CHAPTER 4

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“I swear, the way they argue, you’d think they really hated each other or were sisters” (DA 80).

According to early radical feminists, Female Bonding meant that all women were a single class oppressed by men. Female Bonding can be perceived as a harbinger of women’s movement as it augurs new social consciousness. This bonding rests on the deep sympathy women have for one another. The impact of Female Bonding induces women to shed all sense of otherness that they have internalized. This bonding provides new avenues for them to liberate themselves from their suffocating conditions and emerge as new beings.

The story of the black woman is a saga of the black women’s community that was alienated, surrendered and oppressed. The black women did not muster courage to revolt against the sexist images of the women in male writings and so remained passive. The images of black womanhood projected in the literature both by the white and the black were degrading. The worth of women as human beings was degraded and their claims of individuality and identity rejected. Therefore women were forced to attain their goal through female bonding in life and for the same reasons, in fiction too. Women have come out of a common history of subordination and repression and have developed a tradition of Female Bonding. Women from early days have resorted to this bonding to
express the quality of their relations with one another and to endure and resist oppression.

From within and without, Female Bonding empowers women. Elizabeth Fox-Gernovese in “Feminism without Illusions” has opined that female bonding is the female model which has to replace the male model of individualism. According to her, “men have wrecked havoc and death out of “domination” but “women with their politics of partnership will bring a renewed commitment of life” (12)

This bond among females became one of the most powerful weapons of the middle class women’s movement when it unfolded in the 1960s and early 1970s. Black Women’s Literary tradition can be traced back to Phillis Wheatley in the eighteenth century down to the boom period, the 70s and the 80s with its remarkable talented writers like Paule Marshall, Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor, encompassing the pioneering work of Zora Neale Hurston in the forties. Women writers took it up as their bounden duty to discover black women’s self, entrapped in the white society. The urge to discover their self and to establish relation to the world had become the important thrust of these novelists. Giving expression to this, Alexis De Veau says “I see greater commitment among black women writers to understand self, multiplied in terms of the community, the community, multiplied in terms of the world” (233-248). These are the lead words of Barbara Christian’s article “Trajectories of self: Placing Contemporary Afro American’s Fiction” which gives the historic account of the progress of female bonding as developed in the novels of Afro American women novelists.

During the 60s there was a perceptible change in the attitude of the writers due to the Women’s Liberation Movement. After the upheaval, Afro American literary tradition took to a new direction. Writers started making conscious attempts to go to the roots and
re-link the present with the past. Literature produced during the late sixties was militant in nature and the novels especially were written to achieve solidarity among women community and inspire them to assert themselves. The genre has been enormously popular through the years. The radical change in the attitude of writers in the late sixties manifested itself especially in the works of some of the most celebrated Afro American women writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morison and Terry McMillan.

Commenting on the efforts of black women to build and sustain a community of women, Katrina Bell McDonald proclaims, “... the historical praxis of black sisterhood is manifest in a wide variety of ways, each involving the harnessing of woman power for the preservation and elevation of black women’s lives” (47). The distinctive features of African American family structure are that of single parenthood and extended families. Further, an extended family has been a means to cope with poverty and single parenthood.

The legacy of black sister remains alive in the novels Terry McMillan and it provides a unique cultural space shared by black women. By means of this space women can intimately and positively involve in each other’s lives and those of their children so that their family might progress. Alice walker in her poem women talks about rough working women who made it through tough times to prevail.

They were women then

My mama’s generation

Husky of voice – stout of

Step

With fists as well as
Hands
How they battered down
Doors
... To discover books
Desks
A place for us
How they knew what we
Must know
Without knowing a page
Of it
Themselves.

The issue dealt within the novel *Waiting to Exhale* is gender and the theme of sisterhood runs through the novel from the beginning to the end. By portraying the struggle of the four friends McMillan depicts the bonds of friendship and sisterly relationship in a humorous as well as a serious light.

The main thrust of this chapter is to examine the strong ties among McMillan’s women characters and the chapter also explores the reasons behind this intimacy. Female Bonding is all the more imperative and inevitable because of the various aspects of the inadequacies of men. In this connection, Paulette Richards says,

All of McMillan’s novels challenge stereotypes about black life. By representing affectionate bonds within the black community, she exposes the contradictions inherent in the images of blacks that have pervaded the popular American imagination for centuries. Her fiction humanizes African Americans by
demonstrating that they love one another in a complex variety of roles, including parent and child, romantic lovers, and ‘sistah’ friends. (Richards 130)

The theme of female bonding runs deep in African American experience and it is powerfully demonstrated in the novels of McMillan. It is a term which can be considered as a call to female community and the term obviously has social implications.

Terry McMillan’s fiction reveals that women are the best helpers for women. In Waiting to Exhale, Bernadine is Gloria’s closest friend and one of her best clients. They confide in each other and take each other into confidence. She has told Gloria about her miserable life with her husband, John and the imminent divorce. Gloria comes out with a suggestion to keep her mind engaged and persuades her to join “Black Woman on the Move”, an organization which highlights black women’s issues. When Gloria learns about John’s desertion, she is extremely concerned about Bernadine and offers solace. Savannah, another intimate friend consoles Bernadine and instills confidence in her. Bernadine relates how Savannah, Robin and Gloria stood by her when she was in an abyss of depression.

In A Day Late and a Dollar Short, Viola’s eldest daughter, Paris, keeps close touch with all her siblings especially her two sisters. Charlotte, the second daughter is away in Chicago and does not keep in touch with the family. But Paris takes measures to see that the family ties do not get severed. Ignoring all the problems in her own life, she helps her siblings to solve their problems. Charlotte and Janelle are not in good terms but Paris wants to bring about an amicable relationship between them. Paris calls Janelle, the youngest over phone: “I was just calling to reach out and make a sisterly gesture.
Similarly in *The Interruption of Everything* Marilyn Grimes has a miscarriage which was a relief in a way because she cannot think of taking up the arduous task of motherhood at forty four. Nevertheless she is emotionally broken wanting solace and consolation. As soon as she sees her friends Bunny and Paulette outside the hospital, she feels relieved. She says, “I feel like I’ve been rescued.” (TIOE 110) And such words as these “We’re here for you” brings her great solace.

Female bonding helps them to develop the consciousness to unlearn all the internal and external aspects of the culturally prescribed female role which is a slow process. In *Waiting to Exhale*, the four female protagonists, Bernadine, Gloria, Savannah and Robin flock together in times of joy and happiness and also in times of dire need and stressful situations. All the four meet on the thirty-eighth birthday of Gloria and celebrate it with music and drinks. Towards end of the party Savannah raises a serious question as to what they all have in common. It is not merely that they are all Black Females but that they are all single women and that is a disturbing fact. Immediately Bernadine retorts that she does not want a man either. Gloria argues that the presence of a man in a woman’s life is not everything and she asks when they were going to realize that truth in life. Gloria also asks a factual question. “Do you think if any of us had a man we’d be here doing this?” (WTE 442) Savannah tells categorically that even if she had a man and if Gloria was all alone celebrating her birthday she would still be here to join her. That is the kind of bond that she has with her and the two other friends.
Women receive from each other what has been denied to them by their own males. They receive from female friends, the emotional support they have been expected to give to men and children. In *Waiting to Exhale*, Savannah realizes the futility of waiting this long to fulfill her dreams of a family. Her relationships with her extended family and her friends provide her emotional sustenance and solace which is completely denied to her in relationships with men. This is her discovery, though it does not appear to be a completely satisfying option. But she is content that she will not be defined as a dependent or an inferior. “If nothing else, the trials of Savannah, Bernadine, Robin and Gloria reassure black women that they are not alone and that their singleness is not a sign of personal failure.” (Richards 123)

Women begin to rely on each other for succor, approval and support instead of relying on men. Like Robin, one of the four protagonists in *Waiting to Exhale* expresses her views about her friends Bernadine and Gloria “We fight like sisters, but I don’t know what I’d do without them”. (WTE 73) Here the essential feature is not hating men but loving women more. The same can be seen in *Mama*, when Curly Mac takes the liberty of asking twenty Dollars from Mildred which she actually saved to pay the gas bill but she gives it to Curly Mac because of her intimate relationship with her. Among all her friends, the only one she truly liked and trusted like her own, was Curly Mac who was actually her sister-in-law. Curly despised her brother’s relationship with Ernestine Jackson and hated him for deserting Mildred. She says, “And I don’t care if he marry that whore, she ain’t never gon be no kin to me and won’t never step one rusty foot in my door neither. She trifling and besides, you will always be my sister-in-law, sis”. (Mama 51)
Likewise, Marilyn Grimes reveals the state of her loveless marriage to her friends and expresses her absolute dissatisfaction. She ponders deep about the institution of marriage and wonders how one can guarantee that one can love someone until he dies. Paulette and Bunny counsel her on this topic. Paulette says, “Marriage requires cooperation and compromise and patience. As soon as you’re not willing to do that you both lose”. (TIOE 27) Marilyn feels blessed to have a friend like Paulette who always identifies a distraught Marilyn and handles her with care. When Paulette learns that Marilyn’s husband is deserting her for another woman half her age, Paulette reveals the story of another such case and composeds her. Such discussions with friends act like a panacea and it gives her immense relief. She feels, “Friendship can be just as blind as love sometimes, I suppose” (TIOE 184).

Terry McMillan’s female characters depend on their female friends for succor, encouragement and inspiration. And above all in dire situations when they do not have anyone to turn to, the only source to vent out their feelings is their female friends who can sympathize and empathize with them. For instance in Waiting to Exhale, Robin is heart-broken when Russell sends a message stating that his wife Carolyn does not like the idea of Robin, calling him at his house. When Robin relates this incident to her female friends, Bernadine suggests that Robin should get him out of her life as he is a man without character or values. Gloria is not surprised at the event and tries to bring her out of this crisis. They take her out for dinner and keep company to cheer her up. This is evident that bonding of females plays a pivotal role in mitigating the mental trauma and suffering of the female characters. Terry McMillan discovers the positive self in her
female characters and presents the theme of female bonding in all its intensity and complexity.

The feminist concept of female bonding has legitimized female friendship as a serious and also a primary relationship. Female Bonding and support - groups among women provide women with security and a sense of nurturing. In Waiting to Exhale when Robin’s parents are in Hospital, Bernadine and Gloria are right there and it was diagnosed that her daddy suffered from Alzheimer’s disease. Even when great expenses were ahead, Bernadine writes her a cheque to meet the expenses and tells her to forget about it. To quote another instance, when Robin and Russell break up, it is Bernadine and Gloria who drag the shattered Robin out of the apartment and treat her to a Beauty Day at Canyon Ranch and call her every three hours to ensure that she was comfortable. They send her flowers on her birthday, draw names at Christmas and also offer her advice.

In The Interruption of Everything, Joy, Marilyn’s sister comes to know of the diseases that she is suffering from and wallows in self-pity. She suffers from Herps, Hepatitis C, Pancreatitis and besides her addiction to drugs. Seeing her plight, Marilyn’s heart goes out for her and she puts her arms around her to offer comfort. She feels,

My heart is throbbing … I wish it would stop. I wish I were blind. I wish I were deaf. I wish I could do something to show her how sorry I am for never allowing myself to take care or wonder about what or how she was doing because I’ve always been completely consumed by my own life. I wipe the tears away from my eyes because I’m not blind. I heard everything she just said, because I’m not deaf. And I realize that I have two diseases I hope there’s a cure for – selfishness and
apathy- because this stranger standing in front of me happens to be the only sister I have. (TIOE 202)

Emphasizing the main principle behind the concept of sisterhood, Katrina Bell McDonald says, “The Sisterhood in the black tradition was founded upon a principle of mutual respect for all black women, who regardless of the quality of their personal and social attributes, were equally deserving of the opportunity to move forward and equally important to the survival of the race.” (53)

Female Bonding implies mutuality and it can be defined as a bond developed among any group of women for support and the accomplishment of shared goals. In due course they also take certain vows and live together under conventional rule of kinship relation between females. Female Bonding has offered women a safe haven without disrupting existing social structures or values. It has erased all differences by a monolithic concept which ignores age, race, economic and social class. In Mama, When Freda comes home from Los Angeles after a year she gives four fifty dollar bills to Mildred. But Mildred feels bad about it but Freda says she does not want her to go back bankrupt. She also gives a pair of silver ear rings with which Mildred gets thrilled. Their relationship is much more like two different females from different backgrounds bonding together to sustain each other rather than a relationship between mother and daughter.

At another instance, when Mildred visited Freda in California they went shopping and sight-seeing. By the end of two weeks Freda spent every cent she had put aside for her mama’s visit. And she could not remember having had such fun with anybody and it had been worth every penny. That is the kind of bond that existed between them. Once Freda leaves for Los Angeles she undergoes drastic changes. She seems sharper, alert and
Females bond with each other irrespective of all barriers like age, class, race and so on. In *The Interruption of Everything*, Arthurine, Marilyn’s mother-in-law learns about her son, Leon’s strained married life with Marilyn and has an open talk with her. She bluntly asks Marilyn if she wants a divorce. This question from her mother-in-law stuns Marilyn who finally says, “I think I do.” She experiences extreme relief to hear herself say that out to the world. “To finally admit it.” (TIOE 299) It has to be noted that the vital question is raised by a woman and so the answer is given overtly by Marilyn Grimes. This highlights that a woman can open up completely, only to another woman even if it is her mother-in-law. A special bond exists between them which bring them closer. That even prompts Arthurine to say “Regardless of what happens, you gon’ always be my favorite daughter-in-law.” (TIOE 301)

The Black women bond naturally and what is interesting is that they convert this bond into a constructive force to liberate themselves from the clutches of the patriarchal world. In *Mama*, the relationship between Mildred Peacock and Curly Mac is unique in itself. Curly Mac who is the sister in law of Mildred disapproves her brother, Crook’s ways. Mildred’s intimacy with Curly Mac is evident in many instances. Curly Mac advises Mildred to kill her brother if he raises his hand against her. “And if he put his hands on you again, the sucker deserves it. I don’t care if he is my brother what gives him the right to disfigure you?” (Mama 18) Curly gives her the idea to have a gun which will scare a “niggah” and to use it in self-defense against her brother. She also counsels her that it is futile calling the police because last time they had reached in forty-five minutes when it
actually has to take only ten minutes. By then her life might be at stake. This is the kind of intimacy that exists between them. The black females in McMillan’s fiction come together, to overthrow the dictatorship of the patriarchal society. These two examples show that female bonding is stronger than blood relationships.

Women desire intimacy in all relationships. Sabrina, Mildred’s daughter appreciates her mother’s act of sending her portfolio and application to pursue her education and encourages her saying, “That’s a big step in the right direction.” (TIOE 239) Then she gives further tips like yoga, to go ahead with a happy life and hands over a book on healthy life and suggests that she meets a Chinese doctor and herbalist. After handing over a yoga brochure and the doctor’s business card she leaves saying, “Let Daddy do his thing, and you start doing yours. Watch and see. Half the things that drive you crazy will cease to even move you.” (TIOE 242) This is an open talk between two women, irrespective of their age and relationship as mother and daughter.

The notion of Female Bonding lies in the affirmation of the solidarity and similarity of all women. *Waiting to Exhale* is a novel structured around four protagonists, not divergent in socioeconomic status and values. They have enough in common to share a rich friendship. They are all in their late thirties and were similar in many ways. A little more thought would tell us what brings these black females together in the novels of Terry McMillan in general and *Waiting To Exhale* in particular. One cause is the absence of responsible men in their households that makes them stick together. None of them has found a permanent man who is adequate in every sense. Thoughts such as these arise in Gloria’s mind. “Why are we all out here by ourselves? Are we just going to have to learn
how to live the rest of our lives alone or make do with inferiors like Russell and John and may be even the Michaels of the world?” (WTE 250)

Commenting on the four-woman novel Paulette Richards opines,

A staple of American popular fiction since Louisa May Alcott developed it in Little Women, the four-woman form evolved organically out of Alcott’s experience growing up in a close-knit family of four girls. Like Alcott, McMillan also grew up with three sisters and is therefore able to realistically represent the emotional bonds that can hold diverse groups of women together. The four woman novel’s rich potential for portraying female friendship accounts for the tremendous commercial success the genre has enjoyed. From Little Woman to Rona Jaffe’s The Best of Everything and more recent offerings such as Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club to Julia Alvarez’s How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents, the four woman novel is an important fixture in American women’s literary history. (Richards 123)

It is the common condition of the black women that brings them together and unites them. This bonding initiates them in taking part in activities which foster bonds of affection and fellowship.

Female Bonding takes place within the family and outside, as is illustrated in the life of Marilyn Grimes in The Interruption of Everything who is burdened with a big family. Her mother-in-law decides to move out to the apartment where Prezelle, her 70 year old boyfriend lives. She is scared to divulge this to her son Leon; hence she unravels her feelings to her daughter-in-law Marilyn Grimes. She says, “... I’m just a little worried that he
might not want me to leave which is why I thought you’d be much more understanding seeing how we are both women and all”. (TIOE 143)

Female to Female relationship, whether one is speaking of a relationship between two female friends, or between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law or any other bond between females, is most intriguing because of its complexity and potentiality. Nevertheless, all McMillan females are sisters in the social though not in the biological sense. Initially Zora wanted to conceal facts about her pregnancy from her own friends but when she thought, “we were all women, so why should I?”(DA 144) The fact that they are all women binds them together and over-rules all other barriers. Fearing the worst, Zora decides to go for an abortion. Zora’s friends decide to contribute financially and physically to help Zora go through the same. It is a fact that women necessarily identify with one another and value a strong sense of community with other women.

Female characters in Terry McMillan’s fiction develop strong kinship network among other female characters which intensifies in course of time. Hence emotional ties are very strong among women. In Africa, the blacks have a concept of a family which extends beyond their immediate physical environment which makes mutual assistance remain a priority in Black families. In *Interruption of Everything* Marilyn Grimes feels lighter after letting out a volcano of emotions to her friends. When Marilyn returns from her visit to Gynecologist with the news of her miscarriage, her friends Paulette and Bunny hug and offer her solace. Bunny who is loquacious as usual in her own style says that Marilyn does not have to go through the whole ordeal of raising another kid and that she can indulge in a whole lot of other things besides changing pampers. Marilyn then reconciles to the existing fact that everything happens for a reason.
Marilyn would have been devastated but for the constant support of her inseparable friends. When Marilyn Grimes divulges the fact of her husband’s desertion to Paulette, her best friend, pacifies her saying that she too had been through the same. She also says many women visiting her store have undergone the same misery which makes them feel depressed, hopeless and ugly.

The bond between females is stronger than between males and this fact is evident in their intimacy. An ugly situation is created when Freda has to slap Mildred, her own mother for cursing Angel, her sibling at the time of her wedding. But Freda has a way with Mildred and only she could do that. She alone has the privilege of raising her voice against her mama. “And now the only one who could smack her and get away with it” (Mama 255). This shows the bond between Freda and Mildred. Freda is the best friend, the best guide and at times, ironically the best Mama to mama Mildred herself. Freda reconciles with her Mama and kisses her on her head and convinces her to attend the wedding of Angel. Mildred says “You can watch your mouth. You thank you grown, but I’m still the Mama in this house” (Mama 255). Though she tries to resume her position as the mama of the house often, at times she allows herself to be reprimanded at like a child by Freda and only by Freda. Because of Freda’s and Curly Mac’s persuasion, Mildred attends Angel’s wedding and takes her seat in the front row. Angel squeezes her Mama’s shoulders as she passes and Mildred winks at her. Angel’s expression on her face clearly reveals that she requires no apologies at all for the unpleasant situation at the time of her wedding. The scene explains the bond that existed among these females in the family.
Terry McMillan succeeds in depicting the positive changes in her women. Mildred, for instance, who was never demonstrative of her affection for Freda, overcomes her inhibition and openly displays her love towards the end of the novel. The cathartic effect is seen in their loving embrace which is a mutually beneficial interaction that suggests forgiveness for the painful effects of Mildred’s earlier emotional distance. This opens up new vistas and inaugurates a higher level of emotional supportiveness between mother and daughter which is also in effect female bonding. Freda surprises Mildred by coming back to Point Haven. She informs her Mama about having quit drinking. Freda recalls a promise which she made to her Mama about buying her a house. But Mama says she has done many things for her already. Mildred never used to express her love but now she asks Freda whether she knew how much she was loved by her. It is a rare and an open scene of intimacy when Freda pretends innocence. Mildred hugs her daughter as if she were a god’s gift which she had always wanted and finally got it. They patted and hugged each other as though they had no one else to give them solace. “It seemed as if they hugged each other for the past and for the future” (Mama 307). It was this kind of bond that sustains females through all their travails. They derive sustenance for their life from this kind of female bonding.

Terry McMillan’s female characters unravel their minds to their female friends. Zora divulges the fears which lurked in the recesses of her heart. She confides to her friends that she has been pretending that nothing is wrong in her relationship with Franklin. She admits that she has all along been pretending that she was not affected either by Franklin’s married status or joblessness. But now, she says, “But it’s getting too hard, this acting. I’m scared of what the outcome of everything will be” (DA 206).
Likewise, in *The Interruption of Everything*, Marilyn Grimes has two best friends to whom she would open her heart. They decide to meet at regular intervals and interact. Marilyn Grimes says, “We decided that one evening out of every month we would get together—... Where we can even ‘fess up to our mistakes and misjudgments. Or admit stupid or embarrassing things we’ve done. Should’ve done differently, or not at all.” (TIOE, 19)

After the emotional turmoil in Bernadine’s life in *Waiting to Exhale* she wins a just settlement of one million dollar and is in raptures. Besides, she “... knew her girlfriends were as elated about her settlement as she was. She could hear it in their voices. Hell, they’d been waiting as long as she had. Now it seemed as if they’d all won the lottery. And as far as Bernadine was concerned, they had.” (WTE 544)

Female bonding always remains a source of hope and intimacy for the female characters in McMillan’s novels. Marilyn Grimes confides to Paulette about getting a divorce from Leon. Paulette counsels her and infuses hope into her saying, “Just remember, some time what looks like the end is really the beginning” (TIOE 169). Besides offering solace, the female friends inject hope into McMillan’s protagonists during distressful situations. Susan Isaacs in her review comments, “Terry McMillan’s heroines... observe men - and contemporary America - with bawdy humor, occasional melancholy and great affection. But the novel is about more than four lives; the bonds among the women are so alive and so appealing they almost seem a character in their own right. Reading *Waiting to Exhale* is like being in the company of a great friend.”

*Waiting to Exhale* explores the supportive friendship and romantic frustrations of four self-reliant professional African-American women in their late thirties. Savannah Jackson
is a successful television producer with material security but without a meaningful, long-term relationship with a man. Bernadine Harris, a mother of two children is divorcing her husband of eleven years after learning that he is having an affair with a young white woman. Robin Stokes, an insurance underwriter, is single and unhappily dating many men. Gloria Mathews is a self-employed beauty shop owner, resigned to the solace she finds in work, food and caring for her teenage son. In Phoenix, Arizona setting, the four women discuss their careers, contemporary social ills and single parenthood. Besides, they declaim the shortcomings of prospective black men, revealing their shared loneliness and deep longing for a true and long-lasting heterosexual relationship in a conventional domestic arrangement. Commenting on the female friendship Paulette Richards says,

Reviewers appreciated McMillan’s humor and the palpable bonds she portrayed among the four female friends. Susan Isaacs of the New York Times Book Review recognized McMillan’s debt to other novels about female friendship such as The Group by Mary McCarthy, The Best of Everything by Rona Jaffe, and Best Friends by Consuelo S. Baehr. (15)

Savannah in Waiting to Exhale is cool, competent, shrewd and the strongest of the group, but her relations with men are dissatisfying. And this prompts her to raise queries concerning men, even those which are considered delicate. Such issues could be discussed among female friends whose bond is strong and intimate. Savannah, Bernadine, Robin and Gloria, the four female characters have different experiences when it comes to their relationships with men. Though they hail from different parts of country and pursue different careers, they are drawn together throughout the novel. At times one can see that
they are not together physically. Nevertheless they are present in each other’s thoughts. Such an intimacy they enjoyed in each other’s company.

**In Disappearing Acts** when Portia, Zora’s friend disapproves of Zora’s choice of Franklin, she wonders, “I swear, I love Portia like a sister, but sometimes I wonder why I feel the need to get her approval for everything” (DA 55). The reason is that their intimacy requires her approval. Portia counsels her in a serious manner about Franklin. She says, “You’ve already had your share of losers, girl. Don’t go getting yourself all hung up on another one” (DA 59). Portia was also annoyed with Zora about not confiding to her about her epilepsy earlier. She says, “What took you so goddamn long telling me? ... This is a cheap shot, Zora. I mean really. I thought I was your damn friend”. (DA 58) Portia feels hurt and deceived when Zora did not take her into confidence regarding her epilepsy.

The female characters of Terry McMillan are extremely comfortable in the company of women. Exchanging views and sharing experiences with women have a cathartic effect. It helps them to shed negative feelings and revives their self-confidence. For instance, in **Disappearing Acts** Claudette and Portia, Zora’s best friends air their views on different topics, including topics like husband’s role in rearing children, problems of handling teenagers, shortage of eligible men and so on.

Meanwhile, when Zora conceives, she is desperate to inform her friends - Portia, Claudette and Marie. Her joy is four-fold when she shares it with her friends. She says, “I had to tell somebody. And I can’t keep this to myself” (DA 139). Zora reveals not only joy but also her fears openly to her friends. But her fear comes true in the end. She says, “I do not want to be single mother that much I do know” (DA 140). Likewise, Stella in
How Stella Got Her Groove Back shares her feelings about her relationship with Winston to her friends, Tonya and Patrice. Stella also opens up to Vanessa, her sister but not to her younger sister Angela who never wants Stella to bring about a change in her lonesome life. Stella shares her feelings about Winston to Maisha, her friend who convinces her saying that age factor has nothing to do in a relationship. She adds, “Then I’d go for it, and don’t worry about what anybody says. This is your life, girl. You’re not going to get another chance to come back and do it over.” (HSGHGB 313) She advises Stella to get rid of “do-the-right-thing” and the “double standard”. Stella approves all that Maisha says and feels the same. “Deep down I feel this way too” (HSGHGB 314) Stella sees a mirror of her own self in Maisha.

Female Bonding is a god-sent boon for the female sex. They cannot open up to others in the family circle especially to men. It is impossible for them to share with men small matters which keeps gnawing them. If they talk on those things more than once they would be branded “repeater” or a “nagging person”. In these situations women turn to their “sister friends”. It is said, “… This is where friends come in” (TIOE 20)

We don’t claim to be shrinks and we certainly don’t think we have all the answers to each other’s problems. But what we do have is empathy and we listen and try to be light hearted when it seems appropriate and also recognize when our hearts are cold and lacking in compassion. Over the years, what has happened among the three of us is an amazing freedom that comes with being able to say out loud what you think and feel without having to apologize for it (TIOE 20).

Female Bonding provides psychological space within which women could come to know themselves through knowing one another. In Waiting to Exhale, Savannah visits
Bernadine who was undergoing a crucial situation in her life. They hug each other tight, “Harder than she hugged anybody in a long time”. (WTE 195) They sit through the whole night and exchange every single detail of all the recent events in their lives.

Besides, Savannah gives a patient hearing to Robin’s talk on men in her life especially Russell who is a real philanderer. She bores others with this topic and Savannah wants to slap her and put some sense into her because she was a little crazy when it came to men. She plays the role of an elder sister and guides Robin. Robin, though refuted by Russell, was not ready to believe the news that he was living with some woman and she was bent on marrying him. At this juncture Savannah cautioned her. “Well, why would you want to be with a man knowing you can’t trust him?” (WTE 233)

The bondage among the females has helped middle class women to break out of their walls of silence and has permitted women to create a common language with which to express their hostility to men. That language has provided a new vocabulary for female anger and angst and thus opened paths through which women might turn natural aggression outward rather than upon themselves. For instance, in Waiting to Exhale when Bernadine’s lawyer is trying to get all John’s assets figured out, as nothing is decided about the settlement, she is completely broken psychologically. She breaks down over the phone to Gloria who understands her dire need and consoles her that she would be with her in about half an hour. As soon as she reaches Bernadine, she tries to compose her with a strong hug. Bernadine’s fears as to what would happen to her life and what the future holds for her and her kids are, off her mind for a while. Her mental agony is greatly mitigated when she is in her friend’s company. Bernadine’s daughter accepts the change gradually and is fine but her son, John Junior is disturbed at school and at home,
because he is also going through crucial changes. Bernadine says, “So I’m trying not to go off. All of this is wearing me out. I feel like I’m being split into little tiny pieces and every single part of me has to perform at optimum capacity” (WTE 262). The following quotation stands testimony to Bernadine’s words.

The importance of sisterhood as an emotional support base that can sustain women through the activist efforts necessary to manifest their value in the world has always been a feature of the four-woman novel. (Richards 125)

McMillan’s women characters exhibit a strong desire to break away from patriarchal family because their material, physical and emotional needs remain unfulfilled. They are thoroughly disillusioned with the patriarchal system and wish to replace that with African-American patterns of communal interdependence. This theme is very dominant in her fiction. Stella in *How Stella Got her Groove Back* meets two of her friends, Tonya and Patrice on the Beach. They spent time like three girls on vacation though Stella was in her forties and the other two were in their thirties who have been friends since elementary school. Patrice says, “We love our husbands even though they get on our nerves sometimes, but we’ve both been working so hard these last eight or nine months and we hardly ever get to see each other anymore so we decided to take a girls’ vacation and leave their butts at home. That’s all” (HSGHGB 154). They feel they deserve a vacation after a period of hard labour and they take it on their own.

Terry McMillan’s fiction reveals that the female characters, at some point of their lives realize that they are wasting their energies on wrong things. By pleasing men they start to detest themselves. Female bonding, on the contrary, provides women with personal satisfaction and gives them opportunities to uphold their own dignity. Female
Bonding has afforded a network of mutual support which is a fund of collective strength and affection from which women could draw upon for their private battles at home or in place of work.

Throughout her exploration of the lives of African American middle class women, McMillan has succeeded in creating characters who are not mere survivors but victors. She prefers to concentrate on women who assert themselves and are willing to tackle adversity with determination, at least as a team, if not individually.

Terry McMillan’s novels, do not advocate the feminine gender to function with the exclusion of the masculine gender. Such exclusion will mean disturbing the natural order of human life. This can be supported by Nancy Chodorow’s assumption that most women are heterosexual and that women make a resolution in favour of heterosexual bonding. This is in favour of a positive approach in female bonding. This validates the point that female bonding does not mean rejection of the heterosexual world. Female bonding does not imply Lesbian practices or withdrawing from the world of men. “Women’s friendship cannot be reconstituted in a vacuum of dissociation from the wider world. Any women’s community that dissociates itself from a wider world cannot take the place in a wider world.” (Greiner 42)

Female Bonding is a shared allegiance to the common good. The bonding of females opens avenues for social service. It is easier for groups rather than individuals to be involved in community service. Women coming out of their cocoons and mingling with the women outside prove to be extremely rewarding. Female bonding breathes new life into women and rejuvenates them filling them with energy and determination for social work. Savannah in Waiting to Exhale joins a women’s organization “Black women on
the move” and soon she is on the advisory board. They take up various projects like visiting schools for unwed teenagers and counseling them. Gloria is extremely glad and she says, “I know we’re all busy with our own lives and everything, but I swear, some of these kids out here are just lost, and they need any kind of motivation they can get. If we help point them in the right direction, then we’re doing something”. (WTE 256)

Females foster significant personal relations with other women in order to reproduce mothering. This argument as presented by the psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow is discussed by Donald J. Greiner in *Women without Men*. The relationship between Marilyn Grimes and her best friend Paulette, in *Interruption of Everything* is a fine illustration to prove this fact. Besides, the intimacy between Mildred Peacock and her sister-in-law Curly Mac prove the fact that bonding of females reproduces mothering. Marilyn Grimes unravels her aching heart to her grown up daughter Sabrina and that reminds one of the intimate relationship between Mildred Peacock and Freda in *Mama*. One can see a perfect bond between a mother and a grown up daughter. When Sabrina justifies her father’s act of leaving for Costa Rica with Frank, his friend for four weeks, saying that he was under excruciating stress, Marilyn disapproves it saying, “But what about me, Sabrina? Huh? Lovey’s going through something that might be hard on all of us, but chances are I’m the one who’s going to have to handle it. My mother is losing her faculties, Sabrina. Joy swears she’s on the road to recovery, but I’m not real sure she’s got it in her. I’m bored and lonely. And I’m confused. Half the time I don’t know whether I’m coming or going.” (TIOE 239) After an outburst, she cries like a child and her daughter hugs her and plays mother to her saying, “It’s okay, Mom. You’ve got a right to feel stressed.” (TIOE 239) Owing to the sameness of mothers and daughters, the
daughters develop the capacity to mother and nurture the weak ones specially the females in distressful situations.

Likewise in *A Day Late and a Dollar Short*, Paris, the eldest daughter of Viola Price is intimate with her siblings and tries to help them solve their problems. She learns that her sister Janelle is caught in an emotional conflict. Janelle was appalled to learn that her twelve year old daughter was sexually abused. Her lover, George was found in an uncompromising situation with Shanice, her daughter. Paris’s bonding with her sister is distinctly seen in this conversation on the telephone though her sister is reluctant to give out details:

Well, when is she coming home?

I don’t know right now.

Why don’t you know?

Because there’s a lot of confusion around my house.

Like what?

I don’t feel like getting into it right now, Paris.

Why not, Janelle? You never feel like talking about anything that really matters.

Why is that?

That is not true. It’s just that sometimes other people can’t solve your problems.

Did I say anything about solving your problems? No. But I’m your sister, bitch, and if something is wrong over there, I just wanted you to know you can talk to me.

I know.

Then why aren’t you?
I am.

No, you’re not, Janelle. Something is going on with your daughter and your husband and you’re not telling it.

You’re right. But, like I said, Paris, I have to work this out myself.

But you’re not very good at that.

You don’t know what I’m good at.

I’ve only known you for thirty-five years, Janelle. We grew up in the same house.

So – I think I do. (ADLDS 258)

Janice G. Raymond in A Passion For Friends: Towards A Philosophy Of Female Affection, stresses the “importance of women’s affection for each other as primary and paradigmatic, … until women mother to love and care for other women, the system of women hetero-reality will not be transformed. Thus she finds that Female bonding is nothing less than “an original and primary attraction of women for women” (Greiner 40).

One basis for Nancy Chodorow’s argument is that the female model of bonding features flexible network rather than an affinity strictly between two individuals. “Chodorow states that in the complex matter of female bonding, women tend to have closer personal ties with each other than men have, and to spend more time in the company of women than they do with men. In our society, there is some sociological evidence that women’s friendships are effectively richer than men’s” (Greiner 38). In Disappearing Acts, Zora finds listeners only in her female friends to whom she confides her deepest thoughts and fears. Her friend Portia, cautions her to be alive to the situation. She tells Zora that her whole world already seems to be revolving around this man called Franklin. She also adds, “You better be careful, or you gon’ start disappearing
Franklin. At another instance, Zora anticipates that her friends who were her well-wishers would judge Franklin harshly, which he actually deserves, so she conceals many of his deficiencies. But in due course she reaches a breaking point and reveals the fact to Portia that Franklin was a married man. This and such incidents speak volumes of the rich and intimate relationship among McMillan’s female characters. While Nancy Chodorow lays stress on mothering as the force of female bonding, Elizabeth Abel’s emphasis is on friendship.

In A Day Late and a Dollar Short Charlotte is in grief after her mother Viola passes away. Besides, she is already in a conflict regarding her husband’s suspected betrayal. Hence she decides to seek professional help. She visits a psychiatrist Dr. Cecily Greene for suggestions. The doctor introduces herself in the beginning: “Hello, Charlotte, I’m Dr. Greene, please feel free to call me Cecily.” (ADLDS 449) The given conversation between Dr. Cecily Greene and Charlotte show how women enjoy flexible relationships even though they are strangers:

Can I get you anything to drink? Water, Juice?

Nope I’m fine.

She walks over and turns the music off and then comes and sits across from me. I don’t know why I ain’t nervous.

So- Lela referred you to me?

Yep.
Good. She’s nice. A very smart sister. So, tell me, Charlotte, what I can do for you?

She used the term ‘sister’? I can’t believe that a doctor would say that, but I like it. … Where is your questionnaire?

I don’t use one.

Why not?

Because they don’t really tell me anything about you as an individual. It just puts you in a yes-or-no square box, you feel me?

Did she just say, ‘You feel me?’ She did. Yes she did. I like this, too. ‘Yeah, I do.’ I say, and just look at her.

Let me tell you how I work. First of all, most of my patients come to me because they’ve had some kind of trauma or negative experience and they’re suffering. One of my goals is to help relieve some of your suffering and help you to learn something about yourself. But it’s something we do together.(ADLDS 450)

After her appointment, when Charlotte is about to leave Dr. Green makes her feel good.

“… she gives me a hug. A soft, warm hug. One that a mama or a sister would give you. One like I ain’t felt in years. (ADLDS 454)

The Female characters tend to stick to their female community namely, the female sex on all occasions but more so, when injustice is perpetrated on them. They come together in joy or sorrow and share their feelings and experiences and thus build a strong bond with each other. In Terry McMillan’s *Mama* the bond between Mildred and Freda is not just a mother-daughter relationship but something more special. The emotional bond between them started early in life. Freda used to accompany her mother
to rich folk’s houses to help her. When she sees her mother slogging, she wonders how long this would go on and when would something better come along. She desired for a new husband for her mother and a new daddy for herself. Freda does not like seeing her mother sweat and puff. She says, “I’m a rich when I grow up and I’m a buy as a better and bigger house than the Hale’s and you ain’t gon have to scrub no floors for no white folks” (Mama 32).

The emotional bond that existed between them is obvious in many situations. Another instance to quote here is when Freda did not approve of her mother’s marriage with Rufus but still she stood by her. And when there is a scuffle between the two she supports her mother. She attacks Rufus to defend her mother and this need not necessarily be explained as a daughter’s feeling for her mother. It is a natural impulse for any woman to help another in a distressful situation. In Freda’s case, Mildred sees her daughter as an extension of herself. Hence she is able to bond with her without any hitch. It is also a woman to woman relationship that exists between Mildred Peacock and Freda but this relationship overlaps the mother—daughter relationship and the former surfaces more than the latter. Mildred’s and Freda’s individual journeys have provided them with the knowledge that they can find support in one another while facing the travails of life. Depiction of enduring friendship between Mildred and Curly Mac in Mama is another instance of female bonding.

The delineation of female friendship or bonding gives life and strength to Waiting to Exhale and it is not the plot that moves the novel. The relationship between the four women who sustain and nurture each other through moments of crisis and loneliness may not seem dramatic as their relationship with men but ultimately it is more convincing.
The novel strikes a chord with African American readers especially females who identify themselves with the frustrated desires, betrayals and personal triumphs experienced by its protagonists.

Female bonding ignores all kinds of barriers like age and relationship. Here in *A Day Late and a Dollar Short*, Viola Price the matriarch, is in the company of her granddaughter Shanice, Jannelle’s daughter who is twelve years old. Shanice, of late stays with her grandmother because she was sexually abused by her stepfather George. For Shanice, her grandmother’s place is a safe haven and she is happy here. She is nurtured by her granny with love and trust. The given conversation is a proof of their bonding.

I hope I can make you proud one day, too, Granny, and she gives me a big hug and squeezes me so tight ….

You know what, baby? I’m already proud of you. I’m proud of how well you’ve handled all this terrible stuff that’s happened to you, and I pray on my knees every single night that you grow up and become a strong, healthy woman. I pray that, if you can’t forget this, which you probably won’t, that you bury it somewhere so deep you can’t find it. So deep that it won’t never have to haunt you. Watching you smile makes me happy. (ADLDS 338)

Female bonding nourishes each other. Most of her novels feature strong bonds among women. To quote Paulette Richards,

Mildred Peacock of *Mama* raises four daughters, Zora from *Disappearing Acts* meets regularly with a group of three close women friends who offer her support and sisterly advice. In *Waiting to Exhale*, McMillan weaves the story
around four “sistah friends” whom she endows with the foibles and experiences she has observed in herself and other black women of her acquaintance. (7)

The traditional notion of female nurturing is always an issue of bonding, for a woman’s identity is often best sustained in a community of women which supports the individual self and the bonded other. This suggests the healing effect of female bonding. Freda, Mildred’s daughter, was initially annoyed with her mama’s relationship with Billy Callahan who was in his 20-ies. But when her Mama told her that he had a job at Chrysler and he also made her feel like a woman, Freda acquiesced. Mildred relates to her daughter the nuances of a woman’s feelings and that it had been long since she felt so. Saying this, she breaks down wallowing in self-pity, fully conscious of the fact that it is to her daughter that she is unraveling her mind. Freda understands her loneliness and her feelings. When Freda leaves for Los Angeles, Mildred appears indifferent. The fact is she cannot bring herself to hug or kiss Freda while she is departing. She cannot believe that Freda is leaving her and when she finally left, Mildred could not withstand the parting and phoned her and apologized to her for her seeming indifference. Freda, in return consoles her that she could understand her mama’s feelings. All these situations speak volumes about their intimacy. They enjoy a special bond - something like inseparable friends. Like her sister-in-law Curly Mac, her daughter Freda too is a loyal friend and sister to Mildred Peacock. When Freda says she has written an editorial for their campus newspaper, Mildred says, “Yeah, well, you better step on it, sister. You ain’t exactly got the rest of your life to find no Husband”. (Mama 187)

According to Paulette Richards, “In her 1972 exploration of the bonds between mothers and daughters, Friday concluded that daughters unconsciously incorporate many
All these themes prove that female bonding is a positive force in the female development personally and socially. It paves way for them to interact with the outside world more effectively and forcefully. The intimate relationship that existed between Curly Mac and Mildred can be seen in many scenes. Curly Mac, though sick visits Mildred and greets her on her Birthday. Again, she tries to influence Mildred to come to Church though Mildred is not convinced as she is not religious. Later, Mildred visits Curly Mac when she returns to Point-Haven from Los Angeles. Curly Mac’s voice in itself is a relief to Mildred. Curly has had a stroke though she is just forty-five, three years older than Mildred and Mildred does not want to spend her day talking about the unpleasant event.

Even when they are away, they are so much in each other’s thoughts. Mildred knows very well that when she leaves Point Haven she would miss Curly Mac, her sister-in-law. Curly Mac would certainly miss Mildred but she is happy that she would have somebody else to visit other than her dull relatives in Alabama. Women in general, necessarily identify with one another and value a strong sense of communion and enjoy fellowship with other women. This feature is obviously seen in McMillan’s novels especially in *Waiting to Exhale*.

Terry McMillan concentrates fully on the bonds between women, their intimacy and about how they use their friendship to bolster and enrich one another. In her novel *A Day Late and a Dollar Short*, McMillan returns to the theme of family and community, where
a family is headed by a loving mother, Viola and populated by siblings who must work
out their own strained relationships, rivalries and jealousies. The novel asserts her
recurring theme that personal relationships are the foundation of African American
women. In McMillan’s *The Interruption of Everything*, Marilyn Grimes is bogged down
with household duties, but still keeps in touch with her two best friends Bunny and
Paulette whom she meets for “Private pity parties”. They hold these meetings every
month. Marilyn says, “even if it just meant venting, bitching or lamenting … but mostly
to help each other see ourselves more clearly”. (TIOE 19)

Female Bonding opens new vistas of thought and enlightens the female characters.
Very often the female characters are not aware of the limitations of their own attitude and
discussions with female friends bring about a state of awareness. For instance, Franklin
being jobless was the topic on the agenda on which the friends had a heated discussion.
Portia opined that if she were in Zora’s place she would not wait so long for Franklin to
get into a job. Claudette, Zora’s another friend relates her own experience with her
husband Allen, when she had to do all the earning and paying the bills while he was
going his education. She also says it does not mean that they did not have typical
differences of a couple. At times their relationship was strained. Nevertheless she says,
“You’ve got to take the bitter with the sweet. Just as long as you’re not the only one
doing all the struggling, I’d stick with the man” (DA 143). Such discussions act as an eye
opener and enrich women on many aspects.

Similarly, in *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, Maisha, Stella’s friend, echoes
Stella’s thought. “Do you realize that as women we’ve been programmed to do the right
thing since we were little girls” (HSGHGB 316). Maisha cautions Stella to wake up
because tomorrow is not promised to anybody. Krystal is another friend of Stella to whom she confides everything. “Krystal is and has been my motivator. We talk about everything and of course she knows all about Winston. She thinks the whole idea is pretty ... But has some reservations ... (HSGHGB 358). Krystal states the bottom-line, “If it feels good, I say go for it. Follow your own heart and your own head and forget about what anybody says. This is your life, Stella, and no one can experience it better than you” (HSGHGB 360). Female bonding enriches McMillan’s female characters thereby opening new lines of thought.

Marilyn Grimes and Joy, her foster sister in The Interruption of Everything, get into a serious conversation about women in the mid-life stage, after seeing a show on the Television. Joy elaborates on how women begin to look at their lives differently once their kids go out of the house fending for themselves. Some women get depressed and feel lost because they have spent maximum number of years taking care of everybody. And now, they have reached a stage when they do not know what to do with their lives. Some experience rage and feel miserable, while others feel bored with their lives but fear to admit it because it would imply that they ought to make changes. Joy describes the show wherein one group of women whine about losing their children as if they were lost or dead to the world. Some end up trying to dominate their grown up kid’s lives and make them dependent. A few others take care of somebody’s kids, like Marilyn Grimes herself. Joy pays a compliment to Marilyn that she belongs to the last category. She concludes her conversation saying that women generally love this phase of their lives. Paulette boosts up Marilyn’s dejected spirit elaborating on a teenager’s attitude to parents. Thus she mitigates the pain that Marilyn experiences. She tells Marilyn, “The
hard part is getting used to being on the periphery when we’re not their center anymore” (TIOE 232).

At another instance, one can see Marilyn’s friend Paulette counseling her on the topic of separation of a married couple. When Marilyn seems lost after coming to know of the affair of her husband, she says, “... when it rains it pours, doesn’t it?” Paulette consoles her saying, “It’s God’s way of making us pay attention, so deal with it, Marilyn. ... Don’t worry. It’s always the hardest road. Not the easy one.” (TIOE 169) The company of women is a boon to women themselves because it enlightens them on many matters. Similarly in *Waiting to Exhale* the four female characters are enriched by being in each other’s company because all their misconceptions and wrong notions are discarded. The conversation between Savannah and Robin illustrates this fact:

Yes, I’m serious. I’ve never eaten out by myself.

Why not?

Because it would feel weird.

What’s so weird about it? I do it all the time.

You do? And you don’t feel like people are staring at you?

What? Why would people be staring at me because I’m eating by myself?

Because it looks like you can’t get anybody to eat with you.

You’re for real too, aren’t you, Robin?

Yeah, why?

So what am I supposed to do if I want to eat out but don’t have a companion?

Stay home? Go to the drive-up window of Taco Bell so I can save face?
You’re making it sound ridiculous. I’m just telling you that I’ve never done it because I would feel awkward, like I was on display.

On display for what?

Everybody would know I don’t have a man to take me to dinner.

That is the biggest bunch of bullshit I’ve ever heard in my life. You ought to stop.

I can’t help it.

Yes you can. All you need to do is take your black ass to the restaurant, get out of your car, go inside, sit down, order, and then proceed to eat the goddamn food.

This is the nineties, Robbin. Eating by yourself is not an admission of loneliness. (WTE 278-279)

Donald J. Greiner has revealed that the relationships in female bonding are not always reciprocal, “One woman in each pair is more of a knower; the other one is to be known” (Greiner 45). The best example in Terry McMillan is Paulette who plays the role of a knower, when she enlightens her friend Marilyn Grimes about the general attitude of sons in their adolescent years. Stella’s friend Maisha advises her to go ahead with her affair with Winston though he is twenty one years her junior and adds saying that women were the ones in the relationship who bore the brunt of everything and carried out all their duties to the letter. She says, “So my point is we’ve acted responsibly for so long that I think we could’ve had more fun than we did and in fact I believe we’re entitled to a whole lot more so I think now is the time for you to enjoy what the ... you missed.”(HSHGB 317)

In some situations the roles of the knower and the known get interchanged depending on the peculiar circumstances in which the protagonist is placed. This fact is obvious
when Savannah and Robin have discussions regarding the inadequacies of men. Though not always mutual, yet at times it is seen that this sisterly bond is reciprocal, one in which each gives and receives equally.

Anyhow, McMillan’s fiction proves that African woman embodies genuine sisterhood. She tries to portray positive African - American characters especially women and their female bonding which makes them optimistic in their attitude to life. Female bonding is a strategic device for female characters to survive a situation of crisis. It is a kind of defense mechanism in crucial times. It doubles the feelings of joy and lessens the impact of sorrow. For instance, Mildred Peacock of Mama raises four daughters. Despite their blood relationship, the bond that exists between Mildred and Freda is sisterly and friendly. Zora from Disappearing Acts meets three of her beloved friends, Portia, Claudette, and Marie, who are very supportive and offer her sisterly counsel. In Waiting to Exhale McMillan weaves a story around four female friends namely Savannah, Bernadine, Gloria and Robin, who are like four sisters with their share of strengths and weaknesses.

Raymond coins the term Gyn /affection to define her understanding of female bonding beyond Chodorow’s insights into relationships fostered by mothering: Gyn/affection is not only a loving relationship between two or more women; it is also a freely chosen bond which, when chosen, involves certain reciprocal assurances based on honor, loyalty, and affection. (Greiner 40)

McMillan takes a new initiative to set the families pictured in her novels on a model which goes back to ancient African American kinship patterns wherein obligations extend beyond the nuclear family. Here one can find the traits of self -reliance and the
kinship obligation in the social organization of black people. Female bonding assures the power of mutual aid especially in times of dire need. For instance, at the end of the novel *Waiting to Exhale*, Robin, who is pregnant, decides to keep the baby though Russell, the prospective father is a married man. This is because she believes the baby would give her something, that no man could provide, that is a family. She says, “I’ll finally have somebody I can love as hard as I want to. Somebody, who needs me … And whenever I have any questions, or any doubts, I can always ask Gloria or Bernadine. They always know what to do” (WTE 537). Her remark that she will turn to her girl friends for support is to be marked. McMillan is creating different possibilities for family in the present scenario. Large scale urbanization has changed the present scenario of the African society wherein the network of ancient kinship is eventually fading. Nevertheless, that does not affect the relationship among black females. Susan Isaacs in her review argues,

> All is not angst in Terry McMillan’s hilarious, … novel about friendships among four Phoenix women … this book about female buddies is full of good times as well as bad. The genre has been enormously popular through the years; the pleasure of sharing a friendship among women seems to be so great, we can’t get enough of it.

The four female characters unravel their minds to one another thereby mitigating their mental agony.

Most of McMillan’s novels demonstrate the failure and incapacity of patriarchy to meet the needs of contemporary African American women. It is in such situations that kinship groups play a vital role.
Raymond establishes an opposition between female friendship and hetero-relations, and she insists that the latter is an overriding theory of oppression. Women bond, she argues, not because of biological needs but because of cultural conditions… She urges female bonding as the political means of neutralizing the cultural power of hetero-relations. (Greiner 41)

In *Disappearing Acts*, a young woman eligible for a happy family, learns how her fine feelings of love simply vanishes by stronger feelings of racism and sexism and other inadequacies of men. In *Waiting to Exhale* McMillan depicts single women struggling to create a sense of kinship for themselves without husbands.

McMillan’s novels also highlight the power and security experienced by women in the kinship groups they form. By bonding, women help to empower each other and form a dynamic community. Patricia Collins in her preface to second edition of *Feminist thought, knowledge, consciousness and the politics of Empowerment* speaks of fostering Black Women’s empowerment. She says,

I knew that when an individual Black Woman’s consciousness concerning how she understands her everyday life undergoes change, she can become empowered. Such consciousness may stimulate her to embark on a path of personal freedom, even if it exists initially primarily in her own mind. If she is lucky enough to meet others who are undergoing similar journeys, she and they can change the world around them. If ideas, Knowledge, consciousness can have such an impact on individual Black Women, what effect might they have on Black Women as a Group? ( x )
Female bonding as portrayed in McMillan’s novels is a healthy relationship which helps females move in a positive direction. In *Mama*, McMillan ends the novel on a positive note wherein Mildred’s daughter Freda who was addicted to alcoholism returns home, mending her ways and Mildred takes concrete decisions in life and decides to attend community college. The novel concludes with an unexpected scene. Mildred brings herself to hug Freda and tells her that she loves her. As Janet Mason Ellerby explicates,

A healthy relationship between mother and daughter is a stronger base from which Mildred and Freda can move in positive directions. Given the social constraints of their culture, this image of family is the best McMillan can realistically provide. The embrace is a start, one in which the patriarchal center has been erased but the authoritarian matriarch is not inscribed as an ironic mirror.

(105)

Here Mildred and Freda represent a family: One parent and one child, namely a mother and a daughter which means two females finding emotional solace and connection in one another and that makes a strong female bond.

The bond among female characters in the same family as well as with the outside families receives a lot attention in Macmillan’s fiction and can be termed sisterhood. Through her portrayal of female bonding, McMillan reveals the minds of lead characters and brings them from marginality to centrality and unravels the intricacies and paradoxes involved in the relationship.

Besides the theme of Female Bonding amidst the female characters in the novels, one can sense a bond between the novel itself and the female readers. By opening the novel *Waiting to Exhale*, with Savannah’s first person confession about her difficulties finding
a husband, Terry McMillan immediately draws the reader into the circle of friends. Savannah confides in the reader as candidly as if she were talking to her best friend Bernadine. McMillan’s novels have touched the chord of many women readers which is due to the fact that “she expressed something millions of women were feeling.” (Richards 8) In her novels, McMillan has skillfully created a whole community of female characters that a broad spectrum of readers can embrace as intimate friends.

McMillan’s portrayal of female bonding especially in *Waiting to Exhale* among the female friends received great applause from critics and reviewers. The novel lacks a well defined plot but is episodic with a focus on female friendships. Thus a survey of Black women writer’s tradition proves that women writers especially Terry McMillan is able to discover the positive self in women and has presented a true picture of female bonding.

Terry McMillan belongs to the self asserting tradition of establishing the centrality of black women in Afro American history. Through her artistic expression, she has voiced, the fine feelings of African American women community. McMillan’s fiction highlights African American patterns of kinship groups based on mutual aid and community participation. The women in her novels rediscover their own sustaining power in kinship bonds which have historically served African American in surviving the physical and psychic atrocities of slavery, as well as hardships of reconstruction.

This chapter explores the implications of female bonding that exists in Terry McMillan’s fiction. McMillan delineates a friendship or sisterhood based on the shared experience of black womanhood. Generally, women bond because of isolation, violence and abuse at the hands of men. It is the women who suffer oppression which is a shared common experience in a male dominated society. This naturally makes them bond with
other women. This bond helps women to survive, sustain and live fulfilling lives as a community even in desperate situations. It is their common fate that unites them and eventually this bonding defends them against all negative forces including abuse of men. Female Bonding offers them a sense of healing, a feeling of peace, intimacy and fulfillment. Terry McMillan’s female characters take refuge in this bonding which assuages their mental trauma, while equipping them to make constructive contribution to society as a community.