CHAPTER-2

Self Affirmation of Black Womanhood
(CHAPTER 2)

SELF-AFFIRMATION OF BLACK WOMANHOOD

“I’m supposed to do something different, too, and I don’t know how I’m supposed to do it or what I’m supposed to do but I can’t do it by the book anymore. That much I do know” (TIOE 176).

Terry McMillan’s novels exposes the frustrations and hard-won pleasures associated with middle-class security and female autonomy - both financial and sexual among the African-American women in modern American society. To portray this, McMillan focuses on the everyday experiences of energetic black women protagonists who overcome male domination and socio-economic obstacles to achieve self-actualization. Liesl Schillinger in her review says, “Terry McMillan is the only novelist I have ever read, apart from writers of children’s books, who makes me glad to be a woman”.

Terry McMillan has established herself as one of the most important novelists in America, by consistently upholding and exploring black women’s experience in ways that have resonated deeply with feminist perspectives. In characters such as Mildred Peacock in Mama, Zora Banks in Disappearing Acts, Savanna Jackson, Bernadine Harris, Gloria Matthews and Robin in Waiting to Exhale, Stella Paynes in How Stella Got Her Groove Back and Marilyn Grimes in The Interruption of Everything McMillan has created strong, independent, rebellious women who struggle to claim a sense of self.

The diminution of the male as a patriarch is a result of Slavery’s gradual demasculinization. Consequently the slave woman became the centre of the family, and
hence the hypothesis of the black matriarchy. A Matriarchy is a system of government ruled by women, but many writers argue that African and American women under slavery had no privileges or power, only the dual challenges of labour and motherhood. Some writers argue that what has been mislabeled as matriarchy was in fact a burdened state. This condition was amplified by the stifling conditions of poverty and illiteracy. Slavery left its unmistakable mark on African and American life. Recently, however, the assumption that slavery created the basis for the instability of marriage and the inversion of traditional gender roles within the African American family has been challenged.

Gradually strong roles for African American women began to emerge. During the late nineteenth century, freed black men found it very difficult, sometimes even impossible, to obtain jobs but this was not so for black women. However, with the migration from the rural south to the northern cities, came the rise of families run by women. The position as the head of the household is not synonymous with empowerment for African American women. As their families became vulnerable to the traumatizing experiences of urbanization, black women lost the support of the extended family and the small community. In addition to this, their roles continued to be moulded by a racial bias which forced most women into domestic work for white families. Frances Beal points out the deplorable condition of the Black woman.

Her physical image has been maliciously maligned: she has been sexually molested and abused by the white colonizer; she has suffered the worst kind of economic exploitation having been forced to serve as the white women’s maid and as wet nurse for white offspring while her own children were, more often than not, starving and neglected. It is the depth of degradation to be socially
manipulated, physically raped, used to undermine your own household, and to be powerless to reverse the situation. (61)

African American women were the poorest lot who were forced to fend for themselves. Although white feminists have had some success challenging male domination Black women have often found themselves the victim of male powerlessness that causes the black men to give vent to their frustrations on their own women. This projection has been vividly represented in works of fiction by African American writers as in Ann Petry’s The Street, in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, in Alice Walker’s The Third Life Of George Copeland and now in Terry McMillan’s fiction.

McMillan’s work is important because it depicts Black family life outside the norms idealized by the white middle class. She refuses to accept the black families as a pathological unit that can do nothing more than sustain the conditions of its oppression. Far from sustaining the conditions of its oppression it depicts the aggression exhibited by female characters when their original self is throttled out of life. In Maya Angelou’s poem Still I Rise one can get a glimpse of a defiant black woman in all her pride and grace, determined not to be cowed down by the oppressive society.

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies.
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I’ll rise ... 

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like tear drops,
Weakened by my soulful cries. …

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I’ll rise. …

It is evident that Terry McMillan’s polemical novels do not idealize the patriarchal family as the necessary configuration for emotional security and psychological health. On the contrary such a system has resulted in feelings of guilt, betrayal and rage. Savannah in Waiting to Exhale, one of the four friends proves her strength of character when she says, “And I’m not one of these women who think that a man is the answer to everything” (WTE 3). Robin in same novel asserts herself after being betrayed by Russell several times. The same sentiment is echoed in her words when she asserts, “I’m going to have to learn how to stand on my own two feet … The answer to everything is inside me” (WTE 536).

McMillan’s fiction promotes alternatives by reconfiguring family arrangements relating to the changing roles of male and female. Although many African American feminists have promoted goals of racial equality, the care and nurturing of children and the strengthening of the African American family, McMillan has stayed away from it and has exclusively urged and concentrated on the reconfiguration of the family system. McMillan, in her majority of novels like Mama, Disappearing Acts, Waiting To Exhale and How Stella Got Her Groove Back has the traditional family reconfigured. In the opening of the novel Mama, Mildred is being beaten because she has challenged her husband’s macho position. Later, she lays claim to all that is truly hers, saying to
herself, “This is my house ... I’ve worked too damn ... Like I’m your property ... I pay all the bills ... to buy it ... These ain’t your damn kids ... got your blood but they mine” (Mama 15).

In a clear feminist gesture, McMillan’s contemporary African American families allocate to men a different space than the patriarchal centre. In an interview with Wendy Smith, Terry McMillan says, “The men are on the periphery, they’re not the focus ... .” This statement is true of all her novels. Mildred in Mama says, “Most of all she hated Crook. And if it weren’t for their five kids, she’d have left him a long time ago (Mama 1). In Waiting to Exhale Savannah is anxious not to find a mere man but Mr. Right. She says, “I worry about if and when I will ever find the right man, if I’ll ever be able to exhale” (WTE 21).

In Waiting to Exhale, the four friends share a common voice and are in a critical point in their life. Darryl Pinckney in a review states, “They recognize that black men have treated them the way they have because they, black women, have let them get away with it all these years. The love of a black woman isn’t a black man’s right, one character tells herself, it’s a privilege”. McMillan’s female characters desire to get into relationships with men on their own terms. Viola Price is strong enough to put her foot down and is not prepared to take it lying down when she learns of her husband, Cecil’s betrayal. She and Cecil had been married for thirty eight years and naturally she is enraged that he has deserted her for a younger woman Brenda. She says, “Sometime I wish I had a giant vacuum cleaner so I could suck up all the stupid men in the world and put ‘em in a big hole and bury ‘em in hot mud and not let not a one of ‘em out until they realize that the
women they married … is the ones that truly loved ‘em and even though these new and improved models may give ‘em a quick thrill, it won’t last longer ….(ADLDS 278)

McMillan challenges stereotypical views of African-American women through her novels. In *Mama*, for instance, the protagonist Mildred throws her alcoholic husband Crook out of her life. After this episode “Mildred felt like she’d shed ten layers of dead skin. She knew she’d made the right decision” (Mama 26). Centuries of betrayal and exploitation suffered by women and lack of commitment on the part of men, gradually shattered the traditional family system. Such a change did not happen overnight but gradually as women started taking up dominant roles fulfilling the needs of the family. Virtually, with women taking up dominant roles in the family, a novel family system came into being. For instance, the dominant character, Mildred Peacock, is forced by circumstances to take up such a role in *Mama*. She tries many trades to make money, after separation from her husband. She uses her home to organize parties -for people to dance and gamble. At Christmas time, there was a dire need for money so she approached the social service department for help. She always prided herself on being self-sufficient and self-reliant. But, for once, she ignored her pride for the sake of her children because Christmas was around the corner.

McMillan’s female characters fight back oppressive forces in their orbit and reveal their stand to the patriarchal society. This can be illustrated in the character Marilyn Grimes when she overhears her husband, Leon talking to his girlfriend about leaving home and his wife. The conversation which ensues will unravel the strong character of Marilyn:
Call the ... back and tell her you’re coming right over, ... Leon. You said you wanted to leave. So leave.

I didn’t mean today, Marilyn.

Oh, so what am I supposed to do, wait until it’s convenient for you? Is that it? Marilyn, I’m sorry.

Leon, if you don’t get out of this house in the next ten minutes, I’m going to do something I might regret. (TIOE 152)

Marilyn takes this shock in her stride and decides to move forward in life. She says, “I’m about to explore my options.” (TIOE 178)

Terry McMillan’s women readers in particular find that her characters and situations identical to their own life and conditions. At last they are reading something that sounds, authentic and true to life. In McMillan’s first novel, Mama, Mildred’s husband Crook holds fiercely to his notion of being the man of the house within the nuclear family. He hollers, “Don’t you know your place yet girl?” (Mama 9) Her husband inflicts violence on her; not just physical but mental, verbal, and sexual. She puts up with all his atrocities just to fend for her five kids. For instance, he slaps her for having a two minute conversation with Percy Russell which shows his lack of faith in her. She reaches a breaking point when she is unable to stomach the abuse and eventually musters strength and gets rid of Crook. She feels, “I’ve worked too damn hard for you to be hurting me all these years. And me like a damn fool, taking it” (Mama 14).

Women in general desire autonomy but that does not mean she does not need companionship and affection. In Terry McMillan’s novels we are introduced to such
women who are branded as, to quote Janet Mason Ellerby, women who “inhabit conflicting subject positions”. According to her, as given in a review, 

Even in seemingly healthy family arrangements, most women inhabit conflicting subject positions. One desires autonomy, defining herself and the values by which she lives moving into a world in which she acts and chooses ... free to shape her future. Another is erotic, desiring affection, companionship and emotional commitment embodied in the romantic tradition. McMillan’s novels allow us to see these subject positions in conflict. (105-17)

McMillan’s women characters are situated in specific histories, cultures and classes. The women are partially dominated by and liberated from the domestic ideology of their time and place. As in Waiting to Exhale Bernadine is not in tears when she is deserted by her husband John. But the thought of her life and her kid’s future torments her. Composing herself she says, “I could just kill him for what he’s doing to my life. I swear I could just kill him” (WTE 262) Such embittered thoughts are expressed overtly and it is an indication that the McMillan’s female characters are prepared to flee from their circumscribed lives. Likewise, Freda, Mildred’s daughter in Mama, thinks beyond the confines of her limited life. She is a strong willed girl who wants to take up sociology with a purpose. She says, “I can’t save the world, but I want to make a difference somehow” (Mama 186).

McMillan’s readers are presented with the serious complexity of the patriarchal model that continues to influence gender identity and limit women’s autonomy. As part of the African American literary canon, McMillan’s novels locate the African American family as a site of struggle. It is evident that African American families are on the cutting edge
of a number of changes in our society. McMillan’s fiction captures the evolving dynamic change in African American families by looking at both extremes - the very poor, and the ambitious Black women of the upper strata. Many African American women face poverty while many others make great professional strides. For instance, Mildred in *Mama*, encounters poverty and struggles to make both ends meet for her family, whereas Stella in *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* is placed in an affluent situation. Zora in *Disappearing Acts* is pictured as educated and ambitious professional woman. McMillan delineates new options for family arrangements to accommodate both women who divorce, and women who choose to create a family without a husband, like Bernadine in *Waiting to Exhale* and Zora in *Disappearing Acts* respectively.

Besides, she wants to unmask the consistently reiterated belief that “the most glorious destiny of a woman is reciprocal love with a man” and interrogate “the longing for a unique, synthesizing, romantic connection with a man which should result in monogamous bonding and the institution of marriage” (Ellerby 105). According to Janet Mason Ellerby, “her narratives refute what Patricia Hill Collins calls the image of “happy Slave” ... (105). One cannot meet happy slaves in McMillan’s fiction because many women no longer accept traditional family values. For instance, Marilyn Grimes, the protagonist of *The Interruption of Everything* reaches a breaking point when she says, “That I have been attached to my family for so long, I need to find out what kind of person I’m capable of being as Marilyn Dupree and not just as Marilyn Grimes: mother and wife” (TIOE 9).

Yet in many books by and about women, the family remains dominant and plots still move to resolve or efface domestic conflict and impose harmony. McMillan’s narratives
hold up such ideological plots by creating narrative spaces where Black families are in crisis, where conflict is not always resolved, where the predicament of contemporary existence do find a place and finally self-reliance abides with nurturing interdependence. Such an ending comes about in novels like *Mama*, *Waiting to Exhale* and *Disappearing Acts*. Beal observes the plight of the Black woman, “Most black women have to work to help house, feed and clothe their families. Black women make up a substantial percentage of the black working force from the poorest black family to the so called ‘middle class’ family” (61). In *Mama*, Mildred Peacock hustles ceaselessly to sustain her family. We find that she works in a salt factory, cleans houses, throws rent parties and even endures a brief stint as a prostitute. As Will Blythe says in her review, “When life presses in on Mildred in the form of bill collectors, police and nosey neighbors, she presses right back. Indeed, in the vernacular of this fine novel, Mildred Peacock slaps the forces of economic determinism clean upside their hoary heads.” *Mama* offers characters like Mildred Peacock and Freda, capable of victories over their particular difficulties.

Terry McMillan has been compared to Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor for her fiery, resolute and tough black heroines. Zora of *Disappearing Acts*, is one such character who can be added to the list of indomitable women who came to New York from Ohio. She is thirty, and is a musician who makes her living teaching in a Junior high school, but gratifies her soul by writing songs. She dreams of a recording contract and was on her way to that goal when she falls in love with Franklin Swift who is separated from his wife and two children. The novel gives an account of a love affair between them which was initially passionate but it turns sour when Zora becomes pregnant and Franklin turns violent and abusive due to his frustration over frequent
unemployment. His inferiority complex and resentment escalates and so does Zora’s frustration and they are driven to desperation by the end of the novel. This novel investigates difficulties in relationship between black professionals and those of the working class. In this novel Zora is forced to take drastic decisions because of Franklin’s nature who is a loser in all ways. He is frustrated by his dealings with the white construction world. He beats Zora, who is pregnant and torments her physically and mentally. Though Zora loved and adored him, she throws him out because he continuously refuses to take responsibility, blaming racism and the whites for his unsettled condition.

The plot of *Waiting to Exhale*, is another novel which centers around four friends in their thirties, Savannah Jackson, Bernadine Harris, Robin Stokes and Gloria Mathews who discover themselves, their lives and their mates. Besides these three major issues, they also face and deal with cultural, social, and economic challenges facing black women. One can get a glimpse of McMillan’s high-spirited and vibrant female characters in these novels. Similarly Stella appreciates her own idea of going on a vacation to rejuvenate herself when she got bored with her stagnated life after her marriage got dissolved. She says, “I feel bouncy like I could sort of just fly low but fly nevertheless. This was a smart move, Stella, real smart.”

McMillan draws vivid portraits of women who are successful at liberating themselves from the desire for the patriarchal family. “The expansion of wives’ role to shared breadwinning, gradually led to the demise of the traditional family. Instead of rigidly separated breadwinner and home maker roles, spouses in the ‘new family’ now pursued permeable and flexible – if not entirely interchangeable roles” (Landry 136). In *Mama,*
after a year of separation from Crook, Mildred’s endurance seems to fade, but she does not regret divorcing Crook. She scrubs, cleans and washes white folks’ homes and becomes the bread winner of the family but does not accept defeat in life thanks to her optimistic nature.

I know I ain’t gon be on my knees for the rest of my life …. This is what I gotta do right now so I don’t have to ask nobody for nothing …. Ain’t no sense in me whining like some chessy cat. This ain’t killing me, Women’ve done worse thangs to earn a living and this may not be the bottom for me. (Mama 32)

After a good deal of introspection, Marilyn Grimes realizes that she has been a fool all along and her family members were not only reaping the fruits of her labour but also have been ungrateful and un appreciative of her sacrifices. She thinks,

I’m not half as afraid of earthquakes as I should be, mostly because I feel like a fault line myself. Right now for instance, I’m rattling inside. My mind is jostling. I’m all shook up. I stare … until an unbelievable calm seems to fall over me and I realize something I haven’t thought about before: just about everybody in my life is doing exactly what they want to do. Arthurine is like a college girl, making plans to move out on her own. She’s even got travel plans. Arthurine is probably in better shape than I am, too. At least she gets some exercise. Spencer … is with the girl he wants to be with right now … . Simeon has discovered that playing music is what really moves him. Sabrina is happy and pregnant. … she blew me off and is doing it the way she wants to. Even Joy. She enjoys getting high, … And then there’s Leon. My so-called husband. He’s having an affair but thinks of it as a new form of friendship. … Now it’s just me. (TIOE 182)
From McMillan’s female characters’ side, there is a collective resistance to the hegemony of dominant family values owing to unfavourable circumstances. McMillan, in her fiction, jettisons conventional domestic ideology. This gives scope for reconfigured African American families wherein a woman can experience loving trust, respect, commitment and connection like Savannah in *Waiting to Exhale*, supporting her mother and moving from one city to another, plans to shift to a fourth city, Phoenix. She was looking for nothing but “Peace of mind; a place I can call home; feeling important to somebody; and just trying to live a meaningful, significant and positive life” (WTE 5).

McMillan’s women prove to the world that they do not merely exist in relationship to men whether as mother, daughter, wife or mistress. On the other hand they do live in their own right as individuals. They have become aware of the fact that their dependence on men have made them emotionally, intellectually and morally crippled. McMillan’s fiction is not a mere cry for independence but the recognition of women’s rights as individuals. Marilyn Grimes in *The Interruption of Everything* is determined to bring about a change in her life so that her priorities are taken care of and are not neglected. She says, “I’m scared. But I have to do something or the spirit I still have left is going to petrify (TIOE 9). Hence Terry McMillan’s novels can be viewed as a diatribe against traditional gender norms. Thus her novels contribute a lot to the understanding of the evolving African-American family. “Society’s most potent tool for making female human beings into dependent adults is a socialization process. We have a society which is based on arbitrary and strictly enforced sex roles” (Kreps 46).
McMillan’s depiction of African and American family in *Mama* rejects the dominant patriarchal family value reinforced and proposed by the Christian rights. In *Mama*, Mildred ultimately rejects her fearful existence as victim of an abusive husband. This resilience in the face of many adversities and her ability to fend for herself and her five children, in both the urban wasteland of Point Haven, Michigan and in Los Angeles, deserve applause. She makes a firm resolution, not to accept defeat and yield. Mildred Peacock is not a transcendent or an exemplar of the black women’s experience, yet she is a character whose strength is manifested in her ability to survive the difficulties which fate brings her way. As Michael Awkward observed in his review,

> It is purposely stark, unlyrical delineation of an unredeemed and unrepentant female character … *Mama* stands boldly outside the mainstream of contemporary black women’s fiction … in its largely episodic depictions of the travails of Mildred and her family, is a moving, often hilarious and insightful exploration of a slice of black urban life that is rarely seen in contemporary black women fiction.

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Thus McMillan proves by means of her novels that her female characters take great effort to explore their identity and do not want to bow to patriarchal conventions. In *The Interruption of Everything*, as soon as Leon, Marilyn Grimes’s husband, deserts her, she is surprised at how happy and relieved she is that her husband has left her. She brings about some changes in her life, like getting a membership from Bunny’s Health Club, focusing on her yoga classes in Berkeley, visiting massage therapist and manicurist and indulging in various other activities. Taking care of herself, she starts with the treadmill and rigorous exercise and changes her life-style on the whole. She registers for classes
online, logs on her computer using her personal ID number and also brings about a new look on her person. She feels good, “Because I’ve finally done something I’ve been meaning to do” (TIOE 272)

Likewise Stella has a whimsical idea and goes on a vacation to Jamaica and falls desperately in love with Winston who is half her age. At first she does not give in to the feelings of infatuation but later she understands that she is seriously in love with Winston. She is overwhelmed by the change that has come over her after her marriage got dissolved. She says,

I realize something very profound: I haven’t been this aroused on the spot in about three thousand years. It feels like a miracle because it means I am still alive inside and not dead after all. You may think you’ve lost it but it’s really just lying around dormant, waiting for somebody to come along and reignite those flames you assumed had long since turned to cold white ashes. Apparently the fire is not out. (HSGHGB 59)

Macmillan’s uniqueness is seen in the manner she delineates an omnipresent aspect which is universal - namely pain and suffering. In the case of Black women, pain can result from male abuse, poverty, neglect, or the inability to cope successfully with one’s own seeming unimportance. McMillan’s female characters suffer such pain; and their battle against these forces makes the essence of her novels. Her characters understand that painful experiences come as a consequence of living in the world; and that living means learning how to survive such painful incidents, and to steel oneself for subsequent challenges. Mildred in *Mama*, takes a vow when she suffers betrayal at the hands of men, never again to open her heart generously to a man. “No, Hell, no. Her heart was
McMillan creates a different scenario in her fiction when compared to her contemporary writers, where the African American man of the family is no longer powerful or simply does not exist, and the female dominates. Black women’s responsibilities extend beyond procreation which is the reason for their being more powerful than men. They face a dire need to ensure that their children are fed and properly reared. Mildred is definite about one thing that her children would not go hungry. Even if she cannot afford delicacies like steak, onions and mashed potatoes, they certainly would not be left to starve. Besides, she is determined as a rock to send even the last one of them to college, no matter what befalls.

Part of Macmillan’s project is to dismantle the stereotype of the resilient African American single mother who can cope with whatever troubles and sorrows life serves her. In fact, Mildred’s endurance often sinks below sea level. Life on her own is so difficult that she continues to put her faith in the mythical family model that includes a steadfast loving husband who will support his wife and children. Mildred says, “A good husband. Some healthy babies. Peace of mind. Them is the thangs you try to get out of life.” (Mama 33). It takes considerable time for her to shed this ideal and see reality. However, Mildred’s illusions do not have McMillan’s endorsement. Instead McMillan complicates matters by adding Mildred’s erotic desires to the domestic problems which makes her portrayal realistic. Mildred is not promiscuous but she wants to have some fun and she does attract men. Although her children object, she becomes so erotically aroused by the new men in her life that for a while “she can’t remember her children by name or
by face”. But her affairs end as abruptly as they begin, not without emotional cost to herself and her children. At one point she pledges to keep away from men but driven by impossible bills, she hosts poker parties, remarries, divorces and moves from house to house, from state to state.

Mildred takes constant effort to maintain some form of family stability and financial security by replacing the man of the house, but each new partnership ends in a disappointing betrayal. Mildred is very cautious while moving with other’s husbands, no matter what kind of financial proposition he made. For instance she liked Percy and he too liked her but she did not want his wife knocking on her door in the middle of the night. Mildred’s relationship with a tall man Sonny Taylor, who was in the air force, was not approved by her daughters. Finally she made them understand that she was a grown woman with needs just as any other female. Through Mildred, McMillan shows just how persistently women will hold on to the ideological promise of rescue by the “right man”.

McMillan’s indomitable female characters overcome their life’s problems and eventually determine their own destiny. It is inevitable that Mildred is disappointed at the initial stage about the fact that she must make a family all by herself for her children. Her ability to do that is so limited that she can neither give nor receive affection from her children. Ironically she becomes a patriarch herself, handing out orders, and making hostile threats. McMillan does not glamorize single motherhood nor does she explore the opportunity that matriarchy might offer. McMillan proves by her narrative that the absent father can be effectively replaced by the strong, enduring and loving Black Matriarch. Though Mildred at times is skeptical about her life, she emerges as a character with an indomitable spirit. The past ten years she felt she had been over-burdened and
now she felt light because she knew, “she could dig her way out of any hole, no matter how deep it was” (Mama 302).

The same spirit is evinced by Bernadine in *Waiting to Exhale*, after her divorce. She moves around with many men but, when one of them expressed his wish of marrying her, she cuts him short sternly and tells to her friend, “She used him. But so what? That is what they’d been doing to women for years she thought. Taking advantage of us” (WTE 373). Thus Bernadine carries out her sweet revenge against men in general because eventually she becomes very outspoken and daring.

Terry McMillan’s female characters grow and evolve and this evolution is evident in each and every novel of Terry McMillan. The evolution takes place in them consciously and subconsciously on all levels – especially on the emotional level. Black woman’s process of evolution is more significant than that of a white woman because she undergoes intense trauma. The intense oppression in the form of political, economic, and social restrictions of slavery and racism have historically stunted the lives of black women.

The women characters in McMillan’s novels are not to be construed as history’s victims but as active persons confronting concrete dilemmas in particular times and places. They prove to be strong effective women who face a plethora of challenges. In the poem titled *I Love Black Woman* by the popular singer, D’Angelo one can get a glance of the Black woman who is an epitome of strength, perseverance and wit, a combination of admirable traits.

I LOVE Black Women because they are the mothers of our Black future.
I love Black Women because of their enduring strength, a strength that at times has risen Above the failures of Black fathers.

I love their Curly hair, their braided hair, their straightened and Even kinky hair.

I love their full lips and, of Course, their brown sugar skin.

But most of all, I Love Black Women because I am the product of a Black woman.

Black men are born of Black women and Influenced by the Black Women in their lives.

I have to love Black women in order for me to love myself.

Black women, in general, have been monuments of strength and determination. Women in any society play multiple roles- of a daughter, wife, mother, caretaker, bread winner. The Black woman rises to the situation and takes charge of herself when her man deserts her. The economic necessity for the black woman to earn for the family forces her to grow up into an independent being. Mildred in Mama, though forty eight, lives life to the brim. She decides to celebrate her birthday despite her miserable condition. That she is firm about not spending the day alone shows that she is determined and unrelenting. She does things which seemed impossible to her earlier. Mildred drives to the hospital to see her sister-in-law, Curly Mac, despite the bad weather and her own sick condition. Mildred sees the whole life as a test given by God to see how much pain and suffering
each one of us could endure. She says she has had enough of her share but still she says, “I’m gon’ make it past the finish line”. (Mama 297)

The same unabated confidence in oneself can be seen in Marilyn Grimes in *The Interruption of Everything*, who is vexed merely taking care of the family. She is resolute about doing something fulfilling in life. She says, “I’m about to explore my options” (TIOE 178). Marilyn Grimes resembles Zora Banks of *Disappearing Acts* to a great extent in bringing about a change in her life. One can see this spirit in Marilyn Grimes from the conversation that ensues between Leon, her husband and herself:

I haven’t had time to pay attention to what I really feel, what I really care about, or what I honestly think, and it’s almost made me numb.

Well, whose fault is that?

Did you hear me blame you?

No. Then I don’t get it.

Just about everything I do is for someone else’s benefit.

That’s not true.

Maybe you don’t see it this way, but I’m telling you it’s how it feels to me.

So this is the best reason you could come up with to go back to school?

No, I feel like now that the kids are all gone, it’s not too late for me to find my place out here.

He’s nodding his head and if I was able to read him accurately, I’d almost be inclined to think he understands what I’m saying and that he might even agree.

I just need a change, Leon.

So do I.
I’m tired of doing the same thing the same way all the time.

Me, too.

I really want to get out more.

So do I.

I hardly ever spend time with my friends and when I do I always seem to be in a hurry, rushing to get home to do something: cook, take Arthurine to Bible study, laundry, something.

Well you’re not completely alone here either.

I feel like I need to do something I’ve never tried before.

Believe me, I understand that all too well.

Name me one thing.

Oh, I can’t think of anything right now.


You tell me one while I think for a second.

I’ve got a journal full of things. … (TIOE 147-148)

McMillan’s female characters learn lessons from their bitter past and move forward as new beings. In the past Bernadine was so meek and naïve that she was kept in the dark about John’s secret affair and his money transactions. He took her for granted and she on her part blindly trusted him for eleven years. Now she says, “I will never get married again as long as I live … And believe me, Gloria, you’re probably better off being single. You just don’t know it” (WTE 297). After a prolonged period of subjection and introspection, the female figures in McMillan’s novels, dare to tread the unconventional path. They either do without a man or go for a marriage of convenience.
Similarly Zora in *Disappearing Acts* is an overt character and she admits she is lonely but wants to overcome her self pity. She focuses on the gains and blessings of life rather than on her loss thus making positive thinking as the watchword. She says, “I’m going to stop concentrating so hard on what’s missing in my life and be grateful for what I’ve got.” (DA 23)

Terry McMillan’s characters share the confidence and determination of their creator. In an interview with Wendy Smith, McMillan says, “I’m not just going to sit back; I’ve never been passive, and I’m not going to start now.” McMillan says this when she spoke about publishing *Mama* as she did not want *Mama* to meet the usual fate of the first novel. The same confidence is evinced by Mildred in *Mama* when she tells God, “All right if you up there I’m gon’ ask you to help me one last time, and I swear I’ll do everything else myself.” (Mama 299) “I’ll do every thang myself” echoes her confidence and determination as she wants to be the architect of her own life. This quality is also seen in Freda, her daughter who, after a short spell of acute addiction to alcohol and drugs makes a real change in life. She is all regret for not attending grand daddy’s funeral because she had been drunk for three to four days. When the realization dawns on her that she had a whole lot of things to be grateful for, she decides to take concrete decisions in the right direction. As first priority, she goes for de-addiction treatment, realizing that her real self is not tailored for this end and works for a constructive change.

McMillan’s female characters are amazingly persistent even when life is brutally hard for them. They have a robust view of things, crave for happiness and they go to the edge of the world to attain it. Stella is an independent woman who has her own way in life.
The reason that she states for going on a vacation stands proof to her strong character. She says, "First of all, the main reason I’m going to Jamaica is to get away from everything and everybody. So I can lie on the beach and read and chill out without being distracted. If I went with somebody I’d have to negotiate with them about what we’re going to do each and every day, and if I don’t want to do what they want to do then there will be tension and I’ll spend my vacation compromising and I do enough of that at home and at work …" (HSHGHB 25)

For McMillan’s female characters it is their precarious position which makes them resilient, tough and enduring. Mildred is a powerful character who believes in her own potential rather than God and has the gumption to say; “… she didn’t think he was such a reliable source” (Mama 38). Mildred forever is optimistic about life and she always knew that when things go extremely bad, it has to get better. This speaks of her tremendous strength of character and her positive thinking. At the end of the novel Mildred decides to join the community college which has introduced a new programme for middle aged folks to get them working again and she also has a plan to open her own day-care center.

McMillan emphasizes through her female characters that a positive change is possible and that a black woman need not be restricted by the roles society expects them to play. Marilyn Grimes in The Interruption of Everything is burdened with a big family. She is exhausted playing the mule and finally she puts her foot down and decides to go back to school. Her husband makes a casual enquiry about her area of study for which she says, “I should start with Marilyn Grimes” (TIOE 147) This gives a glimpse of the real evolution from within.
McMillan’s concern for women’s social role and their identity in relation to men is animated by a conviction that women suffer and have suffered injustices because of their sex. This is reflected in many of her novels and the injustice perpetrated can vary from being social, physical, emotional and so on. Sonny Tyler, Mildred’s lover in *Mama* gets his transfer to Okinawa and abruptly stops visiting her. Thereby her relationship with him comes to an abrupt end but that does not make her whine or cry. She just thanks Sonny for the best four months she had, since her divorce. She said to herself, “wasn’t no use crying over spilt milk” (Mama 58). That is the kind of spirit that McMillan’s women possess.

All along women have been combating forces of orthodoxy and autocracy, fighting for recognition and equality and thus redefining womanhood. Marilyn Grimes in *The Interruption of Everything* redefines the role of women when she says, “I haven’t done anything except be your wife and raise kids for the last twenty–two years … I think it’s time for me to do something just for myself.” (TIOE 149-150) She refuses to be “Miss Endless caregiver” (TIOE 175) This is the most remarkable way of redefining womanhood.

Women are considered as embodiments of emotions and feelings but Mildred’s way of expressing affection is unique. She felt showing too much affection would make her weak. “And she hated feeling weak because that made her vulnerable. Who would be there to pick up the pieces if she let herself break down? Mildred felt she had to be strong at all times and at all costs” (Mama 46). Kamili Anderson in a review opines, “She (Mildred) suffers the stereotypical slings and arrows of poverty, anguish and despair” (9). Nevertheless she stands tall and strong, not budging an inch from her stand.
Similar in character is Savannah of *Waiting to Exhale* who is very audacious and bold in her thoughts, which makes her disapprove the conventional norms of the society like marriage. She says, “People like Sheila and mama are beginning to make me feel as if I should be embarrassed or ashamed for not having a husband by now” (WTE 16). Likewise after the unexpected turn of events which takes place in Bernadine’s family, she becomes a non-conformist and learns to depend on herself for happiness, messing around with Herbert. Most of the female characters of McMillan are not portrayed as non-conformists in the opening of the novels, they eventually end up being so because of their dire necessity and circumstances.

In *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* Maisha, Stella’s friend, advises her,

> Stella, if you can get ten minutes, ten weeks, or ten months of happiness, take it. Anytime you can get it, take it cause some folks check out of here and don’t even get that ten minutes because they were either too scared to open up to other possibilities or only saw problems as problems or made them problems instead of opportunities. (HSGGB 316)

Stella realizes the truth in these words and adopts it in her life. Most of McMillan’s female characters look at problems as opportunities and utilize them to come out of their suffocated state. McMillan’s female characters are prepared to encounter challenges in life. This can be sensed from Bunny’s words to Marilyn: “Well, this is precisely why I went to college. Even being a country girl from Mississippi my mama always told the girls not to grow up depending on a man for everything because one day when they ain’t nowhere to be found, all you’ve got left is yourself” (TIOE 305)
The African-American woman commands respect for herself in order to keep her true self-esteem and self-worth alive which enables her to have complete and positive relationship with people. She insists on recognition of her humanness so that she may, more effectively, fulfill her role as a positive and responsible being. As a typical character of McMillan, Mildred in *Mama* exercises her freedom on all occasions. Freda gets annoyed with her mama because she encourages Sonny’s frequent visits. When this is mentioned Mildred says, “And Freda, you better watch the tone of your voice, you ain’t grown. I’m still the mama in this house” (*Mama* 56). Here she commands respect to keep her self-esteem and self-worth alive.

The Black woman has to battle on different fronts—against male oppression, both in the family and in the work place, against racial discrimination and has to free herself from her own shackles of thought, specially the complexes of white superiority and black inferiority. When women break free from their own shackles of thought, they feel thrilled. Marilyn Grimes in *The Interruption of Everything* leaves home for the first time and stays in a hotel. She feels thrilled and says, “I have made history” (*TIOE* 180). At home, she experiences a state wherein her soul is crushed and trampled hence she longs for something, “I should find some exotic place to go where I can dig up my soul until it rises to the surface.” (*TIOE* 181)

McMillan does not stop with the portrayal of the struggle encountered by her women protagonists but her success lies in her releasing her characters from social ties and expectations. Marilyn Grimes in *The Interruption of Everything* happens to see a show titled “Can This marriage be saved?” She reflects on it and suggests another title, whether Marriage is worth being saved. Here McMillan pictures the frustration of her female
characters caught in a trap which is the social institution called marriage. Marilyn further comments, “or ask if they want to save their marriage because it’s the marriage they want to hold on to, not the person. As if marriage is some kind of all encompassing entity that can sustain you all by itself” (TJOE 181). Commenting on society and its expectations Bonnie Kreps argues,

Little girls are all too often dressed to be ‘ladylike’ -in other words, they are dressed to be pretty objects, like dolls. Whereas boys are encouraged to be rough, tough and aggressive, girls are trained to become timid and docile”(46)

Because of such notions in society, women most often are forced to give up their autonomy in their very girlhood days. The upbringing of boys and girls are different in that the girls are grown to be flexible beings, and forced to be servile and dependent all their lives. But the girls in contemporary fiction are depicted in a new light since they are educated, pursue professional careers, face challenges, and have a taste of freedom in the air. In the past, though the Black woman was synonymous with subjection, humiliation, submissiveness, and acceptance, in the present, she is painted in a different shade. Marilyn Grimes advises her daughter Sabrina not to give up her dreams for the family. In response, Sabina replies that every relationship involves sacrifices and somebody has to make it. Immediately Marilyn is prompted to ask why it should always be the woman who has to make the sacrifice and bear the brunt of everything. No Law declares so but it seems to be an unsaid law which the society propagates.

McMillan’s female characters develop a sturdy mind which makes them indomitable characters and keeps them afloat. Mildred in *Mama* decides to move to Phoenix, which offers a more civilized environment and better prospects, especially for coloured people.
Although Mildred was never scared of taking chances, she never really thought of leaving Point Haven before, but in due course she realizes some change has to happen, for things to get better and decides to move out.

According to David Nicholson, Terry McMillan depicts “relationships between black men and black women as something more than the relationship between victimizer and victim, oppressor and oppressed.” This is so because the victim and the oppressed do not remain the same throughout; they battle it out and go to the next phase of life. Her female characters become autonomous beings by overcoming life situations riddled with conflicts. For instance, Marilyn Grimes in *The Interruption of Everything* takes a resolution to fulfill her insatiable desire of self, “I need to start taking care of Marilyn, as well as I have of everybody else. I may have to learn how to live alone if that’s the only way I can do it. People don’t usually die from loneliness” (TIOE 301). Likewise Stella in *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* was told to abide by the traditional system of society when she was thinking seriously about marrying Winston half her age. She was told, “You’re the oldest, Stella. The one whose feet should be firmly planted on the ground” (HSGGB 227). But she throws these conventions to the wind and acts according to her own will.

The portrayal of male dominance and female subordination is presented realistically in McMillan’s novels. Exploitation, brutalization of women, the actual gender inequality and practice of violence against women are the usual themes found in her novels. Women in general are marginalized in society and gender-based violence is a serious problem in many societies because it is deep-rooted in the cultural and social relations between the two sexes.
Deeply internalized patriarchal conditioning gives moral sanction to man for the use of coercion to enforce compliance by women. Crook’s savage-like treatment of Mildred reduces her self-confidence and makes her physically and psychologically dependent. Moreover it restricts her autonomy, curtails her mobility and her ability to work and participate in social activities. When she throws him out of her way, she discovers her potential and her thwarted desires find fulfillment.

McMillan shows woman’s passion brings with it loss of autonomy. Mildred’s lack of discretion brings her temporary sexual gratification, but it also brings with it the loss of power and autonomy. She learns and relearns that sexual intimacy consistently leaves her vulnerable to emotional and physical abuse. She cannot resist Spooky who hypnotizes her saying that he yearned for her long before he married Kaye Francis. She feels he is a real man who can ignite her feelings and for once she did not stop to think of her kids. Mildred had many men in her life but she was careful in her choices. For example, she uses Rufus to her advantage though he was stinking and smelly but children liked him because he was generous with his money. Freda did not like her mama’s relationship with Spooky, a married man. Mildred snapped her saying, “I like the man and he likes me. And I don’t care whose husband he used to be, he makes me feel damn good, better than your daddy ever did, and if you knew how long it’s been since your mama felt like this, all y’all would be happy for me.” (Mama 79) Mildred becomes aggressive when her privacy is invaded by her daughter.

McMillan’s females prove themselves strong and powerful characters who exercise complete autonomy of actions and decisions. In Mama when Spooky invites Mildred to Niagara Falls for a long weekend she packs up and departs, leaving the kids behind for
the first time. Spooky has a wonderful time with her and abandons her for his wife. Mildred feels lost for the first time in her life because he has abused the trust she had on him but still she composes herself and resolves not to open up her heart again, merely for a man. One can get a glimpse of the strong character of Stella in How Stella Got Her Groove Back when she advises Winston to think twice before he decides about his career. She says in full confidence, “But take it from me, if there’s ever going to be a time in your life when you can afford to take risks and chances and make mistakes it’s now, when you’re in your twenties, because you an always change your mind and go in another direction and the world won’t stop if you err. … And I like the fact for some reason I don’t understand, you seem to be overlooking my age, and that you like me and not what I represent” (HSGHGB 338).

McMillan’s female characters cannot be seen as mere survivors. Besides, the theme of search for independence is far from being dormant in most of her novels. Mildred, in Mama, knew that she was breaking away from the set rules of the society. Nevertheless she took a decision which proves her to be a pragmatic person. She decides to marry Rufus, which she felt was practically a good decision. She says, “Besides, we need a man around this damn house” (Mama 89). She feels she was getting too old to be thinking about marrying somebody for love. Mildred marries him just to fulfill the needs of the family, tolerating his addiction to drinks but becomes exhausted of convincing herself that things would work themselves out. She decides to divorce him and says, “I know when I’ve made a mistake. Crook was a mistake and you, worse than one, you was an accident”[ Mama 93] Finally she gets rid of him from her life by stabbing him with a
beer bottle. Life becomes difficult after they broke up but Mildred indulges in prostitution to fulfill her family’s needs.

McMillan redefines tradition and also disarms it by means of her female characters. They lash out at men who threaten them or their economic security. *Mama* depicts the often strained relationships of a mother, Mildred Peacock, with her family and her community, but most of all to her own self. McMillan places Mildred in the middle of social change in the society. The novel deals with social realism and with a woman’s struggle in a sexist society which is also antagonistic towards women in general. This situation can be juxtaposed with a situation in *Waiting to Exhale* when Savannah affirms her position saying that, “I don’t need a man to rescue me or take care of me financially. I can take care of myself. What would be nice is to know you are with one who is looking out for our best interests, one who makes you feel special, safe and secure.” (WTE 17) She says categorically, “I want a man to go out of his way for me.” (WTE 18)

Marilyn Grimes in *The Interruption of Everything* takes a firm decision about living a life wherein her dreams and desires are fulfilled. She feels she has led a futile life all along, taking care of a big family. She says, “This time though, I will be a spiritual hurricane with no name, a sassy tornado that doesn’t rip apart or shred my own needs and dreams” (TIOE 365).

It can be said by all means that Terry McMillan’s works are a tribute to women’s independence, especially, *Disappearing Acts* which moves toward a celebration of women’s independence and economic success. In *Waiting to Exhale* Bernadine’s perspective of life seems to be different from others. She feels, “Don’t wait for your ship
to come in, swim out to it” (WTE 240) After the divorce she eventually figures out how she should go about repairing her life after it has been totally ruptured. The other females in the novel are no exception. Savannah too gets rid of Lionel in Phoenix when he becomes a burden to her. Robin does not want to pretend to be a happy woman and live with Michael and tactfully tells him that things will not work out between them. Mildred in Mama brushes aside the world’s opinion as a moth. She says, “One day, when you get older, you gon’ realize that you have to stop worrying about what people thank about you and what they gon’ say about you cause they gon’ talk about you anyway, don’t make no difference what you do.” (Mama 107)

McMillan’s female characters demonstrate that their independent and self-reliant nature are the strong facets of their identity. In this connection, Harriet Goldhor Lerner says in her review,

“Dependency, we were told in the eighties, was a bad thing that women presumably possessed more of than men. From my perspective, this was a questionable assumption at best. First emotional dependency (in contrast to economic dependency) is not a bad thing but rather a universal aspect of human experience. Second the generalization that women are more dependent than men is false, although male dependency needs are more hidden and better taken care of by women. Although developing competence and self-reliance is admittedly not a bad idea, female self-esteem plummeted further as women were admonished for the very “passive dependent” behaviors we were raised to cultivate.”

Mildred marrying Billy Callahan ignoring the whole town and Freda finding a studio apartment in Los Angeles and being proud to have her own address are instances which stand testimony to the fact that nothing can deter them from having their way.
Mildred’s unconventional nature is evident in her not using Billy Callahan’s last name though she married him. She likes her old name “Peacock” because she felt like one. This also reflects her character that she is as proud as a peacock though she scarcely has a reason. It is not easy to gauge anyone by external appearance. Though her daughter Angel, appears to be extremely feminine in nature, becomes aggressive when she cannot have her own way. This shows that an iota of autonomy is embodied in each and every female character of McMillan. The predicament faced by Black women is more intense than the one faced by Black men, though both may be cruelly exploited and subjected to dehumanization. There have been challenging, blatant and subtle sexism by the patriarchal power for a long time. Maria W.Stewart challenged African-American women to reject the negative images of Black womanhood so prominent in her times, pointing out that race, gender and class oppression were the fundamental causes of Black women’s poverty. She urged Black women to forge definitions of self-reliance and independence. McMillan fulfills this craving and gratifies the black audience by her characters. Actually the Black woman was synonymous with docility, silence, submissiveness, subjection, slavishness and acceptance. But McMillan portrays them as being born with innate power of endurance to survive all kinds of atrocities and torture—mental and physical. Mildred is an apt example since she is optimistic and her determination helped her through many difficult phases of life. When she sees the wonderful houses of black people she too wanted to own something of that kind. She consoles herself saying: “But today was today, so she did the most sensible thing to help her get through tomorrow” (Mama 181) This quality of buoyancy and sanguineness helps her to sail through life smoothly.
Terry McMillan in her fiction explores the lives of African-American middle class women. Her outright refusal to create characters who are mere victims is what makes her so admirable. Bernadine who was extremely submissive, exercises her autonomy when she feels suffocated being under John, her husband who strangles all her desires. When he moves seriously for divorce, Bernadine summons courage and she eventually drifts away from him. In this broken state, she wants a cigarette. It had been hundred and six days since she had quit smoking. “A cigarette would help her understand that her life had just been revised”. (WTE 51)

Her novels empower black female readers and women in general by allowing them to see their own reality reflected. After her daughter, Doll’s graduation Mildred wants to move back to Point Haven from Los Angeles where her daddy and Curly, her best friend would need her. Freda tries to change her decision but she was firm. She never suppresses her desires or postpones her dreams. Elizabeth Alexander points out in her review, “Only a truly bodacious heroine could merit a book named Mama. Mildred Peacock, the sharp-tongued star of Terry McMillan’s first novel, is up against financial straits and a brutal first husband, aptly named ‘Crook’, the father of her five children” (46). After being celibate against her will for a year, Mildred’s passionate desire makes her yield to Percy, though she is aware that a woman’s sexual desire makes her vulnerable to men.

The African women, in general, demonstrate a sense of spirituality, a belief in a higher power that transcends everything. But Mildred is different in that perspective because she believes that only weak ones resort to God. Her own brother Reverend Jasper, preached that the power of Almighty is swift and immediate and his healing powers are dramatic
and perfect. Mildred recalls Jasper’s words but is disappointed as she never felt an inch closer to God. She believes in perseverance and hard work in life. Mildred’s powerful character is described by her daughter, “Besides, you know mama has always lived over head”. (Mama 252)

McMillan’s women characters become unconventional and overcome barriers to live life to the full. In *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, Stella’s expectations about her man is idealistic and her perspective about marriage is described in these words. She says, “I wanted it to be the rainbow. I wanted each day to be fresh, warm, sprinkled with something redeeming … We both pay attention to each other’s needs, respect appreciate them.” (HSGHGB 24) Acting on a whim, Stella leaves for Jamaica to escape from the mundane world. Besides she was taking a vacation without her son Quincy. “… for the first time in years I feel like being totally selfish” (HSGHGB 25 )

Stella’s autonomous spirit is obvious in her condescending attitude towards women who live in complete dependence on their men. Her independent nature is overtly visible in these lines. “… it is so sad to me that in this day and age women still depend on a man to determine the quality of their lives and are still subjecting themselves to humiliation … is it really worth it?” (HSGHGB 200) Stella evinces the spirit of autonomy and a strong sense of individuality in her words when she says “I come to the conclusion that I have earned the right to some happiness … ” (HSGHGB 252). She does not want to impress Winston by beautifying herself. She says, “… I don’t want to look too embellished. Besides, I am a woman, not an ornament”(HSGHGB 366 ). Further, one can see how Stella ignores her younger sister Angela’s opinion regarding the relationship
with Winston. Stella is an independent character through and through, which is obvious in the given conversation between her bosom friend, Krystal and herself while exercising:

… I mean I don’t really need her blessing, Krystal. I’m an adult, she’d give me more credit for having more credit for having some idea of what I’m doing.

I understand perfectly, she says. Are you counting?

Fifteen.

Let’s take it to half range. Fifteen more. Anyway the reality is you like this guy and I think the fact that you sent him a ticket is fantastic and that he’s coming is awesome and it’s like an adventure and both of you guys know or have an idea that it won’t likely lead to marriage and it’s not like it’s going to last forever, so I don’t see anything wrong with it. Right leg, she says.

I know, I say. But what about the whole notion of forever? When you get right down to it. How long is it? I mean why can’t we just fall in love and simply love each other as hard as we can and see what happens, see how far we can go with it, what levels we can reach in terms of understanding being passionate compassionate honest hopeful. How can we grow if we think we think we’ve already arrived at the end? I mean isn’t life supposed to be this evolving thing, kinetic? I mean isn’t this one of the reasons why we get bored, because once we reach the penthouse we feel like we’ve made it to the top floor but then there’s a roof garden and if we keep going there are like clouds and then an entire whatever?

This is precisely what happened to me when I got married, and I don’t want to go there again. I don’t. I won’t. Can’t. I do not want to repeat that. Besides, I’m
not a boring person, that much I do know. Rarely am I bored with myself and I don’t like the idea of being a bore and I have no intention of boring Winston. I just hope he gets it. I hope he knows and I believe he knows that what we are doing is searching for the curve the arc the warmth the depth of field to live our lives in three-D and feel it deeper than that. (HSGHGB 359-360)

After her divorce, Bernadine in *Waiting to Exhale*, wants to break away from the circumscribed life that she was leading in the past and joins the Black Women On the Move which is “a support group that held workshops for women who wanted to do more with their lives than cook, clean and take care of the kids.” (WTE 48) This organization catered to the needs of such women who want to move forward in life, deal with stress which comes with success and who do not want to remain, mere role models in society. Apart from all the other miseries, black women in the past were victims of subjugation and discrimination. But Terry McMillan’s novels show how the blacks, especially black women, were capable of endurance, and have the grit to survive all forms of torture, discrimination, and inequality. Man’s dominance can be felt throughout her novels which is the worst form of torture. In *Waiting to Exhale*, Bernadine’s first baby is named after her husband and when she insisted on naming the second one according to her choice, he did not want any child of his to have an African name. Bernadine’s preferences and priorities were always ignored or postponed of which her mother reminds her. “He had convinced you that being a good mother meant staying at home with children until they were at least school age. So you postponed your dream again.” (WTE 46) Bernadine feels strong enough and tells him ‘no’ for the first time in
eleven years when John wanted another baby. She categorically tells him that she had not been educated to become a permanent house wife and that angered him.

John’s dominance can be felt at every stage of Bernadine’s life. He refuses to offer her money to start a catering business claiming that it is a risky venture. Hence she takes up another job as a Controller for a Real-Estate Management firm. She does not disclose her salary to John and thus saved money for her business but he could not stomach the fact that she had her own money, and for the first time in years she had an interest outside of him and the kids, and her house. This was like a revolution in her life.

McMillan’s novels highlight how women foolishly rest assured thinking that marriage would provide them with eternal security and love. After the unexpected storm in their life, they struggle and count on small things to make themselves reconcile to their new fate. When John deserts Bernadine, she suffers acute trauma because she trusted him blindly for eleven years but still something in her drives her forward. “She wanted to know what being by herself was going to feel like” (WTE 123)

Bernadine’s rage is obviously seen in her action of burning all John’s belongings, including his car. All these years, she kept the house spotless and now she was tired of it, and sick of answering phone calls. For five long days she stays at home without following any routine but later she resumes her usual schedule. After the initial shock, “She couldn’t understand why she felt so relieved. She felt lighter, almost graceful. But then when she really thought about it she did understand. She was free. Free to do anything she pleased, the way she pleased.” (WTE 132) Bernadine had to accept that she was going to be a thirty-six-year old divorced mother of two, though she never planned to be single. She never anticipated as to what she would do, if her marriage would not
been so presumptuous and naïve. But she manages to swim against the tide and wades through successfully. Once this mess is solved, she could proceed with her dreams, leading a self-governing life. This was the driving force behind the whole thing. Bernadine arranges for a Garage sale to get rid of the rest of John belongings. This seemingly eccentric behavior indicates the rage of the suppressed self which delivers itself from the enslaved state. She says, “Since you want to start a new life, … see what starting from scratch feels like.” (WTE 135) Robin, her friend, is also in a distressful situation humiliated and embarrassed by Russell’s attitude, when he refuses to marry her. One can feel her rage when she says, “I wish there was some way I could give him life imprisonment because he needs to be stopped. He needs to suffer for a while, long enough for him to realize that a woman’s love is a privilege and not his right”. (WTE 65)

All the daughters of Mildred are self-governing and exercise autonomy in their actions. Bootsey, the third daughter of Mildred, decides to leave David. He never permits her to register for higher education, or open her own bridal shop, or go back to school. Her complaint against him, is that he evades responsibilities leaving her to do all the work at home. Janet Boyarin Blundell in her review observes, “Mama, the first novel, tells of a proud black woman, Mildred Peacock, and her five children … and their lives parallel each other’s progress from despair to hope”. (108)

The most significant factor about Mildred in Mama, is that she is a spirited woman who attempts to retain her sense of self while struggling for economic survival. She is a complex, dignified woman, who is committed to raising her children to be capable and responsible adults. Will Blythe argues in her review, “Mildred is the hero – protagonist
is too weak a word - of Terry McMillan’s first novel (Mama), a chronicle of a poor black family’s gritty passage through the 60’s into the 70’s.” One cannot compartmentalize Mildred’s character because she is highly intricate and a multifaceted woman. Elizabeth Alexander says in her review, “McMillan romanticizes nothing, presenting Mildred not as a black ‘Mama’ monolith but as a complex woman.” (46)

McMillan has portrayed the struggles of women in a positive yet realistic light. Terry McMillan has expressed strong dislike for victims and that she never likes to write on them. Instead she craves to write about people who find their way in spite of all the hurdles in life. John Leland opines in a review: “The stories she tells are, in the end, her own.” McMillan, in her portrait of Mildred Peacock, shows her to be a strong-willed woman who becomes the motivating force behind her children’s upward mobility.

Her novel Waiting to Exhale can be seen as an expression of middle class black female identity. Terry McMillan focuses on middle class black women with education and careers who wage a kind of war over the negative forces in their lives. Savannah is the strongest of the four women portrayed in the novel. One can get a glimpse of Savannah’s independent character when she says, “she (Sheila) and mama both think I am out here dying of loneliness, which is not true.” (WTE 1) Savannah’s and Robin’s lives are complex and eventful but they don’t succumb to the problems. Both are attractive professionals who are in search of the man who can make their lives complete. Savannah is bogged down with a mother who is aging, an apathetic family that has become dependent on her financial support and a job which does not allow her to express her creative talents. Robin is trying to overcome a long-term love affair that ended, leaving
her distraught and lonely. After several mistakes with men, Robin decides that she will have a child with or without a husband.

Although the tunnel to happiness is long, dark and dangerous, McMillan’s women manage to traverse it cautiously taking the many hurdles as they come. Bernadine and Gloria are more experienced and matured than the other women in *Waiting to Exhale*. Gloria is a single parent of a teenage son and runs Oasis, a hair salon for black women for a living. She copes with loneliness unlike Bernadine, the mother of two girls, who wages a divorce battle with a husband who is an executive as well as a cheat. Her husband tries to hide his financial assets when she learns about his long term affair with his young white book-keeper. Hence Bernadine is forced to consider being alone and work outside home to maintain the same life style of the past. The way these two women deal with the situation is sad and realistic. Donnella Canty in her review says, “Although McMillan and her main characters are black women her story is not black or feminist. *Waiting to Exhale* speaks to most women and to the issues surrounding most women regardless of race. The women portrayed in her novels are pictured complete, complex and undiminished human-beings.”

The Black woman is adaptable and demands no separate space for nourishing her individual needs and goals but her ambition and responsibility are highly important to her. Zora in *Disappearing Acts* is also one such strong willed character. She is ambitious to launch a career in singing and entertains her own ideas about romance but does not want to get involved any more in the so called “transient romance”. She says, “I’m interested in longevity”. (DA 16) She is matured in her thoughts and action and that enables her to understand the requirements of a long standing relationship. She says “all
you need is two people who are willing to expend the energy so that their hearts don’t rust.” (DA 16) In the past Zora had denied David’s proposal of marriage because she wanted to launch her career in singing in New York and that she wanted to “live a bold and daring life, not a safe little cozy one in Toledo.”(DA 19)

Terry McMillan prefers to concentrate on women who assert their autonomy aggressively and are willing to tackle adversity with determination. Savannah is a typical character of McMillan who detests men for their grave lapses. Savannah’s bitterness towards her father can be seen in these words when she says, “If I knew where my daddy was, I’d probably kill him for making her such a bitter woman. He broke her heart, and she’s never recovered”. (WTE 1) Here she refers to her mother.

Savannah was already thirty six Years old but her unmarried state did not affect her. She in fact “put(s) too much energy into her career and was traversing down that road less travelled”. (WTE 5) She firmly says, “All I’ve got is one life and this is one area that is too large for me to compromise”(WTE 17). The same feeling is voiced by Zora in Disappearing Acts when she says, “This was my life too”( DA 253). Zora did not want to have a baby at that point of time when their life was not yet well settled, like their marriage was yet to be solemnized, Franklin was jobless, her career in singing was not stabilized and above all he did not divorce his wife.

A similar feeling is expressed by Marilyn Grimes in The Interruption of Everything, when she finally comes back to her groove in a different manner by deciding to take up all the responsibilities of her big family. Nevertheless she is clear headed about one thing, “......I’m putting something nurturing and healthy for Marilyn on my daily itinerary. It’ll balance out.”(TIOE 383)
Women in general are taught to give up their autonomy early in life but McMillan’s females shed all that they have assimilated in the past and take a new direction. They discard their servile past and move towards a world wholly novel to them. When Bernadine was deserted by her husband after eleven years for a white woman, all she wanted to do was to repossess her life. Bernadine puts her heart and soul in building his business and naturally feels betrayed at the desertion. After much introspection and less self–pity, like other McMillan’s female characters, she moves forward with utmost caution against other pitfalls in life.

Bernadine reflects of her past: “But you were his wife, and you had done what you had been taught to do, let him take the wheel while you took the back seat.” (WTE 45) In return, John breaks her trust which shows he does not deserve any kind of concern. Bernadine learns from the lawyer that John had deceived her of his income and assets. She says in rage, “Now I know why women kill their husbands” (WTE 173)

Similarly Zora in Disappearing Acts cannot take insults, betrayal and humiliation lightly at the hands of men. She is not at all impressed seeing Franklin apologize and then sob like a woman after hitting her. She sternly warns him saying, “and this I am not asking. If you ever so much as raise your hand to me again, if I don’t kill you first, … I mean that from the bottom of my heart.” (DA 281) Thulani Davis opines, “Zora has all the pulls and tugs of feminism that a modern black woman who’s read Walker and Shange is supposed to have.” Zora expects Franklin to take up a job so that he can help her to pay the rent and other bills. But he evades responsibility and keeps dodging her when finally she puts her foot down and says, “As long as I know you’re trying, I can be patient. I love you, and I’ll hang in here as long as you don’t give up.” (DA 135)
Robin in *Waiting to Exhale* detests the thought of marrying Michel because she feels, “Eighty thousand dollars a year, a house in Paradise Valley … can’t turn him (Michael) into a knight” (WTE 199). Michael spends more time and money on Robin in six weeks than all the other men who had come into her life. He takes her to the best resorts, takes on himself all her personal expenses and gives her a loan of twenty two hundred dollars. In addition, he even offers to pay off her student loan but she does not want to be indebted to him forever. Therefore, according to Robin, money is not the only criteria a woman looks for in a man. She says, “I just think I need a little space is all” (WTE 202).

Stella in *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* is a typical example of Terry McMillan’s female characters. She is spontaneous, humorous and analytical by nature who is excited about life and all its possibilities. In her wildness of character she says,

> … I realize the reason I’m having so much fun this summer is that for the first time in a long time I am not all that worried about what anybody thinks, and so yes, I am acting a little irrationally, a little spontaneously, but hell, if I had known that acting silly foolish felt this good I’d have been behaving like this a long time ago. (HSGGB 326)

Stella’s aversion towards the conventional norms of society in *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* is evident in these words when she decides to get united with Winston exclusively for the reason stated, “That I only want him because he’s taboo.” (HSGGB 325)

The African woman comes from a long tradition of psychological as well as physical strength. She has endured centuries of trauma and struggle for her family and established
her identity. Hence the self-reliant Savannah in *Waiting to Exhale* disapproves of Robin’s servile attitude towards men which makes her say,

> It was amazing to her how some women could be so stupid. They make up all kinds of excuses for a man after he’s treated them like dirt, apologize for his revolting behaviour; and take him back after he’s broken their ... hearts- so he can break them again. And this is supposed to be love? This is supposed to be healthy? This is supposed to be the way to live your life with a man? Not me, Savannah thought . . . (WTE 233)

Savannah never frets over her age and her looks and she never wastes her energy worrying over not having a baby and so on. When Robin asks her for her zodiac sign to make a chart for her, Savannah says, “I don’t want my chart done...I know what’s going on in my life”. (WTE 234)

The same feeling is echoed in Stella’s words in *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* when she sends tickets to Winston inviting him home. She feels “ I am proud of myself for something I really want to do without worrying about what anybody will think for a change, ...” (HSGGB 306) She adds ,”To hell with the do — the — right — thing shit .”(HSGGB 314) This again reflects her autonomous nature. Over and above, McMillan’s female characters prove that they are autonomous beings by whole hearted participation in social service. Gloria, Savannah, Robin and Bernadine join the organization ‘Black Women On the Move’ to conduct workshops on many topics and target more black professionals to share their experiences and expertise. All this shows the autonomous spirit of the black women in general.
One can find feminist themes running through most of her novels. The female protagonist proves to be an individual in her own right who possesses a passionate drive for self determination and autonomy. Marilyn Grimes in The Interruption of Everything is firm about being “all by myself – to see if I can find my centre”(TIOE 301). This is reflective of an upsurge in female assertiveness and audacity. Hence women cannot be seen as universal victims in McMillan’s fiction. McMillan’s female characters are knocked down by life several times, but they never remain in their fallen state expecting sympathy from the world. They detest their fallen state and do everything possible to come out of it which is the trait that endears them to the readers. They are adored, not for falling, but for rising after each fall. Savannah, Bernadine, Robin, Mildred Peacock are all examples of such resilience.

McMillan’s female characters never cry for help or wallow in self-pity, when they find themselves in unexpected hostile situations. Instead, the very hostile situation fills them with the drive to live life, without getting shattered. At the end of the novel Disappearing Acts, when Franklin leaves Zora’s home, she lives alone reconciling to her fate and has nothing to complain about. During Christmas, Zora was determined to have a nice holiday without him so she decorated the Christmas tree all by herself, as a thought flashed, “together forever, But here I am again, all by myself.” (DA 352) When the realization dawns on her that Franklin was inadequate in all aspects, she decides to tread on, all alone. It is this quality of resilience which makes McMillan’s women protagonists unique in nature.

Similarly Bernadine in Waiting to Exhale informs Savannah of her divorce and invites her to join the celebration. She says, “I need to celebrate. I’m a free woman, girl”
The manner in which Bernadine moves forward in her life, raising two kids by herself and working full time is remarkable. The day her divorce was finalized, she had the mental strength to go to the bar all by herself to celebrate because her friends were all engaged with some work. Her indomitable spirit surfaces as she celebrates her new found freedom. She struggles to get used to the idea that she wasn’t married any more, an idea that would take a long time to sink in. Later she developed a relationship with James Wheeler which did not matter to her if she never saw him again in life.

Nothing mattered to her except the fact that “She was alive again” (WTE 394). This infers that a woman bereft of autonomy is equivalent to being dead.

The same feeling is evoked by Zora after an abortion, when she does not encourage Franklin’s advances of making love. He gets annoyed and leaves her room and does not return for three days. Zora heaves a sigh of relief and says, “May be this was for the best, him leaving. It would mean I could get my life back to normal.” (DA 149) This shows McMillan’s female characters feel suffocated in a fettered condition.

Savannah affirms her individuality when she says, “so don’t ever think a man would have that much power over me that I’d stop caring about my friends” (WTE 412). She says even if she had a man in her life, that situation would not stop her from being in the company of her friends. Savannah always deviates from the beaten path and feels thrilled, as can be seen when at a birthday party she insists on the record to be played and plays Stevie Wonder’s birthday song to Dr. Martin Luther king. She says, “I know, but let’s be unorthodox here. Tradition can be boring. Break the rules. Here we go.” (WTE 448)

The same attitude echoes in Zora’s words in Disappearing Acts when she warns Franklin not to interfere with her dressing although he was her man. Franklin as a,
typical man, started dictating as to what she should wear. Immediately Zora retorts, “... but let me tell you something so we can get this straight, right now. First of all, I am a grown woman. I wear anything I want when I want to wear it. ... If it’s a bathing suit today, what will it be tomorrow?” (DA 84). Stella too resembles Savannah and Zora in her fiery spirit. She tells Winston, “And plus there is no right or wrong way. It’s what makes you feel good inside” (HSGGB 282). In *Waiting to Exhale* Savannah’s outlook on life is such that she feels “Everything worth doing in life is scary” (WTE 464).

Terry McMillan’s women characters are not tailored to lead a life of a traditional woman suppressing their desires and individuality. In *How Stella Got her Groove Back*, Stella challenges her sister Angela when she warns her about getting involved with Winston. She says, “I’ve been doing everything according to the book for so long that I didn’t see how I’ve been living like I’m in a cocoon or something, like I’ve been in a walking coma”. She adds, “... I realize I’m tired of missing out on opportunities for happiness that come my way. ... when it does come I’m learning that I should accept it” (HSGGB 292-293). The same frustration is echoed in *The Interruption of Everything* by Marilyn Grimes when she refuses to do anything by the so called “Book”.

Savanna indulges in introspection about the fate of Black women in general. She ponders deeply over their plight and hers in particular. Savannah poses a question when she was betrayed by Charles,

> What happened to all the pride, the tenderness, the love and compassion, black men are supposed to show us? I thought we were supposed to be a prized “possession”. How are we supposed to feel beautiful and loving and soft and caring and gentle and tender and compassionate and sensitive when they treat us
like shit after we surrender ourselves to them? Would somebody tell me that?

(WTE 506)

The change has come about in the women, when they received this kind of treatment. Savannah decides to be pragmatic henceforth and not to put herself in this condition as she is tired of getting emotionally entangled with men who are selfish. She adds, “My heart no longer on display … I can’t afford to do this shit any more. It cost too much.” (WTE 506)

A similar feeling is voiced by Stella in How Stella Got Her Groove Back. She says, “… marriage itself is a dead—end institution. I’m not doing it again. All I want is a little companionship.” (HSGGB 12)

Savannah enquires of Gloria whether she ever felt the need of a man in her life. Gloria replies that she definitely felt so, but looking at what Savannah, Robin and Bernadine had gone through she is confused and says, “I don’t want the kind you all had, I know that much. I’m not interested in going through any heart ache. Look at what that Charles character did to you.” (WTE 517)

McMillan’s female characters move beyond their unpleasant and bitter past. Though McMillan’s female characters have lost many battles in life, they are not prepared to surrender. Savannah says, “But it wasn’t the end of the world. I survived.” (WTE 517)

This is the spirit which makes McMillan’s female characters adorable and fascinating, that is to say their spirit is too strong to be shattered by such blows of life.

McMillan’s female characters rediscover their lives, their mates and most important of all, themselves, thus managing to deal with the challenges that come their way. This can be illustrated in the character of Bernadine when she feels elated, opening her catering business for which she thought of a name, “Bernadine’s Sweet Tooth”. “Hell, she had
her life back. The one she’d lost eleven years ago” (WTE 546). Thus she settles down successfully in her life.

McMillan brings about a twist in her novels by bringing in a new trend. All these years women have been at the receiving end and had suffered neglect at the hands of men. But in McMillan’s fiction, females go on a rejecting spree. Now Savannah tastes the pleasure of rejecting men like Robin in *Waiting to Exhale*. Robin’s strong character comes to the fore when she becomes pregnant by Russell and she is determined to keep the baby. She reaches a stage when she does not want him anymore because he has hurt her too many times. Even if he divorces his wife, she does not want him. She says that she was tired of being a fool and tired of giving him so much power over her life. She says, “Even fools get tired of being fools at some point. If death teaches you anything, it has taught me to cherish life, to value myself. Something I haven’t exactly made a habit of doing.” (WTE 536) Paula C. Barnes in her review on *Waiting to Exhale* commends the work to be one that “traces the problems of real women in a real world.”

It is believed that, “Every Black Woman in America lives her life somewhere along a wide curve of ancient and unexpressed angers.” (Lorde 145) The anger which lies buried in deep recesses of their heart gets spilled over in a weak moment. This anger acts as a driving force to face social and financial challenges. Zora’s audacity is evident in her action of breaking away from relationships which are not worth it. When she feels a person is not worthy of a relationship she turns them away. She says, “I was taught to give all human beings a chance to prove their worth before I dismissed them. I assumed that meant men too.” (DA 20) When Zora befriended Franklin, she did not take him into confidence or become intimate instantly with him keeping in mind his inferior social
status. But when she falls desperately in love with him she decides, “I’ll take happiness and love over money any day.”(DA 54) This shows her individuality.

Terry McMillan’s women characters desire positive male companionship, a relationship in which each individual is mutually supportive. Zora expects to have such a relationship with Franklin but her desire remains unfulfilled. She is extremely cautious at each and every step in her relationship with Franklin. Her perspective of life and future is very different from that of Franklin’s. Though she valued autonomy in her life she says,” And I want to be an asset to somebody - a man - but up to now it hasn’t worked both ways” (DA 66)

There are many instances where Zora makes it clear to Franklin that she needs to exercise her autonomy and does not like him to take her for granted. She tells him, “We said we’d take this slow, give each other some space, didn’t we?”(DA 82) Likewise, Zora’s guilt about going through abortion vanished when she realized the truth in Portia, her friend’s words, “Women got a right to decide whether or not they wanna have a goddamn baby…(DA 146). Zora feels her friend was giving voice to her thoughts.

Just as Terry McMillan was determined to make it in a man’s world, her characters also share her determination and prove it in their gritty nature. Zora gets vexed when Franklin becomes bossy and she tells him categorically, “besides, there’s some things I like doing by myself or with my friends”(DA 155) Zora makes it clear to Portia that she would never let her original self die in her relationship with Franklin. When he tries to strangle her original self, she drifts away from him. She is particular about certain things, “I want to do the right thing, but this is not how I dreamed it. I have always wanted things to be right whenever I did have a baby. To be married to the man I loved.
McMillan has created a strong protagonist and has portrayed the passionate female desire in her novel *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. McMillan portrays a happy woman in the character of Stella who is, in charge of her own fate. She gloats at being a woman and revels at the fact that she is in complete possession of her mind, body, her child, her home and her finances. This novel is revolutionary in its own way because it depicts a rare relationship. Stella Payne, the protagonist, who is a forty two year-old-divorced mother of an eleven year old boy falls in love with a twenty one year old man.

In an interview with Eyvette Porter, McMillan says, “I think as women we almost inherently question anything that makes us happy.” McMillan adds, “so far, she’s got no regrets. Life is really short, too short . . . And I don’t want to be one of these ‘wish I coulda, woulda, shoulda.’” Stella Payne, resembles McMillan to a great extent in her outlook. Her audacious character voices an opinion which makes her ask if aging men can revive their love lives with pretty young wives then why cannot middle aged women, have relationships with young boys. In this novel, the older woman/Younger man romance, challenges the foundations of the patriarchal male-dominated marriage. In a sarcastic tone Stella asks, “Oh, so is there a law out there somewhere that says Stella can’t be happy if a young man is partially responsible?” (HSGGB 226) In this novel Stella loses her sense of self despite her assertive independence and financial empowerment. By means of the restorative power of love and sex, Stella is able to reassert her real self and her desire as being more important than the vision of success that she previously embodied. Stella says, “I come to the conclusion that I have earned

To have made my mark in the music industry. To . . . (DA 254) The never-ending list goes on.
the right to some happiness and by golly I’m going get me some.” (HSGGB 252) The present situation forces Stella to make an assessment of her life, and balance her desire for love and companionship with the responsibilities of mother and corporate executive.

McMillan’s *The Interruption Of Everything* (2005) delves into the issues of mid life of women who have spent much of their lives focused on their children and their husband. McMillan highlights the differences between female and male perspectives on family and marriage. In *The Interruption Of Everything* Marilyn Grimes, a forty four year-old-mother of three, thinks her children do not need her any more except the regular handouts of money. She complains to her mother-in-law Arthurine, “I just feel like nobody really cares what I’m doing as long as I keep doing what I’ve always done for them”. (TIOE 300) Marilyn copes with unpleasant situations at home, and with a husband who has lost interest in her. She begins to reconsider all that she has held sacred in the past. In the midst of an argument she confesses, “I’m also tired, Leon. Tired of being the mule that carries the burden for everything and everybody in this house”. (TIOE 89)

Here McMillan focuses on the immensity of the black woman’s labor. Women in general and black women in particular carry their communities on their backs but the beneficiaries, especially men, fail to appreciate their efforts. Besides, men take them for granted and berate them for trivial matters. Marilyn Grimes in *The Interruption of Everything*, says, “I need to start taking better care of Marilyn, as well as I have of everybody else. I may have to learn how to live alone if that’s the only way I can do it. People don’t usually die from loneliness” (TIOE 301).
McMillan wisely illustrates this inequity of assuming responsibilities by men and women, by demonstrating it. Marilyn offers occasional comments to this effect though she continues to perform tasks for her family. At one instance she says, “I haven’t done anything except be your wife and raise kids for the last twenty-two years. That’s what I’ve been doing. I think it’s time for me to do something just for myself.” (TIOE 150) Marilyn Grimes spends her time deferring her dreams to create the perfect life for her family. She has nothing in her life to feed her desires and dreams. But she realizes in due course and says, “All I was trying to say was I think I need to make some changes, … but I just don’t want to end up old and be full of regrets. I don’t want the list of all the things I meant to do or wanted to do to be longer than the things I did do. That’s all” (TIOE 25).

Black women have been applauded for their grit and courage of bearing the cross extremely well in life. Marilyn Grimes has more than her share of worries in this world. In her forties, she is overwhelmed by her twenty-five years marriage. She works part-time at a crafts store and satisfies her neglected passion with various projects with her friends. She had always been there to cater to others’ needs. Torn between taking care of her family and attending to her own needs, she is faced with choices, like deciding to complete her degree. As she plans, changes are taking shape and life comes up with many twists and turns. She finally decides that she must reinvent everything in her life including her marriage, family and most of all “herself. This novel is the triumphant testament to the fact that the female moves away, takes a deviation from the stereotyped path where she finds her real self.
Most of Terry McMillan’s female characters define their identity in their own terms. Viola in *A Day Late And A Dollar Short* feels betrayed - being in a loveless marriage. She says, “But I didn’t spend thirty - eight years of my life to fatten no frog up for no snake. And just watch: when he ready to come crawling back home, my back gon’ be turned or I ain’t gon’ be nowhere around’” (ADLDS 278). The achievement of McMillan’s female characters is beautifully described in Toni Morrison’s words. As Toni Morrison remarks, the black woman “had nothing to fall back upon; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself” (63). McMillan’s female characters undergo this evolution in search of self.

The self which is born of this evolution is daring and independent, as in *A Day Late And A Dollar Short*. Viola, the protagonist says, “I’ ma divorce him. I ain’t letting him get away with this shit. Not this time. There ain’t enough apologizing in the world he can do to weasel his way outta this … Me and the kids ‘ll be just fine” (ADLDS 124). Viola’s husband is estranged from the family and thus evades responsibilities. Viola stands alone and still has high expectations of her children and wants the best for them.

Apart from this evolution McMillan translated her “felt experience” into works of literature. *Getting to Happy* (2010) is an exuberant return to the four heroines of *Waiting to Exhale*. In that novel the four women learn to heal their unpleasant past and to reclaim their joy and their dreams. They are portrayed as full of spirit and faith in one another. They have exhaled already and now they will also learn to breathe. McMillan’s
novels prove that economically advantaged women are not so vulnerable to male domination.

Terry McMillan’s novels demonstrate the Black women’s power to define their own lives. Her novels are inhabited by strong dynamic African-American women. Toni Morrison explicates the difference between the gentleness of the white woman and toughness and strength of the black woman in her “What the Black Women Think About Women’s Lib “.

White females were ladies, said the sign maker, worthy of respect. And the quality that made ladyhood worthy? Softness, hopelessness and modesty – which I interpreted as a willingness to let others do their labor and their thinking. Colored females, on the other hand, were women – unworthy of respect because they were tough, capable, independent and immodest. (72)

Female autonomy means not merely freedom from external fetters but from a woman’s own slavish thoughts, negative sentiments and beliefs which are psychological self-made fetters. Robin in Waiting to Exhale had been enslaved in her own thoughts as to having a family with a loving husband and children. Initially she had been unwilling to revise her image of the family. Her strong belief was that she deserved a family which would be a role model for others. In her words,

We would have a houseful of kids…..I would be a model mother. We would have an occasional fight, but we would always makeup. And instead of drying up, our love would grow. We would be one hundred percent faithful to each other. People would envy us, wish they had what we had, and they’d ask us forty years later how we managed to beat the odds and still be so happy.(WTE 62-63)
But this remains a mere idealistic dream and she has to relinquish this ideal. She admits bluntly, “I was this stupid for a longtime.” (WTE 62-63) Initially, at the opening of the novel, women embark on various ventures to find a “real life” with a loving man. When this wish is not fulfilled they are dejected but they do not crumble. Gloria, Savannah, Robin and Bernadine go out to Dancing Club. Bernadine finds a partner but the other three become depressed and go home alone. As Gloria turns out her light, she wonders, “Why are we all out there by ourselves? Are we just going to have to learn how to live the rest of our lives alone? (WTE 250) This is the most compelling and complex question in the novel.

It is an apt question in the context of the personal lives of single women in the contemporary world. McMillan’s novels set women thinking that it is high time for them to break free from this thought which binds them. When they do so, they not only find autonomy from the enslaved state, but also feel rejuvenated. After two futile affairs, Savannah answers the question for herself; she is in fact going to learn how to live alone with a sense of peace and contentment. Terry McMillan’s female characters are excited about the prospect of intimacy with men when they can retain their autonomy.

Terry McMillan has attracted much feminist critical attention because of the way her female characters eventually resist the traditional feminine roles of daughter, wife, and mother. In a community where they are supposed to live, subordinating their desires to the needs of others, McMillan’s female characters like Mildred Peacock, Freda, Zora Banks, Bernadine, Savannah, Gloria, Robin, Stella Paynes and Marilyn Grimes explore their world and live independent and self-governed lives.
Terry McMillan has earned a permanent place in the minds of her readers for her realistic portrayal of contemporary African American society. Her women are amazingly resilient as is seen in the characters of Mildred and Freda in *Mama*, the four women characters Savannah, Robin, Bernadine and Gloria in *Waiting to Exhale*, Zora Banks in *Disappearing Acts*, Stella Paynes in *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* and Marylin Grimes in *The Interruption Of Everything*.

Patricia Hill Collins remarks in her *Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination*:

> African-American women have been victimized by race, gender and class oppression. But portraying Black women solely as passive, unfortunate recipients of racial and sexual abuse stifles notions that black women can actively work to change our circumstances and bring about changes in our lives. Similarly presenting African and American women solely as heroic figures who easily engage in resisting oppression on all fronts minimizes the very real costs of oppression and can foster the perception that black women need no help because we can “take it” (238).

The uniqueness of Terry McMillan’s portrayal is seen in the manner in which she has transcended these two types of portrayals. Women in Terry McMillan like Bernadine in *Waiting to Exhale* and Zora Banks in *Disappearing Acts* are victims of racial and sexual abuse, but the very trauma of their situation shakes up passivity and with resilience they fight and overcome the situation and give themselves autonomy. Likewise she does not present them simply as heroic figures, who easily resist oppression for that would be unrealistic and would even mislead readers into thinking that they had no defeats. It is a slow and steady process which Terry McMillan presents in her novels. The Black woman
protagonist of Terry McMillan rises like the Phoenix from the ashes of her defeat and depression.