past because any acknowledgement of past would include resistance to colonialism in the form of legends like Cuffee Ned. The power of Cuffee Ned is not just that he fought against slavery, but that he bequeathed the memory of rebellion that challenges any projections of whiteness and colonial politics as all-powerful. Since Harriet Amron is not going to participate in a reflection on the past that questions whiteness, she lives only in the present where she can assert a social order in which she is at the top.

Harriet’s social ordering is really a racial ordering as well and her racism manifests itself in the interactions she has with the women and children of the Bournehills village. She takes great effort to socialize with the women of Bournehills, care for their children’s bruises and cuts, and does other charitable work for the children of the island. But as the novel progresses, she undermines her own charity with an attitude that regards the residents as inferior and she interacts with them “in a vague, detached manner” only (Marshall 392). She gives “five eggs out of the more than two

dozen [she has] on hand, [and] the end portion of a bread which she always discarded” (Marshall 249) to children that appeared to her as undernourished. Furthermore, she gets very annoyed with the children innocently wandering on her private strip of the beach.

Her interactions with men in the novel further underscores her colonial racism. On Harriet’s first night on the island Lyle Hutson (a successful Black lawyer and senator on the island) touches her in a strongly sexual manner. At this touch, Harriet has the feeling that it is not Lyle’s hands, which made contact with her “but rather some dark and unknown part of herself which had suddenly, for the first time ever, surfaced, appearing like stigmata or an ugly black-and-blue mark at the place he had touched” (Marshall 97). Here, Harriet’s feelings illustrate a mixture of arousal and repulsion, a paradox that she cannot resolve. The word in the novel is stigmata, which when converted to its noun form, is stigma, and refers to “the shame and disgrace attached to something” (Soukhanov 1416). Although, Harriet’s entertaining of Bournehills women and taking care of the children’s cuts and bruises necessitates her touching their black skins, it is only Lyle’s touch that repulses and haunts her throughout the novel. She directs much of her conscious antipathy towards him because she feels somehow contaminated by his suggestion of social and sexual miscegenation in a situation where she considers herself superior to him.

Lyle repulses Harriet because “the coexistence of [his] success, power, and darkness unnerves Harriet especially because they are so alike in their smugness and snobbery and in their manipulation of others” (Olmstead 8). The poor women and children do not repulse Harriet because she clearly sees that they are not on the same economic or educational level with her. The women and children of Bournehills are not a threat to the established social order that posits Harriet and her “blue-blooded” (Marshall 452) white counterparts at the top of that order.

Much the same way Harriet dislikes Lyle, she develops a dislike for Vereson Walkes a young man of Bournehills who underwent a positive transformation in his demeanor and outlook on life. When Harriet notices that Vereson obtained a job, a girlfriend and had a car that was clearly the envy of others in the village, the novel’s narrator described her reaction thus:

[Harriet] recalled the times she had glimpsed [Vereson] working alongside Leesy in the latter's small cane piece adjoining the house or accompanying her somewhere on the donkey cart. Seeing them crawling along the road at a snail's pace behind the plodding animal, with [Vereson] seated beside the straight-backed Leesy like some sleepy-eyed young primitive...and would have preferred to have them remain just that way. (Marshall 349).

Harriet's need to control is evident in her relationship with her husband Saul. She loses control however, when Merle and her contradictions contaminate her sense of social order and racial purity by sleeping with Saul. Ironically, the affair takes place on the night of the Carnival parade when Merle and the Bournehills gang re-enact the Cuffee Ned story and Harriet gets caught up in the crazy swirl of Black bodies that bear her along in its frenzy. During the melee, Harriet fears for her personal safety and tries to regain composure by giving orders to one of the revelers. In reaction to the reveler ignoring her, Harriet is enraged and feels as if she "could have struck her .... Not angrily, but the way one strikes an impertinent child to remind it of its status" (Marshall 295).

It is this need to remind (Black) others of their status that leads to Harriet's demise in a Caribbean space that is inherently filled with contradictions and resistant to colonial ordering. Harriet's inherent need to harness the situations around her lends itself to reinscription of a colonial mentality to coerce behavior. This leads her to offer Merle money to leave the Island and Saul behind. When that ploy fails, Harriet convinces the foundation responsible for funding Saul's research to remove him from the project and place the project on hold. As a result, Saul leaves Harriet and in the wake of her second failed marriage Harriet is forced to recognize all the other failures in her personal history: her ancestor who dealt in "flour and human flesh" (Marshall 457); her mother the "hopeless, un-constructed southern Belle" (Marshall 458); and the hands of her first husband and hers "on the lever and together the two of them, perversely, as if driven by an excess of power, committing the monstrous act that could only bring about their own end" (Marshall 458).

Remembering her past helps Harriet to realize an "essential truth" (Marshall 459) about herself, which stated simply is how deeply she in her pervasive need for control was involved in the colonialist agenda. Ultimately, when Saul leaves her, he strips away



her control of the most defining aspect of her life, which is her marriage. To regain control of her life Harriet ultimately commits suicide.

## **Men in the Novel**

While the women are at opposite ends of the spectrum as foils for each other, the two main men, Lyle and Saul, serve a similar inverse function. Saul is the white man who can empathize with the struggle and contradictions represented by Merle. Lyle is the Black man who bears an uncanny resemblance to the colonial oppressor represented by Harriet.

### **Saul Amron**

As Harriet's husband, Saul is an heir of wealth accumulated by slave labor on Bourne Island. However, he is also heir to a Jewish tradition. Like his ancestor the apostle Paul, who was struck on the road to Damascus by a vision from God[5], Saul "was struck...there on the road to Spiretown, by a double memory that had about it the quality of a vision" (Marshall 163), which brought back memories of his family and then of the atrocities that his ancestors faced, which was "the means by which he understood the suffering of others" (Marshall 164).

With this frame of reference, Saul seeks and achieves a clear understanding of the socio-economic problems of the village by becoming close friends with the people of Bournehills, and taking an active and genuinely caring role in Bournehills' life. In fact, Saul became so involved in the life there that Merle commented that he was becoming "a rumhead just like those others down at the shop" (Marshall 262) with whom he socialized with on a nightly basis. Saul perceives Bournehills a "troubled region within himself to which he had unwittingly returned" (Marshall 100) and this leads him to deal with his troubled past. Saul deals with the death of his first wife and child and starts the healing process that puts him on the road to choose between Harriet (the imperialist-colonialist that was responsible for the "great wrong" done to the African slaves) and Merle (the symbol of resistance against the imperialist-colonialist). When Saul leaves Harriet, he

chooses Bournehills and validates the vision of triumph and rise of the world's darker peoples over the imperialist-colonialist.

Saul's choice in a way demonstrates his own connection with Cuffee Ned and the spirit of rebellion that infects Bournehills. In fact, Saul confesses to Merle that seeing the Cuffee Ned revolt re-enacted made him "to think of [his ancestors]" (Marshall 314). Cuffee Ned represents historical victory for a people, Black and Jewish, over oppressive forces, as well as personal victory, from a personal painful past for Saul.

## **Lyle Hutson**

Lyle Hutson is completely colonized. Lyle, though a descendant of African slaves is the opposite of Merle Kinbona. In fact, he is referred to as "Harriet's Black-racist counterpart" (Olmsted 18). Lyle therefore has adopted the consciousness and behavior of the former colonial masters. His colonization becomes evident in various ways through out the novel, he affects an Oxford accent in his speech and he wears English clothing in the hot tropics, but it is most pronounced in his placing preference on white or almost white women over any other. It is clear that Lyle's wife, Enid, had nothing to offer him. He married her because she is descended from the same wealthy planter family, as is Merle, and she possess the physical attributes of her European forbears -- "her saffron-tinted white skin... mattered to [him]" (Marshall 70).

As the novel presents the character of Lyle, there reader learns just how complicit he is with the system of colonial power. Despite the island's independence, Lyle and the rest of the island's neocolonial politicians allow the former colonial masters to control much of the island's economy. In retrospect, Merle sees it as no different from the days of colonialism. "Consider the Kingsleys (a British company) still hold the purse strings and are allowed to do as they damn please," Merle yells at Lyle in protest of the government's management of the economy. She complains further that, "Never mind you chaps are supposed to be in charge. And the [poor people] is still bleeding his life out in the cane field... Things are no different. The chains [of slavery] are still on" (Marshall 210). Ultimately, Lyle's true colonial colors emerge at the point in the novel where he abdicates his political responsibility to the people by going on vacation when the

sugarcane industry is nearly toppled to the economic detriment of the villagers of Bournehills.

Lyle sees and refers to Merle's and the Bournehills resident's belief that another Cuffee Ned would come to deliver them from their socio-economic problems as a hope for an "impossible revolution" (Marshall 208). Lyle Hutson, therefore, does not place Cuffee Ned in the same context as Merle and others of Bournehills. Since, he has internalized and accepted white racism. Cuffee Ned, therefore, represents a part of him (his color and history) that he seeks to erase through marriage, much like his female counterpart, Harriet. More damning however, is that Cuffee Ned represents ideals, and values onto which he ascribes no special significance.

## **Colonial Challenges**

What Cuffee Ned represents to the individual characters does not remain on the individual level; it is transferable from the specific of the individual, to the larger group of people the individual characters in question represent. It follows then that the historical legacy of Cuffee Ned represents the future to Saul and Merle who want to alleviate the colonial legacy of Bourne Island and the formerly colonized world. To understand this concept one must first know the political statement that Marshall sought to make with the novel. Marshall wrote of The Chosen Place:

In it there is a conscious attempt to project the view of the future to which I am personally committed. Stated simply it is a view, a vision if you will, which sees the rise through revolutionary struggle of the darker peoples of the world and, as a necessary corollary, the decline and eclipse of America and the West (Marshall 108).

Despite Marshall's "conscious attempt" to thoroughly undermine the colonial legacy of the Caribbean through the figure of Cuffee Ned, the novel is still an incomplete examination of the "rise...of the darker peoples..." Two aspects of the debate that remain unexamined deal with which system should replace the Western system of colonial oppression; and how can that replacement system avoid reinscribing colonial politics. These are important considerations because historically the oppressed becomes the next generations of oppressors and Lyle Hutson and Harriet Amron represent the continuation

of this process. This discussion is particularly important in literary works because the ideas put forth in literature are often “transposed into politics” (Mack 2143).

The characters of The Chosen Place are heirs to and descendants from a shared history bound up with colonialism. Through the characters’ relations with each other, it is evident that each one emerges from a specific worldview that views a shared colonial history differently. As characters differ in their view of history, they differ in the value they place on the past and its possibility to transform the future.

## Bibliographic References

Giovanni, Nikki. Rev. of The Chosen Place, The Timeless People. Negro Digest Jan. 1970. 51-60.

Harris, Trudier. Three Black Women and Humanism: A Folk Perspective. Black American Literature and Humanism. Ed. R. Baxter Miller. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1981. 50-74

Kapai, Leela. The Achievement of Paul Marshall in The Chosen Place, the Timeless People. Apr 2001 <<http://academic.pg.cc.md.us/instruction/if/fallif/LK-13.htm>>

Marshall, Paule. The Chosen Place, The Timeless People. New York, Vintage, 1984

---. Shaping the World of My Art. New Letters 40.1, 1973. 97-112.

---. Little Girl of All the Daughters. Callaloo 6.2, 1983. 20-21.

Olmsted, Jane. The Pull to Memory and the Language of the Place in Paule Marshall, The Chosen Place, the Timeless People and Praisesong for the Widow. African American Review Vol 31. 1997. 19-249.

Soukhanov, Anne,. Ed. Microsoft Encarta College Dictionary. New York: St Martin’s Press, 2001. 1416.