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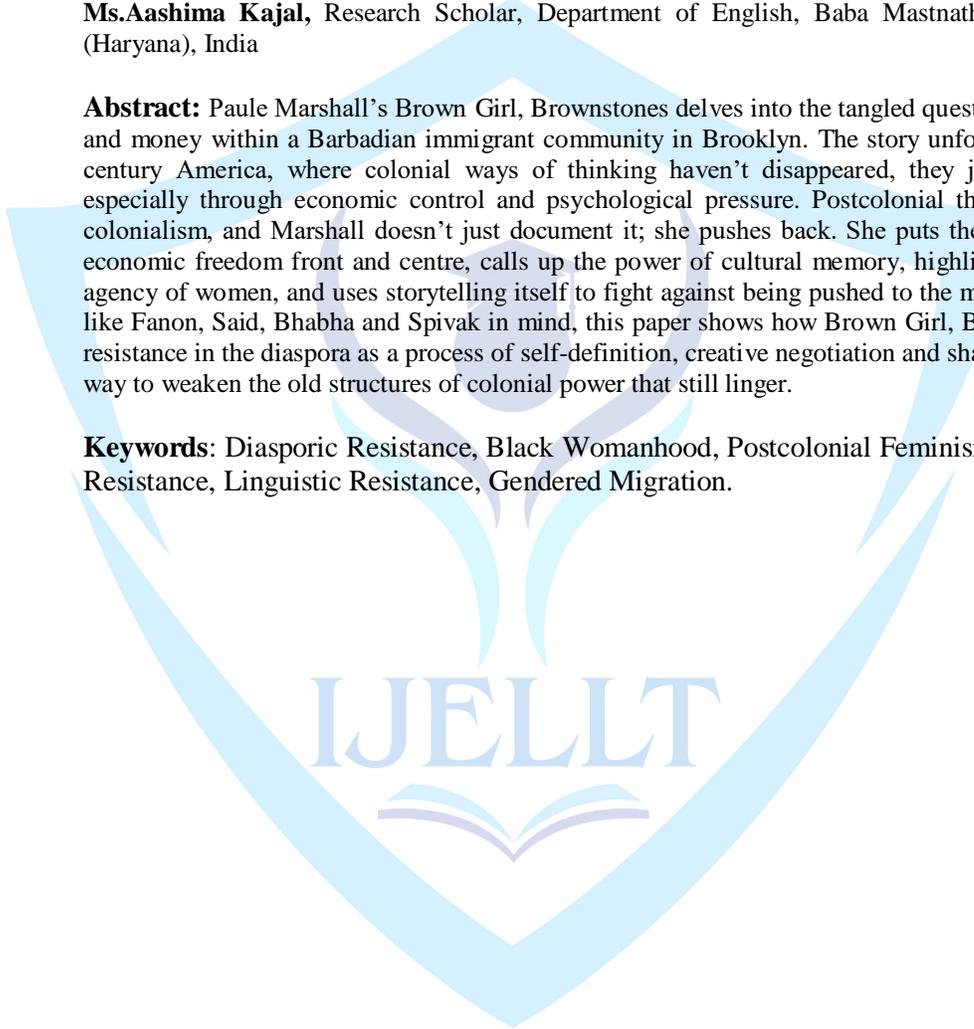
Countering Neo-colonialism in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* by Paule Marshall

Dr. B.M Yadav, Professor, Faculty of Humanities and Liberal Education (Department of English), Baba Mastnath University, Rohtak (Haryana), India.

Ms.Aashima Kajal, Research Scholar, Department of English, Baba Mastnath University, Rohtak (Haryana), India

Abstract: Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* delves into the tangled questions of identity, race, and money within a Barbadian immigrant community in Brooklyn. The story unfolds in mid-twentieth-century America, where colonial ways of thinking haven't disappeared, they just take new forms, especially through economic control and psychological pressure. Postcolonial theorists call this neo-colonialism, and Marshall doesn't just document it; she pushes back. She puts the immigrant drive for economic freedom front and centre, calls up the power of cultural memory, highlights the strength and agency of women, and uses storytelling itself to fight against being pushed to the margins. With thinkers like Fanon, Said, Bhabha and Spivak in mind, this paper shows how *Brown Girl, Brownstones* imagines resistance in the diaspora as a process of self-definition, creative negotiation and shared transformation, a way to weaken the old structures of colonial power that still linger.

Keywords: Diasporic Resistance, Black Womanhood, Postcolonial Feminism, Cultural Resistance, Linguistic Resistance, Gendered Migration.



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Introduction

Brown Girl, Brownstones is one of the first novels from the African American and Caribbean diaspora that lays bare how colonial shadows keep stretching into the lives of migrants, even after the empires themselves have supposedly ended. Readers often see it as a coming-of-age story about Selina Boyce, but there's more going on. The novel digs into the knots of neo-colonial life: economic struggle, cultural dislocation and the weight of racial hierarchies in twentieth-century America. Marshall turns the Barbadian community in Brooklyn into a small-scale version of the bigger postcolonial fight.

Marshall's characters come with a double load of old colonial attitudes and the stubborn desire to break free. Their dreams of owning property, getting an education, and earning respect get tangled up with the idea that progress means acting like the West. Selina sees her mother's obsession with "buying a house" as almost unhinged, like a madness" (Marshall 82). But underneath, there's something else: a fierce instinct to survive, to refuse permanent exclusion in a world set up against them. The novel presses on the contradictions of decolonization for people in diaspora resisting and imitating, reaching for freedom while bumping up against conformity.

Marshall doesn't just put Black Caribbean women in the story; she lets them shape what the postcolonial fight even means. Here, decolonization isn't just about flags and independence days. It's about breaking free in the mind and the culture and it happens in kitchens, bedrooms, and neighbourhood group spaces where women's work and words become tools for resistance.

Theoretical Framework

To get at what Marshall's doing with neo-colonialism, it helps to look at a handful of postcolonial thinkers. Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, lays it out: colonialism isn't just external control; it seeps inside, making people feel lesser. "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip," Fanon writes. "It turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it" (Fanon 210). In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, you see this wound in the community's uneasy relationship with whiteness and the hunger for success. The push to "get ahead" in America carries the burden of measuring up to Western standards.

Edward Said's Orientalism sheds light on how the novel shows Caribbean immigrants as "other" in the American imagination. Barbadians, even though they're part of the wider Black community, are marked as outsiders. Their accents, their customs, everything about them signals both difference and, sometimes, a weird kind of fascination mixed with scorn. Said argues that these ways of seeing don't just describe difference; they help create it: "create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe" (Said 94).

Bhabha's idea of hybridity gives us another way in. For Bhabha, this "third space" isn't just halfway between colonizer and colonized, it's a spot where new identities can get worked out, not just opposites but something more complicated (Bhabha 56). Selina's journey—caught between Caribbean heritage and American life is a perfect example of this creative in-between space.

Gayatri Spivak's claim that "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak 284) echoes through Marshall's work, where she pushes immigrant women's voices to the forefront. Marshall lets these women speak for themselves, breaking the usual rules about who gets to tell history. In Spivak's terms, this is "epistemic disobedience," a direct challenge to the old guard of authority over narrative.

Economic Self-Determination

Property as Counter-Colonial Praxis The novel's most striking resistance plays out in the push for economic autonomy. For Silla Boyce Selina's mother, owning property in Brooklyn isn't just about bricks and mortar. It's her way of breaking free from both colonial dependence and the everyday racism she faces in America. "You got to have something of your own," she says, "else you's nothing in this country" (Marshall 67). This demand for property calls back to Fanon, who argues that real decolonization means taking back control over your own material world (Fanon 39).

Those brownstones mean more than just shelter. They stand for power but also for the risk of copying the very systems that once oppressed you. The Barbadian Association, where immigrants pool their money to buy homes, becomes a small act of rebellion, a collective effort to sidestep banks and carve out a place in the city. Still, Marshall doesn't let it stay that simple. She shows how chasing ownership can mimic old colonial hierarchies. When Silla sells her husband's land in Barbados to buy in Brooklyn, she trades ancestral roots for an American foothold, and that choice stirs up a real conflict between getting ahead and staying connected to the past. Selina feels this sharply. Her disappointment with her mother's hard-nosed pragmatism comes from a fear that all this striving just repeats the colonial hunger for more and more.

Even so, Silla's determination to own property is grounded in reality, a refusal to be left out or left behind, as Black women so often have been. Her fight for economic security is a declaration: Black women can build power, too. As Brathwaite puts it, "Marshall transforms the brownstone from a symbol of assimilation into a structure of resistance built upon female labour and will" (Brathwaite 118).

Cultural Memory, Language and Hybrid Identity

Cultural survival threads through Marshall's anti-neo-colonial vision. The Barbadian community in Brooklyn holds on to home through food, music, language, and ritual. Inside the Association's gatherings, their dialect carries "the cadence of the sea," Marshall says, a bittersweet mix of connection and loss (Marshall 91). This shared memory pushes back against what Fanon calls "the obliteration of the native culture" under colonial rule (Fanon 237).

But Selina's caught in the middle. The elders' constant nostalgia sometimes chokes her: "They talked of Barbados as if it were heaven itself, though none had wanted to stay there" (Marshall 104). Her doubt captures what Bhabha describes as the "third space", a place where hybrid identity forms, not by copying, but by negotiating between worlds. Selina's self takes shape in this back-and-forth between her mother's deep roots and America's pull toward individuality.

Language does a lot of heavy lifting here. Marshall's prose fuses Barbadian Creole with American slang, turning linguistic mixing into an act of resistance. This mash-up stands against the flattening force of standard English, echoing Bhabha's idea that meaning comes from creating something new, not just picking sides (Bhabha 162). Marshall's style itself becomes a kind of decolonization.

Memory isn't just a dusty relic in this world, it's alive, shaping who people become. Silla's stories of Barbados, even when she romanticizes them, teach lessons about grit and self-control. Selina's break from her mother's values still comes out of those memories. Marshall suggests that in the push and pull between inheritance and reinvention, cultural hybridity doesn't just survive, it fights back against both colonial longing and American forgetting.

Gender, Family, and Generational Resistance

Marshall plants the fight against neo-colonialism right in the home. The daily grind—the endless, often invisible labour of women turns out to be deeply political. Silla’s routine never lets up. Scrubbing floors, stretching every dollar. She doesn’t just survive; she claims power, right there in the mess and struggle. Spivak calls this “subaltern agency through praxis” (Spivak 296). The world keeps trying to pin her down, but Silla pushes back; she makes space for herself inside her family and out in the community.

Selina’s rebellion against her mother isn’t just about money, though. It’s her refusal to accept what men or colonial authorities say counts as success. When Selina says, “I don’t want to be like them... buying houses and thinking that’s everything” (Marshall 226), she’s looking for a different kind of freedom, one not measured in property or things. Her resistance is quieter, more inward, charged with creativity. Fanon calls for a “new humanism” that grows out of breaking old colonial molds (Fanon 315), and Selina’s journey echoes that call.

The mother-daughter relationship becomes the book’s beating heart, a living metaphor for generational struggle. Silla’s generation was shaped by colonial hardship, tied freedom to owning property and strict discipline. Selina, raised in America, craves something else: self-expression, authenticity, the chance to define herself. Marshall doesn’t take sides. She won’t romanticize either generation. Instead, she shows decolonization as a messy, ongoing conversation between generations, a process that has to balance material survival with emotional and creative freedom.

By making women both the thinkers and the doers of resistance, Marshall flips the script on male-centered postcolonial stories. The women in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* don’t free themselves with guns or uprisings. Their battle happens at home, in kitchens, in bedrooms, in the way they work and they want things on their own terms.

Narrative Form and Epistemic Resistance

Marshall’s storytelling itself fights back. She grabs the European Bildungsroman, usually a white, male coming-of-age story and recasts it through the eyes of a Black Caribbean girl. The whole structure follows Selina not toward fitting in, but toward self-awareness and taking back her culture.

The way Marshall tells the story matters, too. Free indirect discourse lets readers slip inside heads and voices usually left out. As Spivak points out, the subaltern doesn't just get spoken for, she speaks (Spivak 289). Dialogue takes over, rhythms shift and Marshall refuses to iron out dialects or hand everything over in "proper" English. She pushes back against the idea that only Western, standard forms of storytelling count.

Emotion takes centre stage. Selina's confusion, anger, and longing aren't just feelings; they're ways of knowing, a kind of decolonial truth that's rooted in emotion, not just cold logic. Marshall turns the old colonial split between reason and emotion upside down.

At the end, when Selina gets ready to leave Brooklyn for Barbados, nothing really ties up tidy. Her leaving doesn't mean she's gone "home" or finally fits in. It's more like she's entering a new phase, still figuring herself out. The story doesn't close the door; Marshall leaves it open, showing decolonization as something ongoing, never quite finished.

Ambiguities and Limits of Resistance

But resistance in this novel comes with its own shadows. The dream of owning brownstones sometimes just repeats the old capitalist hunger for possession. Claiming a Barbadian identity can close ranks, shutting out other Black groups. Selina, in turning her back on her community's traditions, risks ending up alone.

Marshall never draws simple battle lines. Her characters have to slog through the tangled mess of race, class, gender, and empire all at once. By facing the contradictions inside resistance, she refuses to sugarcoat the immigrant experience or shrink decolonization down to easy slogans. Liberation, for Marshall, has to be ethical and relational, tied to the group, not just one person's dream.

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Conclusion

Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* digs deep into the ways colonial histories keep showing up, just wearing new masks. The characters don't just accept these legacies; they push back sometimes with hard work, sometimes through memories, sometimes by telling their own stories in their own words. Economic independence, cultural memory, the weight of gendered labor and the act of revoicing all come together to form a layered response to neo-colonialism.

Marshall doesn't treat decolonization as a simple undoing of the past. Her characters find new ways forward. They redefine what it means to succeed, take back language and learn to live with complexity. Silla's relentless drive to carve out a future, and Selina's quiet but fierce questioning, seem at odds, but both shape the ongoing work of creating a self beyond colonial limits.

Marshall's writing does more than tell a story; it claims space for Black Caribbean women to speak for themselves, breaking down the old structures that tried to silence them. In the novel's closing moments, when Selina heads for Barbados, it's not about running away. It's a return that remakes exile into a kind of homecoming, an act of remembering that opens up the possibility of belonging.

Brown Girl, Brownstones doesn't just reflect these struggles; it stands as a foundational piece of Caribbean-American literature and speaks powerfully to postcolonial debates. Marshall's vision, rooted in persistence, imagination and love, offers one of the sharpest and most enduring answers to the challenges of neo-colonialism.

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