

Blossom N. Fondo

University of Yaoundé II, Soa

I TOO AM A BLACK WOMAN: TERRY MCMILLAN AND THE REIMAGINING OF THE CONTEMPORARY BLACK WOMAN IN *GETTING TO HAPPY*

Abstract: Identity in the African American context has often meant racial identity. This is explained by the deeply racialized society in which blacks had to live in America and where, by virtue of their racial identity, they were the subjects of gross abuses. As a consequence, race became the main thrust of much of African American literature. The rise of literature by black women witnessed the addition of gender to the race question as these women sought to illustrate what it means to be black and female in America. The gains of the Civil Rights Movement which included a marked improvement in the status and circumstances of African Americans (even if much still remains to be desired), encouraged writers to begin addressing other aspects of the African American reality. Terry McMillan is one of such writers whose popular fiction has not made race her central focus. She focuses especially on the experiences of the contemporary African American woman away from the racial perspective. Her works have come under harsh scrutiny and they have been considered apolitical and consequently irrelevant to the African American community. The purpose of this paper is to contest these accusations by underlining the ways the issues McMillan raises in her novel *Getting to Happy* constitute a worthwhile contribution to the discourse of identity in African American literature. My main argument is that the quest for selfhood by the women in this novel disrupts the stereotyped version of African American women and is therefore politically relevant. I underscore that, because identity is multidimensional and dynamic, McMillan's *Getting to Happy* fulfills the important task of imagining African American female identity from another perspective and through this McMillan crafts a new black womanhood not entirely dependent on race.

Keywords: Identity politics, sexual politics, personal identity, Black popular fiction, black womanhood

Introduction

The diversity of ethnicities, races, experiences and cultures within the United States of America has resulted in a vast literary production from different groups as they respectively struggle to represent the self. This desire was particularly more urgent for African Americans whose presence in this region has been singularly marked by myriad abuses. The very nature by which African Americans came to the United States had a bearing on how they would be treated in this society. African American identity served to single them out for second class treatment. Totally ignored by the mainstream writings or, when not ignored, presented in the most negative terms African Americans found it crucial to represent themselves and their experiences. This decision to write their experiences has produced a vibrant literature that seeks to lend a place to African Americans in the establishment. Their stories of enslavement and oppression became

the leitmotif of their writings. Needless to say, the first African American writers were mostly male and as a result their writings presented black experiences from the perspective of males. The experiences of the black woman still remained largely untold. Realizing this absence, African American women as well picked up their pens to recount what it meant to be a black woman in a rigidly racial and patriarchal, hierarchized society. Linda Trinh Moser and Kathryn West (2000) have noted this fact: "As the Black Arts Movement receded in the mid-1980s, African American women fiction writers began to appear [...]. Their works signaled a significant shift in African American literature (23).

This shift was the tendency to now address the specific plight of the African American woman; her struggles to carve out a space and identity for herself and the nature and consequences of her struggles. This resulted in the production of a vast canon of writings by black women who recognized the marginalization of their experiences in the literary productions of their time and so decided to tell their own stories. Dana A. Williams notes that "post-1970s African American women writers explore the black feminine self, a self heretofore unexamined" (72). They told stories that provided a "woman's perspective on slavery, suffering, connectedness, and motherhood and [are] straightforward in outlining the multiple sites of oppression faced by black women. Her voice long absent from the historical record, was finally available" (Elizabeth Anne Beaulieu, X).

Writing about these "multiple sites of oppression" brought black female experiences to the forefront and gave readers first-hand accounts of what it means to exist at the fringes of society or at the intersection of diverse dominant discourses. They wrote not only about their suffering and struggles but also their hopes for a better future for black women in America.

This says that African American writings do not stagnate at a specific experience but move in tandem with the evolution of African American experiences and consciousness. This has also resulted in the rise of different art forms or subgenres all intended to provide an aspect of African American experience.

Women writers have adopted and adapted different literary genres to tell their stories and in the process have brought different inflections to these genres. This has seen the birth of new narrative techniques and sub genres. This paper is interested in the novel of bestseller writer Terry McMillan. She is considered the most financially successful Black Female Writer unlike several of her predecessors and contemporaries. McMillan has not squarely addressed the race question in her several novels. She has rather focused on the struggles of middle-class professionally successful women to find emotional stability through diverse relations.

Terry McMillan's popular fiction and the reimagining of black womanhood

Prior to the rise of literary works by black writers, the black race had received little positive representation in works of arts. Black women were either absent or negatively portrayed in works written by white writers. Terry McMillan's fiction recycled the image of the black women by casting her seizing other opportunities and modes of existence.

However, it is worth noting that in spite of her financial success as a writer, Terry McMillan has received a lot of negative reviews from the academia. Her writing has received a lot of criticism for what is considered as not responding appropriately to the burning concerns of the black race in America. Paulette Richard (1999) notes, "academic critics have been curiously silent about McMillan's work despite the milestone achievements she represents in African American history" (16). From a more detailed perspective Richard contends

Academic critics question the merits of McMillan's form and many regards her work as disturbingly apolitical. Her description of affluent middle-class life style seems to avoid addressing the political and social issues that African and American literature has traditionally emphasized. Elizabeth Nunez head of the national black writers conference has expressed concern that McMillan's example will lead other black African writers to conclude "Hey, if you want to get popular then stop writing literature that is race concerned"(17).

The insistence on focusing on the race issue or racial identity constricts fixity to human identity, whereas identity is dynamic and multifaceted. While the historical precedent and socio-political realities of African Americans gives an important place to racial identity, it does not justify nor imply the complete negligence of other aspects or performances of identity. Deidre O'Donnell (2011) has maintained, "in constructing and presenting identities, individuals are constantly engaged in on going interpretation of entities which surround them within their social world" (26). True to this observation, McMillan's women in *Getting to Happy* attribute much importance to their selfhood, to their emotional stability, which comes in part from their relationships with significant others. These relationships, therefore, come to signify a central aspect of their selfhood by which they define themselves. So even though they are black women in a racially dominant society, their self-realization comes from these relationships both amorous and familial. Sheila Greene (2003) has observed as follows:

Challenges to the notion of the fixed and unitary self has result in an understanding of personal identity and selfhood as processes which are always under way, never achieved [...]. The sense of self preservation and continuity within a normal dynamic flux of experience, mainly by dint of active interpretation of experience and its meaning in place and time (112).

This emphasizes the dynamic nature of human identity and a result of its close links with experience. The history of African Americans has placed accent on racial

identity, and rightfully so. Nevertheless, the individual has varied experiences, aspirations and ambitions which determine which aspect of identity is performed at a given time. Given the gains of the Civil Rights Movement, it became inevitable that black women would begin to move to occupy spaces hitherto denied them and that they would begin defining themselves and, by extension, black womanhood in a way that, although inconceivable before, is nonetheless liberating. It is in line with this thinking that Catherine Ross Stroud (2006) has contended:

McMillan's novels serve to revise the narrative of what it means to be a woman in today's society. The female characters in her novels come to the realization that their oppression is borne out of the refusal to let go of dominant ideology of womanhood. McMillan constructs plot lines that show her female characters on both sides of the master narrative. First McMillan's women are constructed in plot lines where the female characters ascribe to the rule of the cult- of -true -womanhood. By the novel's end, these characters discover that self-empowerment and liberation comes when one defines herself in her own terms (616).

Such a project as undertaken by Terry McMillan can hardly be termed apolitical as critics have too often done. Rather McMillan's works focus on myriad possible ways of being and how none needs be sacrificed for the other.

I consider McMillan's novel as reflecting on the position that to be black is not the only possibility but that identity shifts as experiences evolve. She, therefore, creates black female characters whose blackness is not their only defining marker. Instead they are a beautiful mix of blackness, femaleness, emotiveness etc as Dana A Williams observes, "contemporary African American literature by African American women writers offers full expressions of the complexity of the contemporary African American life, particularly as relates to the black woman" (71). To dismiss her works because they are popular fiction and do not make race central is to dismiss the experiences of a contemporary black woman; to make light of her emotional well-being that comes in the form of relationships and also her struggles to stand outside of the dominant script that has predefined roles for her. I read McMillan as insisting that every aspect of African American women's realities count and, therefore, deserve literary attention.

Emergence of the "New" black woman in McMillan's *Getting to Happy*

Getting to Happy is the sequel to McMillan's phenomenal bestseller *Waiting to Exhale*, which follows the trials and triumphs of four black women: Savannah, Gloria, Bernadine and Robin in their quest for a stable personal identity. This facet of identity for these women largely depends on their relationships with significant others. So, even though they are all black women, through her focus, McMillan seems to suggest that their identities are not exclusively hinged on race. These four women are all professional women who, although relatively successful professionally, have troubled relation-

ships or have trouble having and keeping fulfilling relationships with male partners. The emphasis on their romantic relationships and struggles establishes this as a main source of personal identity for these women. Richards (1999) tags such a novel the "four-woman novel," and observes

McMillan's narrative immediately invites readers to participate in the sisterhood presented in the text and the larger imagined community shared by readers who know and love the conventions of the four-woman novel. Readers recognize this narrative space as a forum for exploring the evolving facets of female identity in society. (124)

By bringing together four women, McMillan is able to create a space or a scenario whereby these women by sharing similar experiences can, therefore, stand to represent the larger community of women. It becomes easier to imagine how these women, because they are up to four and not just one, represent the diverse classes of black women. In this light, Richards adds,

The four-woman novel is a character-driven form. Through the four main characters, the author can present a multiplicity of perspectives while emphasizing the commonality of experience women share across race, class or cultural backgrounds in male dominated societies. (124)

Also by bringing together these women and illustrating the ways in which their desires and struggles coincide, I read McMillan as insisting that the issues she raises are important to women and if so are worthy of narrative attention. As emotional and sexual beings, these women equally define themselves from these perspectives and it would be unseemly to insist that, because they are black in a racialized society, every other aspect of their identity should be subsumed in race. If that were the case, then even the rich corpus of female narratives that brought in new themes to the literary landscape would not have received the attention it did and still does receive. The quest for personal identity from the emotional and sexual point of view cannot be trivialized for this reason. This underlines the fact that race alone cannot totally define the individual and for the self to be complete and for personal identity to be stable, these other elements come into play. Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor (2009) intimate,

Some novelists such as Terry McMillan, take the race of their characters for granted and write unapologetically about the love and sex lives of privileged black women, reversing the long-standing equation, in African American literature of middle class status, sexual prudery and racial inauthenticity (165).

These black women step out of the stereotypes they have been forced to sit in for a long time and, in doing so, they enable a new facet of black female identity to emerge.

Each of these four women faces a struggle that is related to their relationship or the lack thereof. Savannah suffers from post-divorce depression following her divorce with Isaac. She says of herself,

I feel like sliding back under the covers. I think I might be somewhat depressed. I've got all the symptoms. Some mornings it's been hard rolling out of bed, and regardless of what time I go to sleep I still feel sluggish when I wake up. There is no pep in my step and I don't get all that worked up over too much of anything these days. (215/216)

Even though overall, Isaac, her ex-husband, is seen as a good man, his acquiescence to her accusation of marital infidelity brings their marriage to a sudden end. She suffers from acute loneliness, which slowly degenerates into depression. Her reflection of her life alone presents a woman helpless and almost desperate for company, for emotional and physical support.

Since Isaac has been gone, I've had to get used to a lot. Besides not having him to complain about, I've had to get used to doing almost everything alone: eating, sleeping, watching television, cooking, getting my truck washed ... I realized how much stuff Isaac used to do around here and how little I actually know how to do. [...] I am tired of paying the handyman and I wonder if they have classes to teach you how to fix stuff around the house, especially if you don't have a husband to do it. (216-217)

What the reader is confronted with here is the near falling apart of Savannah, following her divorce. Her sense of selfhood is threatened as she faces loneliness and total self-dependence. This underlines the importance of the relationship with a significant other for stability. More importantly, the feeling of desperation is not experienced by Savannah alone.

Her friend Robin has never been married and by the time we meet her in the novel, she is beginning to feel desperate about this. Sensing this desperation, her daughter urges her to try online dating. Unfortunately for Robin, her first date from this online site is with a character named Dark Angel who stands her up on their first date and turns out to be a dishonest individual. Deeply disappointed, she writes to him as follows: "in case you weren't aware, this is not a game, Dark Angel. There are millions of women out there hoping to meet a decent man online, and if your behavior represents what's out there, I'm bowing out now" (229). Robin's retorting highlights the importance she attaches to meeting a man and establishing a worthwhile relationship. So she adds, "I thought online dating was meant to save you time and help you get around the riffraff and avoid playing the usual game so you'd stand a better chance of meeting that special someone" (229). This expresses a deep desire for something that will bring her fulfilment.

For her part, Bernadine is falling apart due to betrayal. Pained by the betrayal of her ex-husband, who, she discovers, is leading a double life, she becomes addicted to prescription drug. In spite of her personal struggles coupled with advice and support from her friends, it becomes difficult or even impossible for her to get off the drugs. This emotional instability is doubtless as a result of the betrayal of her husband and their

eventual separation. She is twice divorced and this has taken its toll on her emotional well-being and sense of self, reason why she eventually becomes dependent on drugs.

At the time the reader meets Gloria in the text, she is happily married to wonderful man. Unfortunately, on the day they are to celebrate their wedding anniversary, he is killed by a stray bullet. This devastates Gloria completely and leaves her in the state of perpetual longing. It is said of her that

Whenever she needed a plumber or electrician or handyman—even the new gardeners—her wedding ring told them she did not live alone. It protected her. This is the reason she'd been relying on it for almost eight months. She was afraid to take it off. It would make more things final. She was no longer married. And she didn't have a husband anymore. To Gloria they meant two very different things. (290)

Unable to come to terms with the loss of her husband, Gloria clings to her wedding ring for several months. All four women seek selfhood via relationships and that is the reason why the loss or absence of such relationships creates a void. Thus, when all four women meet, the following exchange ensues:

No one has yet to answer my question. How's everybody doing? For real, says Savannah. Everybody's thinking how best to answer
 "I'm lonely and bored", Robin says
 "I'm frustrated with myself", Bernadine says.
 "I miss my husband and I'm worried about my son and my grandkids", Gloria says, pulling the blanket up to her shoulders. What about you, Savannah?
 "I'm getting better but I won't lie. This is some hard shit to go through. I wish I was telepathic and could see how long it's going to be before we're all in high spirits again." (247)

The pain and frustration experienced by these women is directly related to their relationships or the lack of them. Mitchell and Taylor have noted in line with this idea thus,

Moving beyond the black arts movement, contemporary African American women writers sought to understand the self in relation to society, historically and politically as well as interior self, often through personal experience like motherhood and marriage. Explorations into the interior self characterize the diverse works by contemporary African American women writers. (8)

This highlights the importance and even the obligation to consider the complete picture of the self within African American women's writings. Identity for these women is multifaceted, and, while I evoke the concept of McMillan's new woman, I do not mean a woman for whom race is insignificant. Rather I recognize this woman as one who has come a long way as far as the race question is concerned but who, nevertheless, feels the importance of embracing other aspects of self. Through her women, she attempts to capture black female life from varying perspectives. This is in line with bell hooks' observation as elaborated by David Macey (2000), who underlines of hooks

Yet whilst she emphasizes the enormous importance of 'homeplace' as a refuge and a place for self-renewal created mainly by women, she is very careful not to lapse into the essentialism that sees all African-American experience as expression of 'soul' (1990) and stresses the multiple and complex nature of black experiences. For hooks, the struggle against racism and sexism as such is inseparable from the struggle against racism *within* feminism and the struggle against sexism *within* black liberation movements. (189)

In response to the many accusations levied against her writing, especially her apparent silence on the race question, McMillan responded, "I don't write about victims. They just bore me to death. I prefer to write about somebody who can pick themselves back up and get on with their lives because all of us are victims to some extent. (qtd: Human, 2014: 76). And, indeed, the women in *Getting to Happy* do not wallow for long in victimhood. Eventually, they pick up the pieces, mend them and move on with their lives.

Savannah, devastated by her ex-husband's irresponsible defaulting on his debt owed her credit union, decides to take her long planned-trip to Paris. She tells her friends,

I'm going for two weeks for the same reason Bernadine is going to Rehab to find my center. I need a break for everything. So I can accept the reality that I'm a fifty-one-year-old single woman which means I have to launch a whole new program to help me live like this is a new beginning instead of an ending. (258)

So, even though she is painfully divorced and has lost 36 points of her credit ratings, she is still determined to move ahead and give herself another chance. When she arrives in Paris, she is able to come to terms with her reality that "my life didn't end just because my marriage did. I've got plenty of reasons to live, and much to look forward to. Otherwise I wouldn't be here. I didn't come to Paris to run from myself. I came here to run back to myself" (321). This captures Savannah on the road to self-recovery. For Bernadine, after a lot of hesitation and procrastination, she eventually checks into rehab where she is able to get help and quit drugs. As Bernadine goes to rehab, she explains "I just want my life back" (273). When her friends eventually ask what plan she has for herself, she responds, "maybe meeting someone possibly dating again" (369). She has not given up on life in spite of all what she has gone through nor has she given up on romance either. She refuses the permanent position of victim. Robin for her part proposes to boyfriend Michael and immediately warns: "I can tell you right now that divorce is out of the question. I don't care how pissed off we get, we will work it out" (332/333), and Savannah says of herself, "Romance isn't out of the question. And I haven't given up on men. I'm just not going to act like a hitchhiker on a two-lane highway waiting to get picked up. I've decided to take a move pro-active approach. I'm going to start asking men out. All they can do is say no. One monkey doesn't stop the whole show" (328). Although Gloria does not begin dating, she is finally able to take off her wedding ring. She equally gets a partner for her beauty parlor and

expands her business. These four women are determined to regain their happiness through recovering their lost selves. They all seem to adhere to Savannah's counsel that "I think we owe it to ourselves to start doing as much as we possibly can to make ourselves as happy as we possibly can for as long as we possibly can and to hell with all the bullshit that doesn't" (248).

To be wholesome, the contemporary black woman has to step out of the mould of her diverse oppressions and stereotypes and move into gains of the Civil Rights Movement. In one of their conversations, in the heart of their frustration, Savannah makes an important statement: "I read online somewhere [...] that sometimes we have to reinvent ourselves" (248). This is what we truly witness reading through the novel.

Just like the first African American authors addressed the oppression of the slave establishment and female writers, noticing their invisibility in the literary scape, also wrote to tell their stories of racial and sexist domination, there is need for the contemporary woman's story to be told. Elizabeth McHenry (2002) notes that "students of African American literature, history and culture have come to know that "invisible things are not necessarily 'not there'" as Toni Morrison recently puts it, "certain absences so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves" (4). The experiences of the contemporary women must not be silenced as trifle. Rather, because it constitutes her reality, it must be explored.

Through Gloria, Savannah, Robin and Bernadine, McMillan has lent voice to the contemporary black woman in America to recount what makes her whole. Through Savannah, she brings to light some of these aspects in the following statement:

Should I ever get an opportunity to stumble on another member of the opposite sex who rocks me even at this early stage of my life, I'm not jumping in the first train that pulls into my station. I don't want another husband. I just want someone to have dinner with a couple of times a month. Sex twice a month-three times would be better. Somebody to travel with, go to concert with, the movies and maybe spend the night every once in a while and then send his ass home. I'll date until I'm dead. (254)

A fulfilling relationship constitutes a major element in the sense of selfhood for the contemporary woman. Richard concurs with her observation that McMillan "debunks the myths of the virginal woman ideal and married to her hero. She constructs single, divorced and widowed womanhood as possibilities for the contemporary black American women" (20). For her part Beverly Tate argues that "McMillan's works might not address the longstanding history of racial politics in America, but she expertly exposes the deep fissures of sexual politics within the African-American community" (352). This too constitutes an important feature of black womanhood.

For these women, a sense of selfhood is attained when they find themselves in or are in the process of developing emotionally and physically fulfilling relationships.

Towards the end of the story, when they have all discarded their pains and frustrations and are reinventing themselves in part through re-establishing relationships, we see them more hopeful and self-assured than at the beginning. The novel ends on optimistic mode, as we see:

When someone yells out, “party over here!” these four women-these four friends-cannot stop swaying and shimmying to the brand-new beat, jumping up and down and waving their hands in the air like they just don’t care. But they do. They definitely do. (373)

This citation reveals a number of things that come with reinventing the self. The “brand-new beat” to which they dance could refer to the new sense of self, the creating of the new black woman who defies the boundaries set for her by the society. The freedom with which they jump and wave their hands in the air, I read as the freedom they have acquired by embracing the new self as it is. The last line where the author repeats that these women do care I consider as a reference to other markers of their identity. Not only do these fulfilling relationships make them whole but also the entire array of blackness, femaleness and contemporariness. They care about the whole self.

Mitchell and Taylor add, “contemporary African American writings explore the self, its desires, its longings, its aspiration and its possibilities, particularly in the post-civil rights United States” (71). McMillan has, therefore, crafted a new narrative of black American womanhood, which needs to be embraced and not rejected, because it is now clear that identity is a dynamic and all-encompassing aspect of human existence. This is well elucidated by Candice Johnson (2011), who notes Charles Johnson’s reaction on the exclusive reliance on the race factor. She states,

As Johnson asserts “experience of victimization” from slavery to the Civil Rights Movement within the black American narrative has as its protagonist every black person in America. However, Johnson [...] notes that the black American narrative must begin to eschew the cultural consciousness of victimization and embrace the “rich diversity and heterogeneity” of black America in the twenty first century. Doing so celebrates difference and individualism within black America, allowing readers to redefine the collective based on multiple experiences including those that go beyond race. (661)

This long quotation is warranted here as it well captures the essence of McMillan’s fiction which is the recognition of the multiplicity of layers of African American identity and the various performances of same identity as dictated by circumstances. It is this boldness of McMillan’s narrative that is responsible for much of her success. As Goeff Hamilton and Brian Jones (2015) underscore, “much of McMillan’s success stems from her uncanny ability to gauge the pulse of African-American women” (235). In doing this, she doubtlessly places the black woman in America at the centre of her own narrative and sends across the message that every aspect of her existence counts and she has the right to redefine herself on her own terms. Thus, Wanda Macon (2001) intimates that

"a black woman and her people need not be limited by the roles society expects them to play, allows them to play, or prohibits them from playing by virtue of their status in their community" (285). McMillan's fiction embraces the multifarious faces of the modern African American woman.

Conclusion

The gains of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA did not signal an end to racial concerns, but it equally opened up other possibilities for self-exploration and self-expression. Writers like McMillan responded to this by exploring the wholesomeness of black female identity. If the race question constituted the main subject in the majority of African American writings, there was the need to approach the black individual from another perspective; to address other aspects of the black female self and to highlight the fears, hopes and dreams of the contemporary black woman. This "new" woman is not entrapped in the racial space only but performs different aspects of her identity. Black life is about race but not exclusively so, it is actually about many things. Even in the most racialized societies, attaining racial equality is not a panacea that will adequately take care of the identity crisis of African Americans. Consequently, the whole self has to be addressed and it is in this that writers like McMillan, the foremother of black popular fiction, come in. No longer can African American (women) writers be obliged to focus exclusively on race in America. Amy Sickels (2010) has underscored that "the theme and subjects found in African American literature has expanded widely, and today more than ever it is nearly impossible to group the work of African American authors under a single heading. Cultural, social and political ideas continue to change and become entwined" (14). This is indicative of the diverse directions this literature has taken. Being a woman, and a fulfilled woman at that, is part of the social ideal in America. Therefore, McMillan's *Getting to Happy* emphasizes that no experience that contributes to self-actualization can be considered too minute or irrelevant to receive literary attention as to do that would be tantamount to marginalizing and/or belittling a group's sense of selfhood.

What McMillan's novel tells us is that no single aspect of human identity is so all-encompassing as to exclude others. Our discussion shows that identity is neither static nor constituted by just one element but it is dynamic, evolutionary and multidimensional. The gains or struggles of the Civil Rights Movements do not mean a close to other dimensions but rather the opening up of other ways of being and other routes to selfhood. One lesson that ought to be learned from the Civil Rights Movements is that it is important to give voice to everyone in the society. Denying other possibilities and perspectives stands in conflict to what this movement stood for. No class of

society deserves to have its experience marginalized or trivialized. McMillan's project in her novel leaves the reader with the comforting notion that every story counts, all lives matter, and all experiences are worthy of attention. If we are to go by John Wideman's metaphor that "a story is a formula for extracting meaning from chaos, a handful of water we scoop up to recall an ocean" (qtd. in Porter, xv), then, indeed, McMillan's *Getting to Happy* can be approached as providing another way of looking at the black experience in America, as another dimension of a being black woman in contemporary America. It is in assembling these different voices that meaning can truly be extracted from the complexity of African American selfhood. It is in line with this thinking that Dillahunt defends McMillan's fiction by remarking that for critics to characterize her work as terminable is to invalidate the importance of the contemporary black woman's experience, a distinctively new black experience that is not grounded in a slave-master genre of struggle for civil rights (237). This point is further emphasized by eminent African American critic bell hooks (2013) who concurs, "Most importantly, I am attempting to think and write beyond the boundaries which keep us all overracialized. To find a way to move beyond race is not only the goal of critical thinking, it is the only path to emotional longevity, the only true path of liberation" (8). This is the path McMillan has chosen in writing *Getting to Happy*.

Even a cursory survey of African American literature tells that concerns shift from one literary epoch to another in reflection of the mutating notion of African Americanness. Seen this way, it can be concluded that identity, to borrow from Jacques Derrida, has "no point of origin and no end" (qtd. in David Macey, 86). It is a continuum, a never-ending process, drawing from experience and, therefore, metamorphosing.

Whether we find McMillan's women likable or unlikable is beside the point; what counts is whether we appreciate their struggle to exist out of the frame and role that has been predefined by the society. Their struggle for selfhood represents the diverse facets of the struggles of African American contemporary woman who has been perceived by the dominant society from a negative point of view. The passion with which these women pursue their dream for wholeness is indicative of the place attributed to these dreams for their attainment of selfhood. And if it is important to the black woman, then it deserves a place in black American fiction. While it is unquestionable that collective identity, given the context, is central to African American society, it should also be an unquestionable fact that personal identity has an important role to play. We must, of course, bear in mind the fact that the collective (the whole) is made of individuals (the personal) and both dimensions need to be adequately negotiated for the stability of the society. This is what I consider to be part of McMillan's project in *Getting to Happy*.

Works Cited

- Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann. Ed. *Writing African-American Women: An Encyclopedia of Literature by and About Women of Colour, Volumes 1 and 2*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006.
- Dillahunt, Marion C. "Terry McMillan." *Icons of African American Literature: The Black Literary World*. Ed. Yolanda Williams Page. Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2011. 233-264.
- Greene, Sheila. *The Psychological Development of Girls and Women: Rethinking Change in Time*. London: Routledge. 2003.
- hooks, bell. *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Humann, Heather Duerre. *Domestic Abuse in the Novels of African American Women: A Critical Study*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc Publishers, 2014.
- Jackson, Candice Love. "From Writer to Reader: Black Popular Fiction" *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*. Eds. Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. Cambridge: CUP, 2011. 655-679.
- Macey, David. *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. London: Penguin Books, 2000.
- Macon, Wanda. "McMillan, Terry." *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. Eds. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Forster, Trudier Harris. Oxford: OUP, 2001. 284-285.
- McHenry, Elizabeth. *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.
- McMillan, Terry. *Getting to Happy*. New York: Viking, 2010.
- Mitchell, Angelyn and Taylor, Danille K. Eds. *Cambridge Companion to African American Women Literature*. Cambridge: CUP, 2009.
- Moser, Linda Trinh and West, Kathryn. *Research Guide to American Literature: Contemporary Literature 1970 - Present*. New York: Facts on File, 2010.
- O'Donnell, Deidre. "Narrative, Self and Identity: Explorations in Theoretical Approaches to Narrative Identities and the Construction of "self" in *Later Life*." *Acculturating Age: Approaches to Cultural Gerontology*. Ed. Brian Worsfold J. Lleida: Edicions de la universita de Lleida, 2011. 15-29.
- Porter, Horace A. *Dreaming Out Loud: African American Novelists at Work*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015.
- Page, Yolanda Williams. *Encyclopedia of African American Women Writer*. Westport: Greenwood Press. 2007.
- Richards, Paulette. *Terry McMillan: A Critical Companion*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999.
- Samuels Wilfred, D. *Encyclopedia of African-American Literature*. New York: Facts on File, 2007.
- Sharp, Michael D. *Popular Contemporary Writers, Volume 8*. New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2006.
- Sickels, Amy. *Multicultural Voices: African-American Writers*. New York: Chelsea House, 2010.
- Tate, Beverly. "McMillan, Terry" *Encyclopedia of African-American Literature*. Ed. Samuels D. Wilfred. New York: Facts on File, 2007. 350-352.
- Williams, Dana A. "Contemporary African American Writers." Taylor. *Cambridge Companion to African American Women Writers*. Eds. Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Cambridge: CUP, 2009. 71-86.