NEW ROLE PERSPECTIVE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN TERRY MCMILLAN'S *WAITING TO EXHALE*

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Abstract

A number of studies on female-authored African American literary works have focused on female writers' creative responses to male-authored representations of the tensions of racism, internal crisis of man-woman relationships and the challenges of empowering the black female character. Little attention has been paid to the changing role perspective of females in African American female writings. This study investigates Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* and highlights a paradigm shift from the communal experience to the individual, the internal crises and wave of aspiration as she projects the female character as ambitious and daring. The choice of professionally successful black women as characters in her novels relates to the drastic increase in the population of working class women in the 1990s. The novel is subjected to literary analysis to determine the dimensions of change in female roles and images. The analysis reveals that *Waiting to Exhale* accentuates the quest for personal liberty, romance and intimate relationships as points of conflicts in black female protagonists' existence. McMillan's fiction engages recognisable literary conventions to project these new roles and reinforce her radical feminist and modernist orientations which situate the novel within the post-womanist literary generation expressing specific historical, socio-political, economic and gendered contexts.

Keywords: African American literature, feminist, roles, womanism, *Waiting to Exhale* and Terry McMillan

1. Introduction

Over time, the challenging peculiarities of black history have been integral in shaping black women, their perception of self and the now changed and perhaps still changing perception and depiction of the black female self. Skin pigmentation which seemed the greatest factor, accounted easily for racial discrimination of blacks in different parts of the United States. As whites in America discriminated against blacks in general, black women in turn suffered the negative effects of sexism from black male folk. With these, black women's bonding together to voice concerns that asserted possibilities of mutual equality with black

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men and then whites thrived in diverse forms. Hernton (1987, pp. 50-51) assesses this trend thus:

> In 1903 Du Bois pointed out that the Negro, being both Black and American, shoulders a double Consciousness. Black women have contended with the mountain of racism but being at once black, American and female, they have been victimized by the mountain of sexism, not only from the white world, but from the men of the black world as well. Black women are the bearers of what Barbara Smith calls, "geometric oppression". They are therefore bearers of a triple consciousness.

The re-invention of these perspectives in literary works by white authors and black male authors alike emphasized that the African American women generally were restricted to a minor and stereotyped position. Black women writers have been responsive throughout literary history in portraying black women as real people with all the complexities and depth that black women have. These concerns have been the focus of the feminist ideology; an ideology that fosters the creation of a uniquely feminine consciousness, driven by the need to re-examine and re-write the political history of women.

In "Feminist Criticism and Literature" Spencer (1982, 157) suggests that "feminism" is all about "the conviction that 'traditional definitions of women are inadequate' and that 'women suffer injustices because of their sex." This explication seems to absolve feminists of being anti-men. The statement takes into consideration that women have historically been oppressed within cultural and social formations, and that such treatment is unacceptable. Thus, it is not surprising to find models of the ideal, independent women figure marking the pages of Black women's work. The essence is that feminism is concerned with combating cultural stereotypes of female experiences.

By projecting assertive female characters and their persistent self-application, black female writers highlight the dogged commitment of black women in confronting challenges and this captures a particular phase in black females' march towards self-realization. Black female writers interrogate internalized racism that feeds sexism in the American society. Put differently, internalized racism results from the psychological programming by which a racist society indoctrinates different races to believe and adhere to the superiority/inferiority of specific races. Thus, victims of internalized racism in America generally feel inferior to whites, less attractive, less worthy, less capable; and often wish they were white or look more white. Morrison (1970)

portrays this concern in *The Bluest Eye*, where Pecola Breedlove a young black girl denies her beauty, but believes she would be pretty, happy, and loved if only she had blue eyes. African American women writers celebrate the strength and dignity of the Black woman as an entity to be reckoned with. However, to arrive at the present position, black women have had to wage a determined and sustained battle for recognition against the assumed male-dominated structures and representations.

2. Exhaling: Changing Roles of African American women

McMillan's third novel, *Waiting To Exhale* (1992), is basically structured in the classic four–woman art form earlier projected by Alcott in *Little Women*. McMillan balances four major characters– Savannah, Bernadine, Gloria, Robin, as they struggle through and overcome familial, romantic, and career relationships. The novel tells the story of four intelligent and attractive black women residing in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1991. The women support each other through personal and professional challenges and successes. They are savvy enough to manage every facet of their lives, except finding fulfilment in intimate relationships. The novel's title stems from their collective anticipation of exhaling only when they achieve satisfying relationships with a man. The women think that they are doing everything possible to enact the change they seek in their lives but social stereotypes and bad habits seem to undermine their efforts.

Each of the novel's four strong characters is a narrator of her personal story. And these stories are largely comments about their lives, their relationships with each other, with men, careers, families and problems that characterise their complex existence as modern African American women. Savannah Jackson is single, bright, ambitious, and recently moved to Phoenix as a Public Relations executive for a cable television station. Bernadine Harris is one of Phoenix's wealthy wives in the middle of divorce. She abandons her previous career and strives to build a catering business to raise her two children while her husband of eleven years leaves her for a white woman. Robin Stokes is a senior executive and an insurance underwriter. She has been a mistress for a long time and has problems finding a decent man to love. Gloria Matthews is a beauty salon owner and single mother raising her teenage son, Tarik, who is preparing to leave home and travel round the world. After years of being alone and finding out that her ex-husband

David, the father of her son, is also gay, she falls in love with the new neighbour Marvin King. These women's experiences taken together epitomize America's growing girlfriend culture, where endless teasing, commiserating and celebrating together as they navigate the torrent of romance are integral.

In alternate chapters, the author tells each character's story. Her choice of words and sexual frankness seems to facilitate the novel's broad mainstream appeal. McMillan's heroines are holding their breath, waiting for the elusive blessing of love and learning the true value of independence and pride. The novel focalizes complexities such as inter-racial relations between black men and white women as a major cause of concern for the black woman. McMillan (1992:112) therefore traces this through Gloria's overview of black female experience. Thus:

> in the seventies, when she was still living in Oakland, everywhere she went she saw black men with white women on their arms. Back then, the men seemed to be doing it more to prove a point. Then things cooled down for a few years. Now Gloria was wondering if "our" men were running to white women again because *we* were doing something wrong?... Did white women have *something* we didn't? McMillan .

The novel garners attention because of its portrayal of these emotional, racial and social complications. These concerns on the other hand give the novel its seeming controversial position within the African American community, for its assumed unrelenting bashing and stereotyping of black men. McMillan addresses a significant development within the community of middle class African American women who are successful professionally but who passively may consider themselves otherwise as failures. Instead of highlighting the long standing history of racial politics, she exposes the deep fissures of sexual politics within the African American community. McMillan emphasizes the quest for personal liberty instead of championing civil liberty for the race as a whole. This does not mean she glosses over oppressive forces that curtail freedom of black people; rather she is more interested in examing how individuals empower themselves and define their own sense of freedom.

In *Waiting to Exhale,* McMillian's interest seems situated in questioning personal responsibility and choice as her characters exhibit human flaws at a prime. However, her heroines reflect her generation's unprecedented success as professionals in the mainstream American society as she challenges them to grow and attain greater

levels of personal integration, hence, celebrating the healing power of transformation in her works.

McMillan draws resources from the changing roles of women as at the time of writing. Her choice of professionally successful black women as characters in the novel seems to be a visible trend of the 1990s where the population of working class women increased drastically. According to Richards (1999, p. 24) "by 1980, over 50 percent of all women were in paid workforce, and 38 percent of all mothers with children under one year old worked outside the home." Instead of creating heroines who depend on their partners for economic support, her heroines have successful careers or own profitable businesses; with the growing dilemmas of balancing their careers with marriage and family life as contemporary women. During this period, Richards (1999, p. 25) opines that the "Romance novels had also grown progressively more explicit in their representations of erotic love, and readers seemed to appreciate passionate lovers more than sensitive helpmates." McMillan incorporates the African American cultural inflections to her representations of black love and portrays a network of relationships within a self-contained black community in a bid to extend the liberating power of written narrative to a vernacular audience of black readers.

The four characters, Savannah Jackson, Bernadine Harris, Robin Stokes and Gloria Matthews are all in their late thirties; Gloria the oldest is thirty-eight, Robin the youngest is thirty-five while Savannah and Bernadine are both thirty-six. These women fit Codrington and Marshall (2004) generational classification of baby boomers: those born between the 1940s and 1960s and corresponds to the paradigm prescription of perceived membership in a common generation, common beliefs and behaviours, and a common location in history. The setting of the novel with its reference to the Persian Gulf War situates it within the year 1990. As Richards (1999, p. 108) puts it "to be thirty-something at that moment in time is to be part of the baby boom–a generation that has grown up with a shared sense of identity defined by the mass media and popular culture." The prevalence of this popular culture in her novel reflects especially in the reference to the newly invented CD player.

McMillan demonstrates in her novel how societal events within the American community have revised the place of women. During this period, women were more explicit about the expressions of sexuality

and this trend becomes apparent in McMillan's characterization. According to Richards (1999, p. 118) "the invention of the birth control pill and the legalization of abortion were two landmark events that contributed to a climate of changing social mores known as the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s." This explains the peculiarity of the quest for sexual fulfilment as valid human endeavour among the female characters in *Waiting to Exhale*.

The African American community with its relics of slavery and denigration seems to encourage the female perception of shortage of eligible men. Richards (1999, p. 119) posits that McMillan prioritizes the "changing definition of what constitutes an "eligible man" in the eyes of successful African American women." Put differently, an eligible man should have as much education as the woman or more education than the woman; should be gainfully employed and financially more stable than the woman is. These expectations of black men with the spite of homosexuality and prescription drugs drastically reduce the number of "qualified" black men available for black women. McMillan's changing definitions of some concepts for her female characters is relative to Edmunds and Turner's (2002) classification of the generation as sources of opposition, challenging existing societal norms and values. Clearly, McMillan's projection of successful female characters drives the concept of social change through a new generational re-programming and aspiration.

Through her characters' viewpoint, McMillan gives eyewitness report and testimonials to the dramatic conflicts and resolution with detailed description of thoughts and emotions. The example of Bernadine's life and the failure of her marriage represent the failure of a mutual dream. Bernadine is the only one of the friends who is ever married. However, Bernadine's failed marriage looms as a negative prospect of a life that may never include a male partner for the other women. Contrastively, McMillan uses Gloria's high blood pressure and obesity as an example of how health problems are common in the black community and frequently claim people's lives well before their time. Gloria copes with loneliness and the stress of being a single parent by eating extensively. Here, the concept of sickness is pervasive and is related to the larger societal ills. One of Gloria's stylists is gay and sick with AIDS. Gloria suffers a heart attack but her recovery stems from the love of friends and family. This healing pays tribute to sustaining black families and makes a statement on the relevance of love and family

in the face of persistent ills among the African American community. Pellerin (2012, p. 76) observes that "contemporary media provide a venue to promote anti–Black woman." McMillan's response to these stereotypes is to create strong female characters who confront societal ills such as misguided sexual orientations and personal health issues head on. The task of African American women writers of McMillan's generation is to act as agents of social change and carriers of intellectual and organisational alternatives to the status quo.

In creating assertive female characters, McMillan confronts the mammy stereotype of black women in Smith's (1985) essay by extrapolating alternative images designed to expand black women's consciousness. Bethel (1982, p. 177) observes that "black women writers have consistently rejected the falsification of their Black/female experience, thereby avoiding the negative stereotypes such falsification has often created in the white American female and Black male literary traditions." In synthesizing elements from the body of popular women's fiction as well as from the traditions of African American Oral and print literature, McMillan engages a powerful strategy for creating fictional spaces in which a black female worldview can occupy the centre rather than the margins of mainstream American reality.

It appears that the desire for justice and the search for romantic partners are two motivations that drive the plot of the novel under study. Generally, one could say that the novel explores the progressive trend of growth and personal development of women. The plot somehow projects Bernadine and Gloria as achieving a full cycle of development. Robin on the other hand struggles with wrong choices and a bad habit of sleeping with attractive men without enough information about their personality. Robin's choices therefore become her limitation. The achievement of a full cycle of self assertion and development is denied her. Robin suits the "classic naive narrator" as Richards (1999) puts it and the author deliberately manipulates the dramatic ironies of Robin's self-delusion to make a statement on women who depend on men to validate their existence. Furthermore, McMillan utilizes the scene of Gloria's birthday party to concretize the meaninglessness of waiting: a test of their ability to endure the dreaded time barrier, a lengthy period of waiting during which the passage of time has little importance. This emphasis on waiting draws markers with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Musing about their dilemma, the ladies take turns in the commentary:

> "We're all good catches," Bernadine said. "Why are we all such good goddamn catches?" Savannah asked, leaning forward on her elbows and motioning for the other bottle of champagne.... "Well, since you know so damn much, why are we having such a hard-ass time meeting Mr. Wonderful?" Robin asked. McMillan, 1992:348).

McMillan puts a twist to the pull of dejection by crafting strong female bonding among her characters as girlfriends. Girlfriends assume top status in the hierarchy of important relationships for women. These women provide solace to one another in a way that family members, husbands, and boyfriends do not. They party together, cry together, and ultimately, recover together. What becomes apparent in the novel is a commemoration of powerful female relationships as a spring board for women to band together and summon the courage to tell their stories. Consequently, Register (1993, p. 170) agrees that female friendships have served as "a forum for women, helped to provide role-models, promote sisterhood, and augment consciousness–raising." Register (ibid) adds that such a bond promotes honest self-expression that is not constrained by pre-existing standards. Prevailing in black women narratives is the intensification of these female bonding. In fact, Bethel (1982, p. 179) confirms this inclination and argues that "women in this country have defied the dominant sexist society by developing a type of folk culture and oral literature based on the use of gender solidarity and female bonding as self-affirming rituals."

Black women have a long tradition of bonding and over time, this bond has been a source of survival, information, psychic and emotional support and in the words of Bethel (1982, p. 187) "the concept that when Black women come to each other as Black woman –identified women, we are at the end of our pilgrimage to know and be ourselves." By the end of *Waiting to Exhale*, the four women have come to the end of the quest and long, dull, waiting through the support of friendship. McMillan's novel becomes an attempt at the redefinition of women's experience and women all over find that they can relate the experiences of the female characters to their own lives.

3. Black women and America's social culture

Although, McMillan is criticised for not addressing racial issues, such criticism ignores the context out of which her fiction grows. What she does is a skilful representation of political and economic problems, not as abstract principles, but as realities that affect intimate relationships

in the lives of her characters. These concerns and changed roles of women become more prominent in her later work, *Getting to Happy* (2010) a sequel to *Waiting to Exhale*. McMillan's success is achieved in the narrative as she makes her characters undo their vices, as it were, and to visualize better lives through meditation and 'breathing'. Here meditation speaks to the individualism of a younger generation of black women writers of which McMillan represents. This generation is what Temple (2012, p. 27) describes as "African American post-enslavement generations" who "capture the hopes, dreams, and promise that enslavement denied to their parents and generations that came before."

Despite manifestations of a rapidly changing world, one thing still remains fundamentally the same for most women of this generation: the search for happiness and fulfilment. Therefore, the quest for self-fulfilment is unequivocally projected in her female characters. These women do not necessarily become wives, satisfied mistresses or girlfriends but they are groomed by their experiences and choices into assertive, sexually expressive and independent women with choices and voices to express their wants.

Through the use of the romance novel form, McMillan portrays female protagonists who demand their right to be in touch with their passions - something women are traditionally socialized to repress. Her novels serve to revise the narrative of what it means to be a woman in today's society as Beaulieu (2006) puts it. The female characters in her novels come to the realization that their oppression is borne out of the refusal to let go of dominant ideologies of womanhood. Characters discover that self – empowerment and liberation come when one defines herself on her own terms. Richards (1999) affirms that McMillan's works portray all forms of "black-on-black love". She continually counters stereotypes about African Americans that deny the existence of loving, supportive relationships within black families and black communities. It is not until the late 1980s that African American women writers like McMillan began to assert that the definitions of "the political" could encompass assertions of the power of romance.

McMillan's works may not address the long history of racial politics in America, but she expertly exposes the deep fissures of sexual politics within the African American community. By portraying relationships of romantic love as the most important issue facing African American characters, McMillan's fiction defies modern critics'

expectation that African American literature must privilege racial conflict. Racial uplift and social protest are filtered through a different lens in her works and require new critical models of analysis. In fact, one may contend that what constitutes the mass appeal of McMillan's work is the trend among the 90s generation of Black artists to discard the anxieties of a bygone era. These writers include Bebe Moore Campbell, Walter Mosley, Susan Taylor, and Octavia Butler. *Waiting To Exhale* effectively demonstrates that Black culture is not monolithic and that Black readers respond to a range of stories of Black life. What emerges become a literature that has turned to the Black experience, the sense of self, and power of recovery rather than the earlier focus on the horrors of racism and oppression.

According to Richards (1999), McMillan emphasizes the quest for personal liberty instead of championing civil liberty for the race as a whole by posing questions of personal responsibility and choice. Her heroines are almost all women of substance who reflect her generation's unprecedented success as professionals in the mainstream society. Richards further adds that during the 1920s, writers sought an 'authentic' cultural voice, the 1960s and 70s saw the link between dominant ideology and the values we attached to literature. Although each generation has had its discontents, it would seem that Black writers in the 1990s are staking out new ground. Their writing demonstrates that they are acutely aware of literature and its engagement in a broader cultural and political arena. It is this struggle in the contested terrain of cultural value and cultural authority that now engages Black writers. The emphasis on popularity, celebrity and entertainment during the 1990s brought attention to African American literature. McMillan's works identify with this generation of popular culture with demographic characters of upwardly mobile young black females.

The civil rights and feminist movements both created new professional opportunities for black women as well as expanded society's perceptions of womanhood. McMillan's characters embody these advances as their quest for educational and professional opportunities move them away from their communities and homes and from traditional notions of domesticity. Their search for fulfilling heterosexual unions takes them beyond idealized notions of love and marriage. At the same time, on this new journey—to new geographic spaces, new economic wealth and new relationship roles— –McMillan's

characters encounter new obstacles. They respond by creating new paradigms of contemporary domesticity and redefining gender roles within heterosexual unions.

In terms of characterisation, McMillan's characters are almost always college- educated, middle class, ranging in age from their 20s to their 40s and concerned mostly with family, career, friendships and romantic relationships. Many are searching for husbands that equal their educational and professional success, careers that allow them to be creative but also financially independent, and friendships with like-minded females that share and thus, validate their own experiences. While McMillan's focus may appear narrow, it is one that has not been widely represented in African American fiction.

McMillan replaces the presence of Southern power in African American narrative with that of a domestic power in her fiction. The immediate, identifiable and oppressive power that serves as the catalyst for her characters' migration is not the threat of racial or sexual violence that Maya Angelou faced in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), but the threat of stifling domesticity and economic stagnation. Instead of monolithic communities, McMillan's novel include a contemporary post—integration setting, stories of women moving away from their communities to the suburbs; unsatisfying and disappointing relationships with black men, an exploration of the possibilities and problems of being single, imperfect and dysfunctional black family relations and elements of intra—racial strife perpetuated by economic and class distinctions. Mobility is what gives McMillan's characters the impetus to craft a future different from the previous generations. The importance of mobility is exemplified in the characters' desire to expand their knowledge and experiences and to create a different future for themselves. McMillan's focus is on how her characters operate in their new settings: the friendships and new communities they create, the challenges they face with new careers, and how they maintain their closeness to family and friends despite the physical distance. While most authors use the return home to evaluate their characters' perceptions of history, family and/or community, it is on the "quest" for domestic success that McMillan's characters are forced to re-evaluate home and community, especially their relationships with the female relatives they have left behind, and thereby their perceptions of womanhood as well. As a result, these characters create new paradigms of contemporary domesticity which

require the freedom to move around and call a number of places home, to have the 'financial freedom' to own, build and manage their homes; and finally, to be home alone, that is to exist outside the restrictions of traditional marital norms. It is on this journey that the characters realize alternative domestic situations.

McMillan relies on chapter labelling and the extensive use of dialogue to capture the voices and internal tensions of her characters. This is achieved through the stylistic device of stream of consciousness. For McMillan, current role models are intellectuals and professionally successful individuals. Her chapter titles are situation and context based chosen mostly from slang or phrases and reflective of the characters expression of intent. *Waiting to Exhale* opens with the captioned title "Not Dick Clark". Interestingly, the novel begins with a New Year Eve party and Dick Clark is a radio anchor for such programmes on the network. Additionally, Dick Clark is symbolic of the quest for an eligible man that the four characters are waiting for. McMillan's novel provides contemporary insights into Black women's struggles to form positive self definitions, while documenting the process of personal growth towards positive self-definitions, Black women writers also portray a range of responses that individual women express concerning their lives.

4. Conclusion

Terry McMillan captures the voices of African American women from the perspective of survivors. From this perspective McMillan constructs and emphasises visible role change among African American women, thus de-emphasising possible images of victimhood. The ideas and actions of her characters suggest that not only does a self-defined, articulated Black women's standpoint exist, but its presence is essential to Black women's survival in the United States. African American women's experience provides ideas for meaningful representation of their daily lives in creative works. Black women's work and family experiences create the conditions where the contradictions between everyday experiences and the controlling images of Black womanhood become visible. With the progressive change in socioeconomic conditions of Black women across generations of Black American female writers, issues of Black female sexuality are emphasised in rather expressive language and forms. This marks a keen sense of the departures in Terry McMillan's *Waiting To Exhale*. The exploration

of African American female experience as depicted by the novel explores at different levels the peculiarities of McMillan's literary generation through authorial commitment, and critical awareness of the contemporary socio-cultural milieu of the black female experience in America.

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