

Struggle and Survival: A Study of Black Women's Journey in Terry McMillan *Waiting to Exhale*

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Abstract

This paper primarily focuses upon the novel, *Waiting to Exhale*. It also briefly examines the subsequent media manifestations of the motion picture, original soundtrack, related marketing and advertising associated with the project and how each maintains and supports the rhetorical message of feminist empowerment found within the novel. This study asserts that McMillan's novel is subtly infused with rhetorical messages of social consciousness, feminist values, and black kinship themes. Thematically, this novel explores the midlife experience of life begins with "waiting" betrayals and cultural expectations surrounding dating. McMillan explores the challenges of being a Black woman in America, navigating both societal expectations and personal taboos with grace and determination. Through its compelling narrative and well-developed characters, *Waiting to Exhale* captivated readers from diverse backgrounds, making it an instant bestseller and earning critical acclaim. Its exploration of themes such as love, identity, and self-acceptance resonated with generations of viewers and remains relevant today.

Key Words: self-discovery, empowerment, societal expectation, identity, self-acceptance.

Introduction

Waiting to Exhale is a novel by the renowned author Terry McMillan published in 1992. It is one of the novels to reveal the personal lives of middle-class, professional Black women. The novel follows the lives of four women, Savannah, Bernadine, Robin, and Gloria who navigate their way through romantic, professional and legal issues while living in friendship with each other. *Waiting to Exhale* is the story of four friends who happen to be black, successful, middle-class, single women in their middle thirties. The problem is that the various men in their lives have broken their hearts and the women have no solid romantic relationships. *Waiting to Exhale* centers on the women's struggle to find love and to maintain relationships with men and their struggle to find fulfillment in their friendships, families, careers, and lives in New Mexico.

This novel begins on New Year's Eve 1989 when Savannah sparks an interest in meeting Lionel, whom her sister introduced. Having accepted a job in Phoenix, Denver, Colorado, Savannah doesn't make sense to start a relationship, but she doesn't want to spend another vacation alone. Savannah goes to the party where she is attacked by Lionel, but another woman hints at a close relationship with Lionel. When Savannah's friend backtracks from helping her on her trip to Lionel goes with her, but proves to be a disappointing companion. The story opens as the character Savannah Jackson moves to Arizona to be near her best friend Bernadine. Savannah is moving to a new town to pursue a job as a television producer. She took a major cut in salary to pursue this dream job and has to struggle to help support her mother that lives on a fixed income "back East." She is also making the move to Arizona to get a new start in yet another new city with new male prospects after moving four times over the last fifteen years. She states as if this explanation is enough to mask her restlessness and longing: "The deal is the men are dead in Denver" (2).

The men in Savannah's life have always disappointed her. Her father left her mother years before, her childhood sweetheart died in Vietnam, one of Savannah's brothers has been incarcerated, the other brother has pledged his life to the Marines (which is similar to prison in her estimation), and she considers her baby sister's husband "simple" primarily because of his status as a former basketball player, jock. Savannah had a series of bad relationships but one in particular still haunts her. The handsome doctor Kenneth is the man she wanted to marry but the relationship failed because of a misunderstanding. Kenneth went on to marry someone else but he still cares for Savannah. Despite his marriage and his young daughter, Savannah's mother is still encouraging her to maintain a relationship with Kenneth. Even though her sister's marriage is poor and her mother's marriage dissolved, both insist that Savannah needs to be married because she is nearly 40 years old and lonely. Savannah opens the book by stating, "She and Mama both think I'm out here dying of loneliness, which is not true. I mean. I have my days and I have my nights, but I haven't gotten to the point where I'll take whatever I can get. There's a big difference between being thirsty and being dehydrated" (1).

Waiting to Exhale is the story of four black women Savannah Jackson, Bernadine Harris, Robin Stokes, and Gloria Matthews who live in Phoenix, Arizona in 1991. Women under the age of 30 support each other both personally and professional challenges and triumphs. Apart from finding fulfillment in love, women are intelligent enough to manage

every aspect of their lives. The title of the novel stems from their collective expectation of exhaling only when they achieve a satisfying relationship with a man. Women think they are doing everything possible to implement the change they want in their lives, but stereotypes and bad habits undermine their efforts. At the beginning of the novel, Savannah Jackson moves from Denver to Phoenix because her friend Bernard lives there Savannah has landed a new job in the public relations department at a television station and has taken a pay cut to get out of the recession of living in Denver. Savannah's mother doesn't understand why Savannah helps financially and can't find a man or a job to satisfy her. Savannah had finally reached a position where she was spontaneous and accepted her quirks, shortcomings, and strengths without hesitation. She refused to dim her aura to fit someone else's idea of who she should be and, instead, shone brightly with a sense of self-love and acceptance. Her desires belonged to her alone, and she pursued them with unshakable determination, without seeking validation from others with a deep understanding of her own worth, Savannah stood erect, proud of the person she belonged, and didn't apologize about her journey to get there she knew that self-love was not selfish but necessary, and she made it her priority every day.

The community of the four protagonists portrayed in the novel is not equal as important as the central love relationship as in the novel but arguably more important. The familial relationships of Black women and their roles within the narratives are characterized by the four protagonists assuming responsibility for the economic security of their relatives. Savannah provides financial assistance to her mother while managing a limited fixed income, contributing an amount equivalent to her rent. Robin is concerned about how to assist her parents, given their insufficient health insurance and her father's deteriorating Alzheimer's condition, which need full-time daily care that they cannot afford.

Gloria's parents passed away years ago, but she was a mother and Bernadine's mother is only financially in Geneva self-sufficiency still, before the financial settlement, Bernadine has to provide for her children all in all, the protagonists become responsible for their nuclear family members two of them are also the main source of their parents' well-being. Their families are not represented there is no inevitable burden for them; at the same time, they don't seem to have any upbringing one. In addition, "McMillan's characters, like McMillan's, are limited time for racist theories, but they have a strong sense of being African-American. They are well aware of who is black in their professions and are attracted to them potential allies. Charles R. Larson, observes: "one can say "Clearly [that with McMillan] there is a renaissance in Black fiction" (1). 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.

Bernadine Harris informs her husband that he has been married for twelve years and wants to divorce, so that he can marry his book keeper, who is a white woman. Bernadine is doubly injured because of her sacrifice to build her husband's business, and he has the audacity to leave her for a white woman. The divorce process reveals more than Bernard's imagine, but he perseveres and successfully reorganized his career. Bernard's fresh start to her professional life and love life is a key aspect of her journey of *Waiting to Exhale* after a painful divorce; she embarks on a path of self-discovery and change, leaving behind the unfulfilled role of the executive's wife. She starts her own boutique marketing company, finding success and freedom, which increases her confidence and purpose. In her love life, Bernadine meets James, a kind and supportive man who loves her for who she is allowing her to let go of her past and trust her again. Their relationship is built on mutual respect, trust, and communication, which led to his departure from his previous marriage. Through his fresh start, Bernard learns to prioritize his own needs, develops a strong sense of self, nurtures, and rediscovers her feeling, leading to a more authentic and fulfilling life. When emotionally down about her impending divorce, Bernadine is cheered by Robin who took the children out and bought things for them. Gloria makes sure that Bernadine gets out the house and goes to the movies. Savannah quietly spends time talking things over with her and extends all help her to heal. The same holds true for Gloria during her health crisis and the three other characters in the novel provide consistent love and support. The naturalness of the exchanges, the caring gestures of support, and the easy camaraderie highlight the kinship bonds of the four characters.

Robin Stokes has a professional position with an insurance company, but feels it's not good enough, because her boyfriend won't marry and her father dies of Alzheimer's disease, and she can't take care of him and her mother well. Robin attempts to date other men and noticed and she returns to her original boyfriend. The relationship is failing, but Robin gains new hope for her future with unexpected development. She struggles to move on from a toxic relationship is a gruelling aspect of her journey in the novel. Caught in a cycle of abuse and manipulation with her boyfriend Russell, Robin struggles with emotional manipulation, betrayal, and disrespect, stoking a deep fear of being alone and unworthy of love. Despite knowing that she is more qualified, Robin vacillates between staying and looking for a way out, hindered by low self-esteem and lack of self-worth. However, when she begins to recognize signs of abuse and acknowledge its impact on her mental health, Robin begins to build a support network and takes small steps toward independence and self-defence. Eventually, she finds the strength to leave the toxic relationship and start afresh self-love, self-worth, and the importance of prioritizing one's own well-being serves as a powerful reminder.

Gloria Mathews owns a beauty store for Black women and is on a group of civil organisations that promotes Black women into business and supports the cause of Phoenix Black families. Gloria has a teenage son from an unwanted pregnancy in college, and she tries to instil values that befit her so as not to fall into the stereotype of many Black men who abuse and abandon her wives and families. Gloria buried the disappointment of love in food that had not been returned for years.

Her weight problem which is fortunately can be managed by a new outlook and love of new neighbours. Through this effort, Gloria develops self-confidence, learns to trust herself and her abilities and deepens her connections with her friends and family especially her son Tariq. She begins to embrace her sensuality and lead to more fulfilling and authentic life. When Gloria is free from societal expectations and limitations, she embraces her individuality and individuality developing resilience and self-confidence. At the end, she becomes empowered and her journey becomes remarkable.

The novel *Waiting to Exhale*, open with first-person narrative and a literary device that exemplifies the literal voice of a close friend. McMillan creates an instantaneous intimacy with the character. Literary critic Paulette Richards comments, "By opening the novel with Savannah's first-person confession about her difficulties finding a husband. McMillan immediately draws the reader into the circle of friends. Savannah confides in the readers as candidly as if she were talking to Bernadine, her best friend" (106). McMillan writes in first and third-person narrative throughout the novel and creates successfully. This first-person narrative is also indicative of the conversational rhetoric of African-American women. It is a common, everyday language pattern that is familiar to most African-American women. It is the conversation of friends and sisters and mothers and an important cultural marker for black women.

The Voice of the Black Woman in *Waiting to Exhale* throughout the novel, McMillan provided telling glimpses of the private communication of women their hopes, dreams, desires, and even their weaknesses. These four women became representative forms of black women in America. Their bonds in the novel represent the bonds that millions of women share with their closest friends and family. The story unfolds, numerous examples are given of how the women cared and supported each other. Most importantly, they communicated with each other directly and consistently. The reader is drawn into an intimate, previously private, aspect of the lives of African-American women and their relation with each other. Collins describes this phenomenon as an empowering feature of black feminism. This is the shared intimacy that has always been the one place where black women were uncensored and unmutted. For the first time, however, this intimacy is revealed in a powerful fictional account.

McMillan's writing exposes a secret to the entire world and opens the way for a chorus of voices waiting to be heard. McMillan's second character Bernadine Harris is leading a life related to the concept of the American dream. She is married to a successful entrepreneur and lives in a beautiful home with two beautiful children. She no longer works with her husband although she was his bookkeeper and secretary when they first started their business. Now that he is established, her life revolves around civic activities and social functions. She has everything except her husband just left her for his younger, white secretary, her children are spoilt and don't need her as much anymore, and her husband is hiding his assets while trying to cheat her out of her rightful settlement. Most of all she has given up her creative talents and is not doing anything to fulfill her own dreams. She is bitter and angry in a new scene. She removes all of her husband's clothes and prized possessions from their gorgeous house, loads them into his expensive, vintage automobile and sets the car and contents ablaze. Later, she has a garage sale and sells his remaining belongings for cash - cars, skis, and jewellery. Vengeance is not sweet, however, when she finally faces the truth about her shallow, empty life filled with material possessions and no happiness.

McMillan switches to the third person as she introduces Bernadine to the audience. Readers are able to observe Bernadine's overwhelming hurt, venomous words, and acts from a more objective view and are able to draw conclusions quickly about this woman. McMillan's rhetorical stance for this entire work is also clearly stated within the introduction of this character. Bernadine is lost because she submitted herself to patriarchal domination within the bonds of marriage and slowly lost her soul to the pursuit of what most people believe is a dream. McMillan expresses it very clearly when Bernadine talks to herself, "Of course, this is your entire fault Bernadine because like a fool you acquiesced too soon and gave up too much. You fell right into the blueprint of his life and gave up your own" (30).

McMillan addresses fundamental feminist empowerment issues in simple exchanges throughout her novel. Despite her strong business acumen, Robin is uncomfortable with her own body image and is unable to stand alone socially. Robin's feminist transformation is striking. McMillan provides another rhetorical blueprint of feminist empowerment through the transformation of the characters in *Waiting to Exhale*. Women who read this novel are able to see the mistakes of the characters made and the destructive behaviors that lead to bigger problems for each character. But McMillan also underscores their strengths as well. Each woman is a survivor. They bring something special to her kinship circle. And far from being bitter and angry, the women still hoped for a loving, committed relationship with a good man. After all of the defensive, angry words about black men, throughout the final chapters of the narrative each woman is able to resolve her hurt after finding peace within. In one exchange Savannah tells Gloria, "All men don't cause pain, Gloria," and then accepts responsibility for giving her heart and her body to a man too quickly (377).

McMillan's rhetorical message of self-determination and self-valuation is interwoven throughout her novel. She rejects patriarchy within the African-American community and provides the voice of resistance and empowerment for millions of women. Most importantly, her rhetoric was accessible and written in an open, common style that resonate with the average black woman. This single novel did what all rectors' desire it stimulated communication written communication, verbal communication, artistic expression through the motion picture, and through the musical expressions of the popular culture. The several ways Black women find success and well-being by navigating and overcoming personal obstacles as well as systemic impediments. Potential research topics include mental health, empowerment, socioeconomic situations, resilience, and community support. It might entail looking at individual narratives, historical settings, and tactics for both

individual and group growth. The objective would be to showcase their accomplishments, honour their experience, and point out ways to become even more empowered.

In *Waiting to Exhale*, Terry McMillan skilfully explores complex and multifaceted themes by exploring the complex lives of four African American women Savannah, Bernadine, Robin, and Gloria as they face several challenges such as love, relationships, identity and self-discovery, and so on. Through their experiences, McMillan highlights the tensions between social expectations and individual desires revealing the struggles of finding purpose and happiness in the world that often seek to define and control them. The novel shows that is not only achieved through romantic, but through self-discovery, empowerment, and embracing one's true identity. Each character's path to fulfillment is unique, reflecting their individual strengths, weaknesses, and experiences, such as explores the importance of self-love and self-acceptance, the struggle for independence and autonomy, impact of social expectations on personal choices, the power of female friendship and support networks, the need for trustworthiness and honesty in relationships. Ultimately, the novel suggests that is a continuous growth self-awareness, and embracing one's authenticity, leading to a more liberating and meaningful life. Through its rich characters and nuanced exploration of the human experience, *Waiting to Exhale* provides a powerful and enduring portrait of the search for fulfillment and happiness. The study aims to find out the quest for fulfillment in amidst the trials and tribulations in life.

Macmillan's focus how her characters' work in their new settings friendships and the new communities they create, the challenges they face with new one's careers, and how they maintain their intimacy with family and friends despite the physical distance. Most teachers use homecoming to evaluate the history, family, or feelings of their characters. The community is on a "quest" for McMillan's domestic success the characters are forced to reevaluate the home and community, especially their relationships with the female relatives they left behind, and their ideas about femininity. These characters create new paradigms of contemporary domesticity it takes the freedom to move around and call home many places, have 'financial freedom' to own, build and manage their homes finally, being home alone and out of restrictions traditional marriage norms. It's on this journey that the characters feel the alternative domestic situations. According to Richards: "In 1980, over 50 percent of all women were salaried employees, and 38 percent mothers with children under the age of one to work outside the home" (24). Instead of creating heroines who depend on their partner for the economy support, successful career or own gain of her heroine's businesses, increasingly predicament in balancing their lives marriage and family life as contemporary women.

McMillan's characters are almost always educated, middle-class, from the age of 20 up to 40 and mostly family, career, bonded, oriented, quailing importance to friendship and caring romantic relationships. Many people are looking for equal husbands with their academic and career success, the industry that allows them be creative, but also financially independent, and friendships with like-minded women who share and validate their own experiences. While McMillan's focus may seem short, it's one it lacks widely represented in African American fiction. William E. Gross, Jr. In his article, "Black Identity, Rediscover the Distinction" decides to be African between personal identity and reference group orientation Americans have a high sense of personal worth. According to him, "there are four variables that provide the basis for a black identity: self-concept, group identity or reference group orientation, personal identity (PI), and the relationship between PI and RGO" (156). In Susan Willis's book, *Specifying Black Women Writers: A Critical Perspective*: "three central concerns, written by Black women, namely community, travel, and sex" (18). They make society an issue by pointing out the lack of black cultural identity, it is based on the surrender of utensils to commoditization under capitalism, travel, on the contrary, becoming a means of self-knowledge often by re-entering collective history experience and sexual experience are often distorted by male dominance burdened by heterosexual and double standards, but capable of experiencing sensual pleasures. Shown below, several themes are interconnected and should be read way, often, it's not the themes changing, but their different perspectives McMillan offers.

The four women in *Waiting to Exhale* Savannah, Bernadine, Robin, and Gloria form a strong, supportive bond and create a safe space for vulnerability, sharing experiences and sharing emotions. They provide encouragement and guidance; celebrate each other through failures, providing a sense of belonging and connection. Through their bonding, they find strength of their shared struggles and triumphs, developing a deeper understanding of themselves and each other. This network of love, trust, and acceptance empowers them to let go of toxic relationships and focus on the positives, embrace their individuality, and celebrate their differences. Together, they rise above their struggles, a witness to the power of female friendship and solidarity. They become a testament to, and a reminder that together women can overcome even the most difficult challenges and find true joy and fulfilment.

In the end of *Waiting to Exhale*, four women have come to an end waiting through the support of the quest and the long, dull, and friendship. McMillan's novel becomes an attempt at the redefinition of women experience and women have found that they can relate to their experiences in everything on their own lives. The title of the novel stems from their collection the expectation of exhaling only when they achieve satisfying relationships with a man. Women think they're doing everything they can and they implement the change they want in their lives but socially stereotypical and bad habits undermine their efforts. They all want to have a serious relationship with men and society, but their experience multiple failed relationships that lead to divorce and dissatisfaction they breathe air but they couldn't breathe. Sometimes they perish because their lives are like one movie opened sometimes, they are dissatisfied with themselves, but they did not stop the struggle live a happy life.

Together, these women embark on a journey of self-discovery tackling issues such as racism, gender discrimination, and the limitations imposed on African-American women in society. Through the lens of their experiences, Terry McMillan explores the complexities of race, gender, and relationships in a crude and honest way. *Waiting to Exhale* not only sheds light on the personal struggles Black women face, but also highlights the strength, resilience, and importance of their friendship. Beyond its success as a novel, *Waiting to Exhale* was made on so a popular movie in 1995, further cementing its place as a cultural touchstone. The story and characters captivate readers and viewers alike, making the wait breath a timeless and remarkable piece of literature. Martin Seligman, one of the leading researchers in *The Original Theory: Authentic Happiness* (2016), describes happiness as having three measurable components: pleasure, engagement, and subject. Pleasure is the “feeling” part of happiness. Engagement means living the “good life” Work, family, friends and hobbies. Meaning refers to using our strengths to make a greater contribution object. Seligman further argues that while all three are important, engagement determines a happy life. Happiness is really what one does and who one is. It also selectively accepts one’s situation, children, life, spouse and himself. That’s why modern science defines happiness the positivity we feel when we are content or happy or full of happiness.

Conclusion

The women’s journey together in *Waiting to Exhale* is a moving example of the transformational power of self-love. Savannah, Bernadine, Robin, and Gloria make their way through life; they learn that the secret to true pleasure and fulfillment is putting one’s own needs first. They learn to let go of harmful relationships, self-doubt, and societal expectations via their personal difficulties and victories, and to embrace a profound and lasting love for themselves. They are able to heal, forgive, and rediscover their passions and desires because of this self-love, which also serves as the cornerstone for their resilience, empowerment, and progress. As they form a supportive and sisterhood circle, their trip as a whole becomes a potent. The women’s collective victory is the novel *Waiting to Exhale* is climax, as Savannah, Bernadine, Gloria, and Robin all discovers contentment and happiness under their individual circumstances. By means of their individual experiences, individuals shed societal norms, unhealthy partnerships, and self-doubt, accepting their abilities, passions, and aspirations. In a potent show of brotherhood and unity, they encourage and support one another as they celebrate hard-won successes. Their combined achievement is evidence of the transforming power of female friendship, self-love, and uncompromising independence as they grow stronger, wiser and more resilient. In the end, their tales combine to form an exquisite ribbon of completion, from accepting oneself to being encircled by a supportive, loving, and empowered community.

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