

Humor in chosen places, timeless people and running in the family

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



The book by Paule Marshall titled *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People: Untenable Sisterhood* is an informative book but one that employs a lot of humor. In the first passage, we learn that Bourne Island is the process of gaining full independence from its colonial rulers. Marshall writes that the locals could be on the verge of acquiring power since a local black man and one other mulatto elite are part of the governing circle (Paravisini-Gebert).

It is humorous somewhat ironical that two people are the ones that may bring some sense of power ownership in the entire island. Worse still is the fact that these individuals only have a small share of power.

It appears that Marshall intended to illustrate how far power was from the locals. It is also humorous that a few locals are the ones allowed some control in their land while most of the power remains with foreigners (Paravisini-Gebert). The question that comes to mind in this instance is what the correlation is between a local black, and mulatto elite to power? Could it be intentional that the foreigners handpicked a black and mulatto elite to create some facade? The answer becomes apparent immediately since Marshall reveals that the locals are prey to decisions of the foreigners.

Marshall goes ahead to describe the white manager as a ghost who refused to stay in his grave. From this description, one can deduce the attitude that the black masses had towards the white master. Marshall intends to depict a scene of a person who instills fear among the masses. In fact, a ghost will be something that people would like to stay away from because it is frightening. Therefore one can only imagine a ghost that rides past workers in the field in broad daylight (Paravisini-Gebert).

Merle's character is self-contradictory. On one side she represents the strength of the locals in the Bourne Island. On the other, she represents the painful experiences of these people. But there is no humor in that aspect at all. The humor in her sad story is that she ended up as the sole heiress after years of rejection from her father (Paravisini-Gebert). Her story is depressing, but Marshall manages to put in some sense of humor that allows for time to absorb all that is happening. Marshall writes that Merle's father lawful wife was 'high colored.' Highly colored in this case means that her white descent dominated over the colored element.

There are allegations that the high colored wife either killed or hired a killer to kill her husband's colored favorite. It is probable that the motive behind the killing was purely out of jealousy for lack of a child. However, one cannot wonder why Marshall had to differentiate between high colored, nearly white and colored. There is a sense that Marshall intended to irony behind a woman of color killing another woman of color on the basis that they are of fairer skin (Paravisini-Gebert). It is preposterous to think of the levels one had to go to define the different levels of people of color.

In a conversation with Saul, Allen explains how Merle is dishing out the land she inherited from her white father. It is somewhat humorous if not silly how Merle thinks that by dismantling the plantation she is going to destroy the exploitive forces in the land. It is because the same inheritance and estate are the ones giving her an upper hand on the Island. Allen knows too well that the locals cannot afford to buy the plots that Merle is distributing. He says that Merle is probably giving it to them (115).

Merle also keeps a pair of earrings that she received back in London from the Englishwoman. She says that the earrings serve to remind her to remain vigilant against Greeks bearing gifts. She adds that one ought to be more careful especially if the gifts come from an Englishwoman. From this phrase, it is hard not to feel amused that Merle would equate her situation with the Englishman to the story by Virgil (Paravisini-Gebert). Merle adds that the Englishwoman used her power and money to mislead foolish people like her (327). This experience tells a lot more about Merle's character.

It shows that she was lacking in many ways and was willing to do anything to survive. She does not want to lack financially, and that is why she accepts the gifts and monetary support from Harriet in exchange for sexual favors. At the same time, Merle wants a stable family. After Harriet discloses to Merle's husband their sexual escapades, Merle breaks down. She is unable to cope with another loss especially that of her husband and daughter.

Another character that Marshall uses to portray a sense of humor is Harriet. Although she has her inner struggles, Harriet is confident and sure of herself way far than Merle. Harriet has her mother to thank for her relationship with Bourne Islanders. Marshall remarks that Harriet believed that the fairies turned Alberta black because naughty she did when growing up. Her mother's tone towards Alberta made Harriet feel that blacks were inferior. This perspective contributed to Harriet's behavior toward black people.

It is not only in the Chosen Places; Timeless People does one get to read a historical story with Humor. Michael Ondaatje also presents his ideas in

Running in the Family humorously. It does not take long before one learns of how Ceylon was a wife of many marriages. Apparently, all her suitors were alike and claimed anything relating to power using a sword, bible or language (Saikali). Then we read of Aunt Phyllis, the family storyteller. Ondaatje reports of how the family could not get over the tale of one foul Ondaatje whose horse savaged him to death. It appears that Aunt Phyllis repeated that story so many times that the family got fed up with hearing it. Oblivious to the misery that she was putting her family through, Aunt Phyllis would repeat the story gleefully.

Following closely, Ondaatje treats the reader's too much laughter by saying the around the 20s, and the 30s everyone was vaguely related. And not only that, he points out that the people of that time had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British, and Burgher blood in them (Saikali). It is difficult for one to try and imagine a family line from all those origins. Francis almost drowned himself in a lake had that lake not been only one foot. Francis was a unique fellow whose diet comprised of Gin and Tonic. He eventually died, and all the partying stopped.

Those few sentences talk about various aspects of Running in the family, but Ondaatje comically presents the information. From the humorous description of Francis, a reader can already deduce that he was a social person who overindulged adequately in the party life. He probably was charismatic seeing that his death was the end of parties and the beginning of a rash of marriages. Another aspect that a reader can make out of that statement is that Francis had too much influence and probably negative influence on the

young people (Saikali). Why then would the parties stop and people start getting married?

Mervyn is the father of Ondaatje. He too has his fair share of drama. Just like Francis, Mervyn's actions when drunk were shameful. He once stripped naked and went ahead to leap from a moving train. He also threatened to kill the driver of the train if he did not stop to wait for his friend. All these actions are unlikely to happen in a standard setup. But through humor, Ondaatje presents a picture of a family filled with drama and fun. Last but not least, there is Doris. She is the wife of Mervyn and mother to Ondaatje. She usually overacts. According to Ondaatje's own words, could take the smallest incident or reaction and explode it into a myth-making epic.

Both Marshall and Ondaatje use humor excessively in their narratives to capture the audience's attention. It is also a style of writing that other authors employ. It is not possible to analyze all characters, events, and questions presented in the two novels. However, the few examples discussed to try to explain how humor managed to communicate the author's intention effectively.

Paravisini-Gebert, Elizabeth. "" Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People: Untenable Sisterhoods.*"" *Journal of Caribbean Studies*, faculty.vassar.edu/liparavi/article/TheChosenPlace.pdf. Accessed 8 Dec. 2017.

Saikali, Andrew. "" Voices From The Past: A Review of Running in the Family by Michael Ondaatje."" The Millions Est. 2003, 4 June 2007, themillions.com/2007/06/voices-from-past-review-of-running-in.html.