

# African-American Women's Quest for Happiness in Terry

## McMillan's Selected Novels

Ambroise Medegan<sup>1</sup> & Nathalie Aguessy<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Abomey-Calavi, Republic of Benin

\* Nathalie Aguessy, E-mail: [aguessynathalie@yahoo.fr](mailto:aguessynathalie@yahoo.fr)

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### **Abstract**

*History has it that the utmost aim of Man's struggles is the pursuit of happiness. This pursuit of happiness is a legally and constitutionally recognized right of for all American citizens irrespective of their race, colour, gender and creed. But the concept of happiness is elusive and challenging in nature and its meaning solely depends on an individual's perception of it. This paper aims to explore Terry McMillan's perception of this concept in two of her novels: *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) and *Getting to Happy* (2010). Given that history holds that African-American women suffered sexism and racism in their society, this study seeks to analyze the selected novels in order to unveil the various mechanisms employed by McMillan to make her female personae cope with gender discrimination and exclusion, both of which are the manifestations of sexism and racism and live a happy life. This study draws on New Historicism for theoretical insight and orientation. With this theory, the paper seeks to take stock of how McMillan's times affect her works under scrutiny and how these works reflect her times.*

### **Keywords**

*New Historicism, African-American, contemporary, women, happiness, Terry McMillan's novels*

### **1. Introduction and Theoretical Framework**

"We all certainly desire to live happily", wrote St. Augustine of Hippo late in the fourth century. This assertion of St. Augustine is indisputable. All the struggles of Man have always been directed at the pursuit of happiness. It has been noted that this "pursuit of happiness" was (and is still) so important for Americans so much so that it was inscribed in the United States Declaration of Independence of 1776, written by Thomas Jefferson. In the Declaration of Independence, the pursuit of happiness goes along with life and liberty, and this pursuit of happiness is the third member of the great trinity of human rights. And the conception is that the other two members of that trinity are the prime conditions, prerequisites for the third one (Maclver, 1955). This is to say, without life and liberty, the pursuit of happiness is quite impossible. In America, African-Americans in general and African-American women

in particular have distinguished themselves in this pursuit of happiness through different kinds of struggle such as abolition of slavery, civil rights movement, education, housing, healthcare, search for Mr. Right, etc. What is this happiness so much longed for?

Martin Seligman, one of the leading researchers in positive psychology and author of *Authentic Happiness* (2011), describes happiness as having three measurable elements: pleasure, engagement, and meaning. Pleasure is the “feel good” part of happiness. Engagement refers to living a “good life” of work, family, friends, and hobbies. Meaning refers to using our strengths to contribute to a larger purpose. Seligman further argues that though all the three are important, engagement determines a happy life. Happiness is actually what one is doing and who one is. It is also choosing and accepting one’s situation, children, life, husband/wife and oneself. That is why, modern sciences define happiness as the positive range of sensations that we feel when we are contented or glad or full of joy. Happiness is wellness, well-being, gladness and contentment. It is fulfillment and serenity. However, it remains elusive and challenges all our expectations and reasoning.

This paper aims to explore Terry McMillan’s perception of the concept of happiness in two of her novels: *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) and *Getting to Happy* (2010). How does this writer perceive happiness? McMillan’s perception of happiness is actually encoded in her characters. Jasper, Savannah’s lover says that “It’s a feeling of calm that comes from inside. When you figure out what’s important. When you have nothing to prove giving everything you do, everything you’ve got and being satisfied, regardless of the outcome” (McMillan, 2010). For Savannah, happiness is “When you’re willing to surrender to goodness and joy. Give yourself permission to feel it. Not holding yourself hostage for making mistakes. Doing what you love. Doing for others. Learning to cherish the beauty of right now. When you can make yourself smile and laugh without depending on anybody else” (Ibid). What the two characters’ understanding of the concept “happiness” has in common is the fact that it denotes a feeling or state of internal peace and stability and freedom. Given the elusive and challenging nature of happiness, the foregoing perception raises a certain number of closely related questions: What really determines happiness? Or what brings about true happiness? How should an individual live his/her life to be happy? To what extent does the realization of happiness fall within the individual’s control?

To answer the above-questions, this paper draws on new historicism for theoretical insight and orientation. New Historicism is a literary theory based on the idea that literature should be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic [...] New Historicism acknowledges not only that a work of literature is influenced by its author’s times and circumstances, but that the critic’s response to that work is also influenced by his [or her] environment, beliefs and prejudices. A New Historicist looks at literature in a wider historical context, examining both how the writer’s times affect the work and how the work reflects the writer’s times, in turn recognizing the current cultural contexts that colour the critic’s conclusions. Accordingly, we qualitatively discuss the historical context of the works under study and how the writer’s times and life affect them. We especially

do this against the backdrop of such concepts as happiness and freedom as perceived or/and represented in the social world of the selected works. Before we do this, we would first of all discuss Terry McMillan and her writings in relation to such eminent and prolific writers as Alice Walker. We would also throw more light on the concepts of happiness and freedom before we explore how the author represents them in her selected fictional texts.

## 2. Terry McMillan's Writings

Terry McMillan is an African-American woman born on October 18, 1951, in Port Huron, Michigan. In her writings, McMillan seems to take inspiration from the book of her life or from that of her family. She writes about people, life, and lived problems. She writes in order to understand the world around her and to find an outlet to the questions she herself has faced. Contrary to Alice Walker who writes about Black women of an earlier generation, McMillan writes about the lives of contemporary Black women. As stated in *Black Americans of Achievement*, Alice Walker, the acclaimed African American author of *The Color Purple*, and Terry McMillan, both wrote about the lives of poor Black women in America. Walker described how things used to be, Terry McMillan described things as they are (Fish, B. D. & Fish, B., 2002).

There is actually progression in terms of time and topicality in McMillan's works. In *Mama* (1987), she presents herself from childhood to adulthood. In fact, Madeline, her mother, is the recognizable main character of the novel (Skow, 1996). In the next novel, *Disappearing Acts* (1993), she depicts her loving experience during her adulthood with a blue-collar man. This experience ends with a child and a separation from her lover. *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) has obviously been inspired by McMillan's own experiences of an unfulfilled, explosive romantic relationship over the years and she has noted that many of her friends and herself are in the same boat: educated, smart, attractive [...] and alone (Konkol & Ossei, 1997). As a result of this, she wrote *How Stella got her Groove Back* (1996) whose main character is Stella, a highly successful professional woman in her early 40s, a mother of a young boy, who tries to get her groove back during a vacation to Jamaica. This might possibly parallel McMillan's own life; she herself has met and fallen in love with a younger man, Jonathan Plummer, during her trip to Jamaica following the death of her mother and best friend. This sad and unfortunate situation has deeply affected her following writing, *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* (2001). She also wrote *The Interruption of Everything* (2004) which is the story of a woman's need to break out and live the life she has longed for. After this, she wrote *Getting to Happy* (2010) in which she features the four characters of *Waiting to Exhale*. Here, each of the fictional characters is at the crossroads of their lives just as McMillan herself. McMillan's female characters truly go through much suffering even if they remain strong, facing their plight courageously. McMillan herself has struggled too to find her way out in the American society rife with such plagues as racism, sexism, class difference, gender inequality, etc.

### 3. Historical Context of Terry McMillan's Selected Works

Terry McMillan positions her selected novels, *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) and *Getting to Happy* (2010), as well as her heroines in the changing American society. This period dates back to the eighties and Detroit is revealed to be an important centre of the activities of the Civil Rights movement. In fact, national events are not ignored in McMillan's fictional texts in that she herself was born in Port Huron, and this can be said to impart her and inform her works as well. It is obvious that she is aware of certain national issues which cogently go beyond her family setting. In McMillan's social environment, violence was rife. As Diane Patrick clearly points out, "[then] young Blacks were concerned about the question of violence versus nonviolence, and whether to unite with whites or segregate from them. The Black Power movement was growing, and the Black Panthers were making headlines" (Patrick, 2000, p. 39). The sixties is also the decade wherein young people created their own culture, spending their money on clothes and free time on music.

In *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), for instance, McMillan (re-)presents the hardships that many African-American women faced in the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's and shows how they adjusted themselves to social change. She portrays four courageous black women struggling to survive life's harsh realities. Their struggle actually symbolizes the intense struggle all social human beings in quest of happiness and freedom are facing. These four black women in the novel are in their thirties but they exude a sense of bonding. These women struggle emotionally because they find their individual lives frustrating. McMillan also describes the problem of family crisis and the dissatisfaction of single women determined in finding a male partner. Indeed, McMillan has never accepted the situation of her family as poor African-Americans. As Fish, B. D. and Fish, B. (2002, p. 17) clearly note: "Terry didn't want anyone [...] to determine her destiny, even though as yet, she has no idea what her destiny would be". It is obvious in the foregoing that McMillan holds an essentialist philosophy that looks beyond an individual life and embraces the unknown. Her moving to California many years later truly influenced her perception of life and formed her sense of self. She highlights this in what follows:

"I accumulated and gained a totally new insight, and perception of our lives as black people, as if I had been an outsider and finally let in [...] to discover that our lives held as much significance and importance as our white counterpart was more gratifying. It is exhilarating" (Ibid, p. 28).

For McMillan, an African-American family can be happy while adjusting to social change. Following Charles R. Larson (1990, p. 1), one can say "Clearly [that with McMillan] there is a renaissance in Black fiction". In fact, McMillan's encounter with California affected her authorial ideology, representation and characterization. This is to say, the way she depicts African American women's plight is totally different from the classical way.

### 4. More Light on Freedom and Happiness

Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau states in his *Social Contract*, written in 1762, that: "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains" (p. 156). Philosopher Lewis Gordon (2000, p. 14) reformulates

Rousseau's statement in the following terms: "The slave is born in chains, but she has freedom in her bosom—how is this possible?" African Americans have been fighting for years to achieve freedom so as to be happy. But they are still in chains. Even in chains, African Americans have always desired freedom and all they have done so far is geared toward freedom. In a recent past, the African-American woman waged three types of struggle different from those of her white female counterpart. First of all, she had to challenge herself because she had to liberate herself from the conditionings of her socio-cultural environment. Then she had to free herself from her African-American males. The third and last challenge concerns her fight against the white males as well as their wives. To sum up, one can say that, in addition to the black community's struggle for equality, African-American women in particular fought for the elimination of the injustices of which they were victims, first as Blacks and second as women. So, "throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman's reality as a situation of struggle" (Cannon, 1985; quoted in Soyini, 1994, p. 581). The American society has fundamental creeds proclaimed in the Constitution, among which the right to life, to liberty, the pursuit of happiness, common good, justice, diversity, truth, popular sovereignty, patriotism, peace, and the dignity of every human being, racial and gender equality, the possibility for every American to be promoted if he works hard (from "The 28 Fundamental Beliefs of The Founding Fathers"). All this can or should normally make people happy, but in their daily lives, the average Americans are confronted with conflicting values. They struggle hard to mediate their lives between the respect of life and the culture of death, peace and violence, racial and gender equality and all kinds of discrimination. This confused society in which the Americans are born and raised, deeply affects their behaviours and psyche.

Blacks are still subject to different kinds of discreet discrimination. However, a recent study by the University of Pennsylvania economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers argues that African Americans are getting happier because their situation has been changing. As the study observes, while whites have become less happy, African-Americans have grown a lot happier. Blacks are still not as happy, overall, as whites, but in seminal new research—which tracks the changes in happiness levels by race since the 1970s for the first time—economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers from the University of Pennsylvania found that the gap between black and white happiness has declined by about 40 percent. Wolfers says: "It is the largest and most important change in happiness for any population I have ever seen" (Baird, 2010).

It is noticeable, in the quote above, that blacks as a group are happier than they used to be in a recent past. Even if their income has not reached the level of that of most of the white middle-class, one can contend that blacks' happiness does not depend on income, it also has nothing to do with the decline in day-to-day racial abuse or attack. Albeit everything is supposed to be racially and sexually motivated, McMillan seeks to communicate something else different from racial exploitation in her fiction. She puts this clearly when she writes: "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” (Layland, 1996, pp. 76-79). It follows from this that McMillan has never been someone who waits for things to happen. She has always fought against fatalistic thoughts and behaviours. This is a step to happiness!

### **5. Happiness at the Crossroads: From *Waiting to Exhale* to *Getting to Happy***

Figuratively, crossroads not only evokes potentiality and opening, but it also denotes caution and chaos. The woman or man who stands at the crossroads must expect danger and promise [...] here doors are opened or closed, future meets limitation, chance revises choice (Copeland, 2010, p. 14). Crossroads signifies in this particular case a moment, a period of time during which African-Americans have the possibility of threat or opportunity, to win or lose, to make choices. The opportunity of happiness has helped African-American women to make the right choice. In *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) and *Getting to Happy* (2010), McMillan depicts the plight of four African-American women: Bernadine Harris (36 years old), Savannah Jackson (36 years old), Robin Stokes (35 years old) and Gloria Johnson (38 years old). All of them desire to have a serious relationship with men and with the society but they experience many unsuccessful relationships leading to divorce and much dissatisfaction. They inhale air but they could not breathe out. Sometimes they are devastated because their lives are like an unfolded movie. Sometimes they are discontented with themselves. But they never stop the struggle to live a happy life.

Gloria, in *Getting to Happy*, is the only one who is happily married with Marvin. Unfortunately, Marvin dies. Robin is happy to have finally found somebody she can love as she wants somebody who needs her. Michael, her lover, is said not to fit her. He wants a good and lasting relationship but she refuses. He would have been her Mr. Wonderful and Mr. Once-and-for-All. Nobody cares whether she has found her Mr. Wonderful or not. In the novel, she has found Michael at gym, reincarnated, not fat, not married, saying that he has been maybe waiting for her (*GTH*, p. 324). Michael and Robin are meant for each other for life. So, divorce is out of question: “When you get married at fifty, what reasons could you possibly have to get divorce?” (*GTH*, p. 412).

McMillan, in writing these two novels, wants to awaken African-American women to their plight. Many women would certainly identify with these female characters. By depicting these female personae as strong while confronting their plight, McMillan not only wants to reduce the gravity of the plight but she also seeks to drive a message home. The message is nothing else but the defying of the double-head monster (racism and sexism) which has kept the African-American woman captive for years, a captive who is longing for her freedom and happiness. In fact, the African-American women have been holding their breath for years waiting; their lives have been a preparation for their real destination, creating a family (Ellerby, 1997, pp. 105-117). The term “wait” is a very lonely, uncertain and an anxious experience, but it also denotes hope and a sense of not giving up. The term “exhale” means breathe out. Taken together, these two terms are literally captured as part of the process of “*Getting to Happy*”. Happiness is what humans are searching for. Happiness does not mean the absence

of sadness; in fact, it includes some amount of pains. The suggestion here is that on the path to happiness which is not without pains, people should focus on making good choices that are liberating. One of the ways of getting happy that McMillan suggests in her fiction is satisfying societal expectations.

She also suggests that a healthy affective life determines or is part of happiness. From *Waiting to Exhale* to *Getting to Happy*, McMillan progressively exudes that women's quest for happiness is possible but it is a lifelong process. Women's triumph over affective sufferings or pains is also possible but it is a lifelong process. With time comes wisdom, says a popular dictum. At middle age, African-American women become wiser and more realistic. Middle age is characterized by menopause occurring around fifties. Women at fifties are no more looking for a man to raise children with, but just a life companion to cope with loneliness. In *Waiting to Exhale* and *Getting to Happy*, one can notice that affective problems do not depend on age. The women in these novels face almost the same host of affective problems caused by divorce, menopause, child upbringing, loneliness, the search for the ever-elusive Mr. Right, and of Mr. Once-and-for-All. Nevertheless, all these troubles are lived in a positive way. An example is divorce with dignity: "We had both gotten attorneys but decided to use a mediator instead of going through the whole divorce court setting" (*GTH*, p. 111).

From *Waiting to Exhale* to *Getting to Happy*, mothers on their way to happiness rely on their children. The children having grown up turn out to be their mothers' confidants. Sometimes, mothers let their daughters run their affective life (*GTH*, p. 126). For example, talking to Robin, Savannah says that she need stop letting her teenage daughter run her life. Mothers also think that daughters know them better than anyone else. This observation points to attenuation of loneliness. It also points to weakness of mothers' authority. The example of Robin's daughter, Sparrow, is eloquent. Robin, for instance, cannot refuse any request from her daughter. From *Waiting to Exhale* to *Getting to Happy*, mothers cope with loneliness by accepting the changes of time and physiological state. Robin puts this better: "Feeling desperate was not even a concern in response to her daughter's interpellation: 'It is not normal to live the way you do'" (*GTH*, p. 126).

From *Waiting to Exhale* to *Getting to Happy*, there has been a qualitative movement in terms of perception of life. African-American women have become more confident and trustful but less demanding all the same; all they want is a roommate, a loving presence. For example, consider Robin and Savannah. Both are stereotypical educated African-American women who are unable to find husbands. Fifteen years later, they voice out their apprehension of reality at a meeting through Savannah: "Doesn't it seem like we're always making adjustments to things we weren't responsible for or had no control over? [...] 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 as long as we possibly can and to hell all the bullshit that doesn't" (*GTH*, p. 281).

## 6. Conclusion

Drawing on the New Historicist perspective, this paper has set out to explore Terry McMillan's perception of the concept of happiness in two of her novels: *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) and *Getting to Happy* (2010). It has also sought to analyze the selected novels in order to unveil the various mechanisms employed by McMillan to make her female personae cope with such life-related harsh plagues as sexism and racism and live a happy life. In the novels, McMillan depicts four resilient, intelligent and independent women: Bernadine, Robin, Gloria and Savannah. These women face a gamut of affective problems caused by loneliness, child upbringing, divorce, widowhood, drug addiction and depression. They sometimes choose the wrong way in their quest for happiness. But, they are fortunate in that the writer makes them bond one with another. By bonding with one another, these characters are able to rub minds, learn from one another's experiences and make the right choices to move ahead in life, thereby sustaining their internal peace and stability.

Also, to maintain their happiness, McMillan makes these women draw on such rejuvenating activities as drug detoxifying, good diet, physical health exercise, abandoning boring and stressful jobs, furthering their studies or taking a teaching job or enrolling for a programme in cooking and travelling. With these activities, these women have the impression that they have a new beginning, instead of the sorrowful end which would have represented them as helpless and powerless victims. Aging is another way the writer employs to instill her perception of happiness in the social world of the selected novels. As these women grow older from *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) to *Getting to Happy* (2010), they grow wiser. They become more experienced and mature than before and they reflect this in the way they manage their affective problems to sustain their happiness.

However, from *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) to *Getting to Happy* (2010), the situation of these female characters has not really changed, nor have they themselves. It is rather their perspective that has changed. Their change of perspective denotes their change of perception of reality. This is to say, the way these women perceive happiness and what determines it have progressively changed over time. They now know that change is the fruit of action and that happiness is the fruit of a dual choice: what one can control and what one cannot control. As Giovanni (quoted in Collins, 1991) notes, "We've got to live in the real world. If we don't like the world we're living in, we change it. And if we can't change it, we change ourselves. We can do something".

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