CHAPTER - 6

Conclusion
A RETROSPECT

Terry McMillan has earned a unique place for herself in the annals of modern fiction in general and African American fiction in particular. Though she comes in the African American tradition, she does not follow the path laid by celebrities like Paul Marshall, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. On the contrary, she has consciously moved away from the examples of these influential writers by focusing on the Urban Black family. Also she has steered clear of the idealistic mode adopted by popular African American writers and instead has preferred to explore real life situation and if at all one seeks an affinity, one may find it in the realistic models of her predecessor Ann Petry.

Terry McMillan will be remembered as the pioneer of a new genre as her novels chronicle life in black middle class communities with emphasis on interpersonal relationships. McMillan has been credited with creating a unique niche in American Literature, the urban romance novel. Her portrayal of empowered and successful female characters inspired women to read about themselves, not only as sufferers but as the adventurous heroes of their own lives. The focus is on the way they discover their new self, overcoming male domination and socio-economic hurdles. Hence her novels occupy a unique place outside the mainstream of contemporary black women’s fiction.

Terry McMillan’s novels focus on the female protagonist’s capacity to create fulfilling lives for themselves despite adverse familial and social conditions. For instance, Mildred Peacock in Mama has to battle on all fronts to keep her family going. Unlike other writers
she does not dwell on racism nor does she address political or social issues that are so common in African American literature. On the other hand, she explores contemporary concerns like single parenthood, divorce, interpersonal relationships and so on. Consider *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* for instance where she addresses such relevant contemporary concerns including molestation, alcoholism, incest, and homosexuality using six first person narratives. She does not write exclusively from a feminist perspective though feminism is part of her narrative fabric. She highlights the travails of Black Women in family and society and gives voice to the angst of Urban African American women.

Terry McMillan’s stubborn stand on portraying Urban Black family, Black romance and Black motherhood and Black men and women in a realistic rather than an idealistic mode sets her apart from the other African American Writers. It is obvious that she has self-consciously rejected the examples of these immensely influential writers. She appears to be intent on not being indebted to these contemporary writers. Terry McMillan’s novels appeals to many, mainly because she expresses the identical feelings of millions of women across the world. Her fiction describes mainly the struggle of black women who belong to the urban middle class.

Terry McMillan’s novels focus on the female individual’s role to create gratifying lives for themselves suppressing the negative forces that come their way. As for instance, Bernadine in *Waiting to Exhale* is defiant about mending her life after the divorce and to find fulfillment. McMillan’s writing rings true to readers because it is honest and her novels do not dwell on themes such as Black protagonist versus White antagonist or the impact of slavery. They present the travails of the black women which are insightful
explorations of black urban life that are not found in contemporary black women’s fiction. For instance, the fiery spirit of Mildred Peacock in *Mama* is never dampened by conflicts in her life. Though McMillan is less race-conscious her characters are black through and through. She addresses the concerns of modern African American women especially the complicated relationships. She deftly sketches the exasperated intimacy of the long and unsuccessfully married couple Viola Price and Cecil Price in *A Day Late and a Dollar Short*. She gives voice to the apprehensions of African American women in her novels. Terry McMillan’s ability to evoke her own emotional truths in her novels is one reason for her tremendous appeal. She avoids addressing the political and social issues which was traditionally emphasized in African American literature and her themes do not deal with racism or the white world.

The Black female protagonists of Terry McMillan make a conscious and determined move towards autonomy. The traditional family is re-configured in her novels where in man and woman change roles and men are allocated a different space. Robin in *Waiting to Exhale* decides to make a family without a man after many heart breaking experiences. Her female characters liberate themselves from the ideal and the desire for patriarchal family. In the reconfigured family her female characters expect trust, love, care, commitment and connection.

The Black woman has endured centuries of struggle and finally has succeeded in establishing her identity. Black women had long endured subjugation and discrimination and all forms of atrocity and inequality. Gradually, strong roles for African American women began to emerge and families run by women came up. McMillan’s women
characters redeemed themselves after a lot of struggle in the family as well as in the society. Nevertheless, it did not guarantee power.

McMillan’s female characters are knocked down in life innumerable times but they do not cry for help or wallow in self-pity. On the other hand, they detest their fallen state and do all they can to come out of it. For instance Mildred Peacock in *Mama* and Zora Banks in *Disappearing Acts* celebrate their hard-won pleasures and feel a woman bereft of autonomy has a nullified existence.

Her female characters exhibit autonomy by overcoming socio-economic obstacles and male domination to achieve self-actualization. Her female characters evince the spirit of autonomy at every step of their life and feel that they have the right to happiness just as men. Consider Bernadine for instance, in *Waiting to Exhale* who celebrates her newly found freedom after divorce.

McMillan’s novels focus on women’s inner psychic growth and personal development. In Bernadine’s case, her divorce motivates her to stand up for herself and fight for what she wants in life after years of suppressing her own desires to please John. Gloria grows enough to stop organizing her world around her son. Robin does not learn much from her own experience which adds a touch of reality to McMillan’s portraits. McMillan dismisses the reiterated conventional idea that the most glorious destiny of woman is the reciprocal love of a man and that the relationship with a man should necessarily result in the institution of marriage. Having thrown such a stock idea overboard, Terry McMillan empowers her women to take charge of their own destiny.

Some of Terry McMillan’s female characters realize that their sexual desire makes them weak and dependent on men. They have a critical attitude towards women who
live in complete dependence on their men. They also detest themselves for getting emotionally entangled with men. Savannah in *Waiting to Exhale* berates Robin’s behaviour when she dotes on the undeserving Russell. Her characters do not glorify traditional values of family. They regret, fret and fume because they have missed opportunities in life. All they wish for is a positive male companionship where they are mutually supportive. In her novels she proves that a father can be replaced by a strong, enduring and loving Black Matriarch. Her novels do not idealize patriarchal family because it influences gender identity and limits women’s autonomy.

McMillan’s fiction is an outright revolt against all barriers that come in women’s way thereby barring her from attaining fulfillment in life and discovering her true self. Her female characters move from a state of victim to that of an independent being, enjoying complete autonomy. McMillan feels if women are given liberty to express their convictions and beliefs, and exercise their right to support themselves, it will eventually elevate the state of being of all women. McMillan’s novels are proof to show that the author is a person who is concerned with women’s autonomy. Her female characters are autonomous beings who cannot tolerate men retaining absolute power over them. McMillan strongly believes that women have it in them the power, not only to free themselves, but also to vanquish their tyrannical masters. Many crucial situations in life give women the opportunity to re-envision their potential. McMillan’s characters seem to forcefully contend against the institutions of society like marriage and family and try to revolutionize their roles in it.

McMillan seems to be an overt proponent of economic independence for women. She affirms women ought not to be relegated to the objects of pleasure or merely assigned
roles of mothers but to value her as equal to men. McMillan’s novels propagate a positive message, opening doors to progressive social reforms like economic independence for women, sexual liberation, freedom from class oppression and the crucial issue of a woman’s right to govern herself unfettered by male control.

McMillan’s female characters awaken to their dissatisfaction and get frustrated by the demands encoded in their society. Thereby they defy all social and cultural laws and subsequently transgress the social laws and thus decide to live autonomous lives and their unconventional actions stand testimony to this. Like Stella in How Stella Got Her Groove Back throws all conventions to wind and settles down with Winston, twenty years her junior. The repression suffered by them forces them to lead a life devoid of any passion or interest, out of which they desire to break free. For instance, Marilyn Grimes in The Interruption of Everything wants to take up her discarded hobbies and feed her desires.

Many women characters of McMillan, refuse to meekly accept situations, which they found were restrictive to their desires, artistic ambitions and their beliefs. They feel that familial dictates were framed in favour of men. McMillan herself, felt the pangs of being a woman and more, being a black woman. She loathed the social values of her time which treated woman condescendingly and her writings reflect her loathing.

Terry McMillan’s female characters redefine womanhood by combating orthodoxy, autocracy and fighting for equality. They don’t succumb to the travails of life.

Black Women challenged common views as they transitioned through their life stages of 1) survival, 2) protest, 3) Revolution and 4) freedom, and created a new definition of black womanhood. This new definition allowed black women to reject the system of American domination, the idea of the inferiority of African
Americans, and the traditional idea of womanhood, retain a sense of self-worth; and exercise self-efficacy. This new notion of black womanhood led to oppositional consciousness formation and eventually fostered social change. The 19\textsuperscript{th} century was a crucial time for African Americans because it marked a change in the social order, and black women played a critical role in bringing about this change. (Littlefield 59-60).

McMillan’s female characters have a robust view of life and seek happiness; hence they are resilient, tough and enduring. Nothing would stop them from attaining fulfillment and liberating themselves from the enslaved state. Her female characters grow in stature from what they were in the past by breaking free from their own shackles of thought which is a laborious journey from despair to hope. McMillan releases her female characters from social ties and expectations, thus depicting them in a new light. McMillan in \textit{How Stella Got Her Groove Back} puts forward a new line of thought, a new trend, breaking the barrier of age in relationships and it brings great solace to educated black women. “In addition to offering hope to women working through heartache, the novel questions societal double standards regarding age in relationships” (Dickson Carr 157) Stella breaks the social norm of age in romance and proves that nothing can deter her from fulfilling her dream.

McMillan’s female characters don’t want to be construed as history’s victims but as strong beings confronting the battles of life. An upsurge of female assertiveness can be witnessed in her novels, as the females lash out at men who threaten their security. Mildred Peacock throws out her first husband Crook and second husband Rufus when her
life is in peril, which shows her to be an audacious woman. Her novels empower, not only black female readers but women in general.

McMillan’s female characters desire to move forward in life and not remain mere traditional role-models in society. They set women thinking that they should not be under the illusion that marriage would provide them with eternal security and love. At the end of most of her novels, the crisis in the black family is not always resolved but a degree of self-reliance is achieved. Her characters determine their own destiny and the realization that no one is inevitable and that life has to go on against all odds, makes them amazingly optimistic. Zora Banks for instance in Disappearing Acts decides to tread alone in life when Franklin does not fulfill any of her expectations. McMillan’s novels exhibit the power of black women to redefine themselves and to explore their world of dreams. Thus her novels are a tribute to women’s independence.

Terry McMillan does not idealize the concept of motherhood but draws a realistic picture of it. For a Black Woman, motherhood not only ensures a meaningful life but a respectable place in society. Terry McMillan’s fiction celebrates the wisdom and enduring love of black motherhood. Motherhood is nothing less than survival for a black woman for it provides respectable identity and ensures the continuity of their people.

Motherhood is understood as a social and biological phenomenon and she explores the theme of Black Motherhood to the core in her fiction. Black motherhood as portrayed by McMillan has more depth than any other stereotyped picture of mother. Black motherhood is the product of African American culture and the issue of race aggravates or intensifies the difficulties of motherhood which makes it all the more cumbersome and laborious. Mildred Peacock, in Mama, being a black woman is forced
to work as a maid for white families, taking care of white children, when her own children are left uncared and unattended.

Her novels describe the trials and tribulations of black mothers focusing more on single motherhood. Her novels act as a beacon of hope to women in general and to black mothers in particular. It shows how they journey from innocence to maturity and how they move beyond their bitter past not looking back but forward to the ray of hope at the end of the tunnel. For instance, Bernadine is confident of beginning a life from the scratch after her husband deserts her for a white woman. Her novels pay a rich tribute to the resistance and resilience of black mothers.

Her fiction reflects the toughness of black women who bear the dual task of bearing and upbringing children with courage. They instill pride in their children and this makes them play the role of culture bearers. Hence the main objective of black mothers is to teach their children the value of independence and self-esteem and also to strive towards self-affirmation. They teach their children to come out of their circumscribed lives. They instill a strong sense of responsibility in their children. Despite being adepts at mothering, they are sometimes haunted by the thought that they are not tailored for this complex role. But in due course, they overcome this thought and go ahead in life. This is true of Gloria in Waiting to Exhale who is often haunted by this thought especially when her son Quincy, goes astray. Her resilience, however, prevails.

Black mothers have distinct mothering skills and are naturally equipped with child-rearing skills. They also hold themselves responsible for irresponsible children because they believe that there are no bad children, only bad mothers. They affirm that mothers can change history by bequeathing appropriate values thus enlightening future
generation. Their unconditional love revitalizes their lives as well as of those around them.

A mother’s role never ends in an individual’s life and a Black mother is cast as perpetual mother. Her concern for her children and family is endless and unlimited and the very concern leads to untold sufferings. A mother’s involvement in the lives of her children is responsible for the oscillation between resentment and gratification. Money, Mildred’s son becomes a source of pain to his mother, often being imprisoned and being jobless yet her spirit does not dwindle down. So in McMillan’s novels motherhood is not an all-rewarding phenomenon but an equally exhausting one. In short, McMillan does not idealize motherhood.

Motherhood serves as a site where black women are able to exercise and practice the power of self-reliance and freedom. In fact, they have to fight valiantly at all fronts facing the challenges of Motherhood. Though Black motherhood is a painful and laborious experience, they feel a great deal of pride in their roles as mothers. All mother figures portrayed in McMillan’s fiction are authentic characters because readers are able to easily identify themselves with them. They are considered to be the torch bearers and preservers of tradition but at the same time they are ever ready to abandon the beaten paths of society if the forces around them threaten their individuality. Their pride and power of endurance are the driving forces which lead them through the path of suffering towards autonomy and self-esteem.

The traditional role of mother presupposes passivity and submission. After prolonged period of subjugation and introspection, McMillan’s mother figures dare to tread the unconventional path. McMillan portrays the complexity of black motherhood which is at
once rewarding and tedious. Though it is an exhausting and emotionally draining exercise, a Black mother forges deep and life-long bonds with her children. The tediousness of motherhood is a direct result of the demands made by the patriarchal society. McMillan’s mother figures are not infallible, good or perfect though most of them possess dominant requisites for being good mothers. At times they can also be unforgiving. For instance, Mildred in Mama does not forgive her son Money, when he goes astray after all the counseling and the strict upbringing that he was exposed to. She does not go to see him in the prison when she returns from Los Angeles. She hardens her stand towards him which shows that she finds it difficult to overcome her bitterness despite her affection.

Mother figure is crucial and vital in literature as in real life. The ideology that motherhood by itself makes women inherently virtuous is proved in literature. Terry McMillan does not dwell on this ideology. Instead she captures different facets of motherhood which makes her depiction life-like. Mothering has an inspiring influence on woman herself and McMillan’s portraits of mother oscillates between weakness and strength which offers a realistic version of motherhood. It has become an established social role and is considered ultimate in femininity and as the biological destiny of a woman.

McMillan upholds the theme of motherhood in almost all her novels. McMillan’s depictions of mother figures are full of vigour, zest and love for life. And though they move forward leaving behind their bitter past, they always yearn to return to their roots. This is true of Mildred in Mama who longs to return to Point Haven where she feels a sense of belonging. Besides the thought that her father and sister-in-law might need her
help made her take a firm stand to leave Los Angeles. McMillan’s mother characters are not superwoman characters who resolve all issues in life but they change their attitude to the problems and surmount obstacles which they encounter despite being, commonplace real-life characters. Gloria Mathews, is a single parent to her son, who manages to educate him and provide him with a comfortable life above her means. She could not resolve the problem in her own life but she changed her attitude towards it. The mother’s pride comes through strong and clear. For instance, when Mildred sees herself as the mother of these fine young beautiful ladies, namely her daughters, Freda, Bootsey, Doll and Angel, she is overwhelmed with happiness.

McMillan represents motherhood in a realistic manner and extols Black Mothers as the hope of the Black community. Bernadine and Gloria in Waiting to Exhale and Mildred Peacock in Mama have to be extremely judicious and wary of bringing up their children as they grow without the fathers. They have the enormous responsibility of sending out their children as discerning men and women into society who can confront life’s challenges and take it in their stride. Hence the hope of the Black community rests with the Black mothers. McMillan pays rich tribute to motherhood through her characters.

Female bonding can be referred to as sisterhood and can be defined as a bond among any group of women for support and the accomplishment of shared goals. The theme of sisterhood runs through almost all the novels of McMillan and has gained a lot of attention. The bond between females does not disrupt the existing social structures or values.
Female bonding induced new consciousness and can be taken as a harbinger of women’s movement. Female Bonding is born out of deep sympathy, women express for one another. Female bonding inspires women to shed all sense of otherness assimilated by them in their early years. This bonding opens new avenues to free them from their stifling conditions. Women are the best helpers of each other and they consider themselves a single community exploited by men. In this bonding they unlearn the culturally prescribed roles and receive what they do not get from men. For instance Curly, Mildred’s sister-in-law advises her to shoot her brother the next time, when he raises his hand to strike her.

Female friendship has been legitimized as a primary relationship by the feminist concept of female bonding which provides women with a sense of security and nurturing, emotional sustenance and solace. It erases all differences and ignores barriers like age, race, economic and social class and it is also a satisfying option because it does not define women as dependant beings.

The Blacks assert their natural traits of bonding which are innate in them and they channelize this feeling into a constructive force to liberate themselves from the oppression of the patriarchal world. Thus they develop a tradition of bonding with females and resort to it to endure and resist oppression. Such a bonding ultimately empowers women. Female bonding instills Black women with a renewed commitment in life and its strength lies in the solidarity and similarity of women and the same is presented in all complexity by McMillan. The female characters depend on their female friends for succor, encouragement and inspiration. As in *The Interruption of Everything*
Marilyn Grimes finds solace in the companionship of her intimate friends Bunny and Pauline who always stand by her during trying times.

Emotional ties are too strong among women and appealing because of the affinity and intimacy among them and they develop a strong kinship network. Moreover it provides the needed psychological space within thereby women are able to know themselves, through knowing one another. Female bonding helps women to break out of the walls of silence and to create a common language and build new vocabulary to express their intimate feelings and reactions to the stressful situations faced by them in a male-dominated society. It channelizes the natural aggression outward rather than upon themselves. Hence, it is a healthy defense mechanism which provides opportunity to black women to prove their own dignity. It is like a fund of collective strength, a kind of reservoir from which women could draw strength to resolve their issues at home and outside. This is particularly true of Bernadine in *Waiting to Exhale* who is morally and emotionally supported by all her friends namely Savannah, Gloria and Robin.

Female bonding does not negate the existence of male nor does it exhort women to function individually without the masculine gender. It is the chosen bond, completely built on loyalty, honour and affection. Female Bonding as portrayed by McMillan does not involve a lesbian relationship which is a common place theme among other black writers like Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde in their works: *The Women of Brewster*, *The Color Purple* and *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* respectively. This bond was born, not to satisfy biological needs but to provide psychological support. It does not reject the heterosexual world. It opens new vistas and initiates a high level of
emotional supportiveness to sustain women through all travails. Besides, there is a lacuna which can be filled by a female friend.

It is believed that female bonding reproduces motherly feelings. Mothering can be the base for female friendship. Hence they are mutual or friendship can be the force or stimulation behind female bonding and it features flexible network. For instance, one can consider the relationship between Mildred Peacock and Curly Mac in *Mama*. Women desire intimacies in every relationship and women have become alive to the healing impact of female bonding, which goes a long way to mitigate Black women’s suffering. The offer of affection, trust, guidance given by Savannah and Gloria to Bernadine at the most needed hour proves to be a priceless treasure. Hence women turn to female bonding as the last resort which works as an outlet for pent up feelings.

Female bonding is a positive force in female development, personally and socially. It forces women out of the culturally built cocoon, to interact with the outside world effectively and forcefully. When injustice is perpetrated on women, they stick to their community that undergoes similar journeys.

Female bonding is most often reciprocal because it gives and receives equally and is mutual. Sometimes it is not reciprocal especially when one of the two individuals knows more than the other. It is a strategic device which makes women comfortable and optimistic. It also corrects their false notions and thus enlightens them on new avenues. It is most intriguing because of its complexity and potentiality and it has helped female characters to rediscover their sustaining power in surviving all kinds of atrocities. This bond exists within and outside the family. Female Bonding brings the female characters of McMillan, from the marginality to centrality and unravels the paradoxes and
intricacies involved. For instance, Savannah, Bernadine Gloria and Robin attain importance through female bonding during happy times and trying situations. This bond between the novel’s female characters gets extended to the women readers and no wonder Terry McMillan has touched the chords of million women.

Female bonding has become inevitable and an essential aspect of the black woman’s life owing to the innumerable inadequacies of the Black men. The History of Black Man poses many perplexing questions regarding his sad plight. Black man struggles to make his mark on the American landscape. Slavery has stripped him of his manhood and authoritarian position. The only remnant of it surfaces when he asserts or inflicts physical abuse on his wife. Hence it is the Phallic superiority of the Black man that makes him wield power over Black woman. Terry McMillan exhibits a fine understanding of the crux of the problem and little wonder Richards compliments McMillan for her “intimate insight into the dynamics of the relationship” and “for her understanding the male psyche” (76).

Most of McMillan’s male characters are superficial, immature, untrustworthy and in a way, insignificant. Their negative qualities are all the more obvious when they are juxtaposed with the powerful women characters like Mildred Peacock, Zora Banks, Savannah, Bernadine, Stella Payne and Marilyn Grimes. The portrayal of inadequacies in the Black men, their manners and attitude, is true to life. The male characters are incapable of any sacrifice and they fail to recognize or appreciate the sacrifice of women in a relationship.

Most of the Black men aim to have a relationship with women merely for financial support. For instance Russell, in Waiting to Exhale was seriously in love with Robin but
was not for marriage because he did not want any serious commitments. Nevertheless, he continued the relationship with her because she helped him in clearing his debt of three thousand dollars. Black men are emotionally detached, afraid to trust themselves and lack ability to attract and hold the interest of their partners. They are tormented by a sense of unworthiness and low self-esteem that they do not deserve to be happy and loved, like Franklin Swift in *Disappearing Acts*. According to Paulette Richards, “McMillan’s Skillful characterization enables reader to understand Franklin’s motivations and empathize with him as a human being. Nevertheless when they hear Zora’s testimony about how his actions affect her they cannot see him as an idealized hero” (97).

Owing to this handicap of myriad complexes, Black men exhibit negative attitude to life. They are unable to be happy and cannot tolerate others being blissfully happy. They are also incapable of love and affection. McMillan’s portrayal of black male characters as incompetent and unreliable has drawn much criticism. In her novels especially *Waiting to Exhale* she presents a wide variety of black men who are lacking in dedication and are ready to abdicate crucial responsibilities. Charles, Savannah’s lover, Russell, Robin’s lover and John, Bernadine’s husband are all examples of men who are not happy and therefore cannot make others happy.

These men have one thing in common namely the tendency to live selfishly, notwithstanding the fact that, others are depending on them for emotional and financial sustenance. The theme of male inadequacy is woven around every novel and it is played to the fullest in *Mama* in the character of Crook. The Black man’s frustration makes him detest any serious relationship with women. He is annoyed with the black women’s traditional outlook with regard to institutions like marriage and family. It is highly
deplorable that black man suffers from myriad complexes that make his life all the more burdensome. They are denied dignified labour and that affects their ego and thereby they consider themselves less than real men. Such a social marginalization has a devastating impact and is detrimental to the smooth functioning of the society. Black men in McMillan’s fiction fail miserably as good partners in all aspects - emotional, social, financial and sexual.

McMillan expresses her thoughts on the issue of acute shortage of eligible men for educated urban black women in an article entitled “Looking for Mr. Right”. Here she opines that she never expected to be single at thirty eight. The Black men as portrayed by McMillan are self-centered beings and never care for the interests of their spouses. They are introverts and are never transparent about their dealings. Few are faithful and most have extra-marital relationships without any inhibitions. They desert black women for white women which is humiliating to the former. They have wrong notions and believe that sex is the only prime thing in a relationship. Majority of them are unemployed, imprisoned, unreliable, irresponsible, shallow and arrogant. For them rage is misconstrued as masculinity and often women suffer the brunt of men’s ravaging discontent. Black men never admit their flaws and blame their own women and the whites for their miserable lives. They refuse to be accountable for their own actions. They have no idea of the havoc they bring upon themselves, their families and society. They are remorseless and continue to unleash the society with crimes, idleness and violence for which Crook, Mildred’s first husband, John, Bernadine’s husband and Franklin Swift, Zora’s live-in -partner are apt examples. They are pictured as irresponsible beings who disappear when bills have to be paid and kids to be reared. Owing to their inadequacies
the divorce rate has begun to skyrocket and the traditional black women had to raise children all by themselves.

Black men never learn to respect their spouses or their ties with their respective families. They are never sensitive to their feelings and never demonstrate how important or precious their spouses are to them. They expect their partner’s undivided attention but give nothing in return. Black men are blind to the fact that black women are capable of trust, understanding and sacrifice. They look condescendingly at women and cannot stand women with independent thinking. Due to their own inadequacies they tend to fall behind all the more and the institution of marriage is undermined to a great extent in the black community.

McMillan’s male characters accurately express the sentiments of many a black man in America. In the light of the historic pressures the Black men have suffered, their present plight can be justified to some extent. McMillan never intended her novel to be an initiative on male-bashing because she has created some positive male characters as well. For instance, Stella’s lover, Winston Shakespeare, in How Stella Got Her Groove Back and Buster, Mildred’s father in Mama are positive and flawless male characters pictured by McMillan. The negative male characters are many in her novels like, Crook in Mama, Franklin in Disappearing Acts, Rufus, Robin’s lover and Charles Turner, Savannah’s lover who betrays her trust in Waiting to Exhale. She has reflected in her novels that only under dire circumstances most Black men make real commitments in life. Consequently, the present younger generation is bereft of a father figure- a positive male role model in the family.
Terry McMillan’s men lack the well deserved self-esteem and respect that define manhood. In contrast Black men’s ideal of manhood indicates power, toughness, detachment, indulging in physical abuse, addiction to alcohol and drugs and so on. Black male as portrayed by McMillan perpetuates a negative image. He is of the opinion that he is a man because he has fathered a child. He is unaware that he has not done his part in guiding his son to manhood. Such ignorance is no reason for shunning his responsibility.

Terry McMillan’s narrative skills have garnered her favorable reception – her use of dialect, her insight into relationship, her realism and her characterization are applauded by critics. She has received several prestigious awards early in her career. McMillan’s novels do not have a traditional plot structured around a central conflict. She confines herself to the day to day struggle in the lives of her protagonists. Terry McMillan’s novels do not follow any conventions of the other fiction writers. And most of all, women readers can relate to McMillan’s work because the crux of her novels is seen in the portrayal of relationships. Terry McMillan’s novels transcend the traditional popular fiction categories.

One issue that emerged from many reviews of McMillan’s earlier books is the amount of profanity she uses. But for McMillan, reproducing her character’s profane language is her way of staying close to them. Hence the language used is accurate and apart from being realistic the narrative technique used by McMillan keeps the tempo of the plot. The flavor of language also captures the features of a particular character. As she said in Publisher’s Weekly: “That’s the way we talk. And I want to know why I’ve never read a review where they complain about the language that male writers use. (Smith 51)
McMillan is a master at creating dialogue that sounds realistic. In her novels she has caught the rhythms of the black narrator’s speech. McMillan’s novels feature lively narrators who are dying to narrate their experiences. The novel *Waiting to Exhale* is narrated in first and third person as the heroines voyage through a highly materialistic world in search of love. According to Paulette Richards,

> Her skill in translating black English dialect into print cements her friendship with her core African-American audience. At the same time, this skill is a measure of McMillan’s artistry. McMillan does not simply transcribe contemporary black vernacular speech. Instead she captures an urban black vernacular style while conforming to the rules of standard English grammar and usage so that all audiences can comfortably engage with her prose. (34).

Many critics praise McMillan’s direct and unpretentious approach, apart from her authentic portrayal of African-American relationships and her style of writing intimately about a middle class black experience and their social concerns. She anchors her story and her characters in the real world. For instance, almost all her characters like Savannah, Bernadine, Gloria and Robin in *Waiting to Exhale* are women whom we are likely to meet in day today life. Even others like Mildred Peacock, Freda, Marilyn Grimes and Zora Banks are characters to whom we can relate. McMillan’s deft creation of the psychologically complex character of Franklin in *Disappearing Acts* brought her great applause. Her reviewers applauded her for not making her narrative monotonous, merely another contemporary Black discourse on the sufferings of the victims. “Reviewers praise McMillan’s realistic detail and the powerful characterization of her heroine … (Hall 67)
McMillan’s strong point in her writing is her use of stream of consciousness technique and her ability to capture the voices of her characters. Almost all her dialogues are broken by interior ruminations and thoughts. She ignores the physical details of the physical worlds of her characters, but concentrates on the character’s desperations, suffocations and limitations. The novel *The Interruption of Everything* is a sincere display of emotions wherein she gives importance to emotions, feelings and sentiments which forms the fabric of life, which are inevitable. Action does not have much place in McMillan’s novels. She emphasizes on the psychological intensity of her characters and does not conform to the literary conventions used by her contemporaries.

Besides, McMillan resorts to autobiography as a tool when it is useful to the development of her narratives. This tactic clearly works for McMillan. However, she emphatically argues that “Stella isn’t a reinvention of myself. She’s only part of my persona. … What I give my characters are my concerns, which for the most part are grounded in reality” (Porter 41). Her style, replete with realism is unique and that has led her to success.

And as always, McMillan incorporates humour into even the most traumatic situations, as seen in by a scene in *The Interruption of Everything*, in which Marilyn ends up babysitting her hairdresser’s children while waiting twelve hours for new braids.

McMillan’s female characters learn their lessons the hard way and they become the architects of their own lives. Her characters reassess their lives and in the process of redefining themselves, encounter many external and internal obstacles to achieve self-actualization as autonomous African American Women. It is the female characters’ sanguine attitude that keeps them from succumbing to despair.
Terry McMillan’s heroines are highly intelligent, energetic, determined forceful and charismatic. These characters would have been rendered uninteresting sans the key ingredient of emotional perspicacity. Emotionally intelligent character is one who is aware of one’s own emotions and its effect on others. Stella is an apt example of this quality and it is seen in her demeanour. McMillan’s females know to manage and restrain those emotions in a healthy and productive manner. They are capable of comprehending other’s reactions intuitively and treat them accordingly, building good rapport, trust and relationships. For instance, in *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* Viola Price’s intuition and insight into her children’s problems is incomparable.

Her female characters are optimistic, resilient and adaptable. Besides, they are persuasive which makes them emotionally matured and intensely motivated. They have a driving passion for life that makes them open to changes like Mildred Peacock and Marilyn Grimes, in *Mama* and *The Interruption of Everything* respectively. They confront odd situations with extreme self-confidence and behave assertively as the situation demands and continue to be persistent in their efforts to bring about positive changes in their hostile world. They do not yield, even if they do not reap immediate results. Consider Stella for instance, she accepts Winston against all odds and settles down.

Another adorable quality of McMillan’s female characters is their willingness to admit their own flaws. They show a flexibility that enables them to recognize their flaws and initiate positive changes in themselves. Freda admits her weakness to drugs and alcohol and wants to mend her life from further degradation. The same is true of other female characters like Mildred and Robin. They successfully tend to manage emotional issues which help them to deal with contentious members, responding to other’s frustrations and
concerns with a strong sense of self. Savannah guides and counsels Robin and handles her tactfully to make her realize that she was wasting her energy on Russell.

Terry McMillan’s heroines are so well drawn that the readers, especially women are completely at home with them. They observe men and contemporary America with humor, melancholy and great affection. All her characters are well developed and have redeeming qualities making them life-like and believable.

McMillan chooses an innovative mode and writes from a woman’s perspective which offers flexibility and freedom from the traditional plots which often highlighted the pessimistic theme - the aftermath of slavery. Her intention is to bring the black experience to the limelight and prove to the world that black women have suffered atrocities in the form of slavery for centuries, but they are not meek beings and cannot be branded weaklings. Their unfavourable and hostile environment teaches them to react, retaliate and fight against obstacles which tend to stifle out their existence.

McMillan’s novels parade Black Women’s power to define their own lives. Black women “had to develop strength rather than glory and fragility, and had to be active and assertive rather than passive and submissive” (Landry 89). McMillan’s fiction does not romanticize patriarchal pattern of family. Her fiction explores the dark and discomforting world of black middle class. McMillan does not openly condemn or endorse oppression but shows that it exists. She does not delineate surreal experiences in her novels. McMillan’s fiction paves way for a new family set-up wherein woman takes up novel roles, for the survival of her family and herself. Such a move was not considered feminine by tradition. According to Paulette Richards “Mama not only reflects
transformations in the social status of African Americans, it also reflects transformations in women’s roles in Society” (61).

Terry McMillan’s novels can be taken as an assault against all forces which prevents or suppresses women’s uprising in all fields like - educational, economic, artistic and sexual arenas. Her female characters redefine womanhood. Women move from victim’s position to independent beings, enjoying complete sovereignty in expressing their stance, their art, their religious beliefs, and their right to support themselves, and elevate the living conditions of all women. It is here that McMillan transcends the barrier of race and becomes the spokesperson for all women. Her novels prove she is one who is concerned with a global issue - women’s autonomy rather than the upliftment of a particular race. Many crucial situations in life give women the opportunity to realize their potential.

John Leland in his essay quotes Gladys Johns, a regular reader of McMillan’s books. She says, “I admire those (novels of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker ) but damn, they depress me. I know we’ve been victims as black women, but Alice and Toni really stick it to you and I don’t want to be reminded of it all the time. Terry talks about problems, but with humor and fun.”

McMillan’s female characters get frustrated by the demands encoded in their society and subsequently they muster courage to defy all written and unwritten social laws and thus decide to live autonomous lives.

This study has focused on the main themes found in Terry McMillan’s fiction- the theme of Self-affirmation of Black womanhood, Facets of Black Motherhood, Female Bonding and Men’s Inadequacies. Her works stand testimony to the trials of the urban
Black women. In depicting the educated Black middle class society with great skill, depth and understanding, Terry McMillan has proved her mettle as a novelist of great caliber. She has pictured life and has paved a new path for others to take the cue. She has refused outright to follow the path of her contemporaries who dealt with issues of race and impact of slavery in their novels. She is a writer, an artist who transcends the barrier of race and addresses the globe. Terry McMillan has depicted in her novels the Black urban class which she has drawn from her personal and general experience in a spontaneous style evoking an urban vernacular to bring about a realistic touch.

The writers of her age were primarily concerned with Black culture and Black experience. But Terry McMillan introduced a new perspective to African American literature. Her artistic triumph lies in incorporating an African American female point of view into her fiction. The remarkable feature about McMillan’s works is her unique approach towards her themes, which has earned her instantaneous fame and distinguished her from other African American novelists and made her a novelist of outstanding merit.

Terry McMillan perfectly understands the new generation of writers who are able to capture the most intimate experiences and hopes of African Americans. In fact, she has edited an anthology entitled *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Fiction* (1990) in which she says, “There is indeed a new generation of African American writers emerging … . We are capturing and making permanent and indelible, reactions to, and impressions of, our most intimate observations, dreams and nightmares, experiences and feelings about what it felt like for ‘us’ to be African American from the seventies until now- the nineties.
Terry McMillan’s novels focus on the gradual transition in the lives of Black women from the past to the present. In the past the Black women were relegated to the background and they passively accepted this position. But gradually their desire for autonomy resisted the authoritarian forces of the rigid society and they wanted to break through the prejudices of the traditional past. Not that they wanted to completely do away with everything in the tradition. They valued certain things in their tradition and were anxious to preserve it. Through the ages, black women have consciously or unconsciously helped to preserve and carry forward their traditional culture which earned them the name, the guardians of tradition and culture. Owing to the precarious position of McMillan’s female characters, they reach a state of impasse, after suffering great anguish in their lives, and then, eventually decide to embark on a new path, accepting challenges which acted as stimuli and spurred them to achieve their original selves.

Terry McMillan’s female characters do not completely deplore the past and are not wholly antagonistic to tradition. They possess the wisdom and discrimination to choose and distinguish between what is to be rejected and what is to be preserved. They are forthright in rejecting a tradition that wipes out female individuality. At the same time they are equally strong in preserving the social institution of marriage and the self-effacing motherhood.

Terry McMillan’s women are culture bearers for they imbibe and carry on whatever is valuable in the Black tradition even as they discard whatever they consider an unwanted baggage. Not only do they preserve what is valuable but being great mothers they pass it on to posterity thereby ensuring a better future for the Black community. Thus they
achieve a harmonious synthesis between the best of tradition and the most desirable of the present which is a sign of a propitious beginning.