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## Self-Assertion of Women in Terry McMillan's *Mama*

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### **Abstract:**

Women play a vital role in every civilized society. Therefore, it is hard to believe the development of society without an active participation of women. Though the place of women in society differs from one culture to that of another, it becomes imperative to note that woman has never been regarded as an equal to man in the patriarchal society. The role of woman, most of the time, is confined within the four walls of the house. However, the various feminists have raised their voice against the victimization and marginalization of women in society. Terry McMillan is one of the great exponents of feministic issues in contemporary African American literature. The present research paper focuses on self-assertion of women in Terry McMillan's novel *Mama*.

**Keywords:** feminism, patriarchy, self-assertion, career, divorce, single parenthood.

### **Literature Review**

Terry McMillan was born on October 18, 1951, in Port Huron, Michigan. She was the oldest of the five children born to Edward and Madeline. Her concern is with the issues of feminism with reference to her select novels. The literary output of Terry McMillan is generally considered as one of the projections of contemporary issues of gender studies as her works focus on the urban experiences of African-American men and women. She is regarded as one of the most radical Black novelists in African-American fiction. Her fiction gives expression to the new

aspirations, ideologies and problems of black African women and this makes it an important reference point in the literature written by an African-American writer. There are many critics and scholars who have expressed their views on Terry McMillan's *Mama*. Rita B. Dandridge in her article entitled "Debunking the Motherhood Myth in Terry McMillan's *Mama*" points out that "Terry McMillan's first novel *Mama* offers a more contemporary and gender-expanding depiction of motherhood than that presented in such earlier novels as Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), Sarah Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live* (1969), Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973). In presenting Mildred Peacock, a welfare-dependent mother of five who marries three times, works numerous odd jobs, is incarcerated for writing bad checks, and even prostitutes herself in order to provide for her children, McMillan creates another rift on the literary landscape of African-American fiction" (405).

### **Research Methodology**

A research method is a systematic plan for conducting research; sociologists draw on a variety of both qualitative and quantitative research methods, including experiments, survey research, participant observation and secondary data. Quantitative methods aim to classify features, count them, and create statistical models to test hypothesis and explain observations, including the context of events and circumstances. Research methodology is the specific procedure or techniques used to identify, select, process and analyze information about a topic. In a research paper, the methodology section allows the reader to critically evaluate a study's overall validity and reliability. A qualitative approach has been pursued in order to explore the topic of research paper. To demonstrate the viability of the topic, a descriptive method has been employed because the emphasis is on describing rather than on judging or interpreting the argument. The electronic as well as print source has been used to access the criticism and the discussion about topic. The references from some interviews, published articles journals and other relevant books have been used to authenticate the proposed topic. As far as the scope of this research paper is concerned, it focuses on Self-Assertion of Women in Terry McMillan's *Mama*.

### **Self-Assertion of Women in Terry McMillan's *Mama***

The present research paper is an attempt to focus attention on self-assertion as reflected in Terry McMillan's novel *Mama*. History witnesses subordination of women by men in the patriarchal system of the society. Men have always considered women as weak, submissive, inferior and weak. If we are to peep into the history of feminism, we can find that woman has struggled a lot to get equality and respect in the patriarchal society. In the patriarchal set up of the society, man always considers himself as a superior to woman and thinks that he has every right to rule woman. Therefore, the patriarchal system of the society is a great hurdle to the development of woman. The emergence of feminist movement has given a chance to women to assert their individuality. Terry's novel *Mama* is a fine instance of self-assertion of women.

Based on the real incidents in the life of McMillan's family, Terry's debut novel *Mama* (1987) throws light on the life of an uneducated black woman who struggles to maintain balance in her personal life. The novel has its setting in and outside Point Haven of 1960s. In such a context, Diane Patrick in her book entitled *Terry McMillan: The Unauthorized Biography* writes, "*Mama*, Terry McMillan's first novel, is set in the fictitious town of Point Haven, Michigan, and is based on Terry's own growing-up years in the real town of Port Huron, Michigan" (17). Mildred Peacock is the protagonist of the novel and the portrayal of Mildred in the novel closely resembles to Terry's mother Madeline Tillman. Crook, Mildred's husband, is drunken man and his portrayal in the novel resembles to Terry's father Edward McMillan. Therefore, Diane aptly writes, "In the pages of *Mama*...the first initial of Mildred's name was the first initial of Madeline's name. Her other characters' nicknames weren't too far away from their real-life counterparts, either: Mildred's husband was named Crook, which was the real-life nickname of Edward McMillan, Terry's father (32).

Mildred and Crook have five beautiful and healthy children named Freda, Money, Bootsey, Angel and Doll. Therefore, Paulette Richards in her book entitled "*Terry McMillan: A Critical Companion*" rightly states, "Drawing on her own autobiographical experience, McMillan created in her first novel a story that many of these readers can identify with closely. McMillan's portrait of Mildred Peacock as the motivating force behind her children's upward mobility challenges pervasive stereotypes about black female-headed households by allowing readers to share her unique point of view" (53). Throughout the novel, the relationship between husband

and wife never seems to be at ease even after ten years of their marriage. Therefore, violence at physical, psychological, verbal and sexual level becomes the common aspect in the novel.

Terry McMillan dedicates her debut novel *Mama* to her own mother, Madeline Tillman. The novel celebrates in itself the maternal relationship between woman and her children. The noteworthy maternal bond shared by Freda and her mother Mildred is parallel to McMillan's personal bonding with her own mother Madeline Tillman. Like Freda in *Mama*, McMillan was also born as the oldest of the five children and her father Edward Lewis McMillan, like Freda's daddy Crook, suffered from tuberculosis. Like Crook, McMillan's father also drank too much and used to beat her mama mercilessly. Similarly, as in Freda's case, McMillan's mother also divorced her father when she was thirteen. In order to support the family, McMillan's mother like Freda's mother Mildred held various jobs as a domestic worker, factory employee and so on.

Terry, in her novel *Mama*, presents Mildred as an unconventional black woman who has tremendous zeal to run the family with the rebellious spirit. In such a context, Heather Humann in her book entitled *Domestic Abuse in the Novels of African American Women: A Critical Study*, writes:

The novel's protagonist, Mildred Peacock, is a flawed but sympathetic women who defies traditional stereotypes about what it means to be a black woman in the 1960s and 1970s, yet she remains relatable and real as she confronts domestic abuse, poverty, economic injustice and sexual exploitation, all the while trying to raise her five children and make a life for herself and her family (104).

The rebellious spirit of the protagonist also becomes apparent in the very opening line of the novel. Mildred is no longer submissive to the whimsical nature of her husband and she never misses an opportunity to assert her own individuality. Commenting on the spoiled relationship between Mildred and Crook, Terry writes:

Mildred hid the ax beneath the mattress of the cot in the dining room. She poured lye in a brown paper bag and pushed it behind the pots and pans under the kitchen sink. Then she checked all three butcher knives to make sure they were razor sharp. She knew where she could get her hands on a gun in fifteen minutes...Mildred didn't want to kill Crook, she just wanted to hurt him (1).

In this regard, Paulette Richards states, "Throughout *Mama*, McMillan demonstrates great skill at keeping readers interested in "what happens next"...When the reader firsts meets

Mildred Peacock, she is plotting to kill her husband, Crook, because he batters her. McMillan's strategy of starting in the middle of the things immediately draws readers into Mildred's internal conflict... and keeps readers turning pages to find out why she wants to hurt Crook and what she will eventually do" (54). It is both Mildred and Crook that hate each other beyond certain recognition. They, even, do not bear the stand of each other. Crook drinks excessively and is suspicious about Mildred's relationship with their neighbor named Percy Russell. On the other hand, Crook, Percy and Mildred have grown up together in a small-town Point Haven. Whenever, Crook roams on the streets of Point Haven in a drunken condition, it is Percy who has helped Mildred in her domestic work. He, even, goes to an extreme extent and pays light and gas bills when Crook has spent the said amount of money for excessive drinking. In this regard, Terry writes, "And while Crook ran the streets, it was Percy who nailed plastic to the windows in the winter, bought Mildred maternity clothes, fixed the drip in the bathtub, and paid the plumber to fix the frozen pipes. It was Percy who had shoveled the heavy blocks of coal from the shack in the back yard and carried them to the house when Crook was too drunk to stand up, and then waited for the fire to pop and crackle in the stove (3).

*Mama* is a debut novel of Terry McMillan. It focuses on the struggle of an uneducated black woman who tries her best to maintain balance in her personal life. In the novel, Terry purposefully presents dual protagonists that of Mildred and Freda. In its real sense, Mildred is a dashing woman who has her own ideas of leading life. Instead of succumbing herself to the burden of the patriarchal society, Mildred emerges as rebellious woman in the African American society. Terry presents Mildred as the representative of African American woman who can go to any extent to defend herself and her own daughter. Mildred's reaction to Deadman's behavior clearly violates the traditional notion about women that they are weak and submissive. Likewise, Freda, the second protagonist of the novel, is also presented as dominant and aggressive. In such a context, when Freda sees her mother in danger, she rushes to rescue her. Her retaliation and threatening to Rufus brings out a significant change in her personality. In this way, female characters in *Mama* are more aggressive than men and it is contrary to stereotype presentation of women in literature.

Terry McMillan in her novel *Mama* glorifies the notion of single parenthood. Mildred's refusal to continue her married life with a man who is unworthy of living focuses on the significant change in marriage institution. Had Mildred been a typical woman of African

American society, she would not have dared to go against the norms of tradition bound society. Mildred, on the other hand, is a source of inspiration for women in African American society as she bears the responsibility of single parenthood with great courage and enthusiasm. In spite of many hardships in life, Mildred educates her children. She also undertakes various jobs in order to provide quality education to her children. Through the notion of single parenthood, Terry delivers a very significant message to its readers that women are capable enough of performing any task with great courage and vigor.

Terry, through her projection of female characters, brings to notice women's changing attitude towards life in African American society. The female characters in the novel are strongly ambitious and career advancement remains one of the most important aspects of the novel. In such a context, Terry presents Freda as the representative of African American women who are quite aware about the opportunities in life that are made available to them through the means of education. Freda swears to become rich and famous and this attitude towards life signifies a great change in African American women. Though Mildred is an illiterate woman, she has a great desire to go to school. She is quite aware about the importance of education in life and she does everything to educate her children. In this way, Terry through her portrayal of Freda and Mildred highlights career advancement which helps women to assert their individuality.

The never-ending search for love remains one of the most influencing factors in Terry's novel *Mama*. Terry presents Mildred as a complex character whose life gets entangled in the circle of marriage, divorce and remarriage. In this regard, Mildred's quest for a perfect partner in life remains ceaseless. Mildred has set her own norms about getting married in life and she does not rely on her parental wish for marriage. She regards marriage as a union of body, mind and soul. Therefore, the genuine urge to find a perfect partner in life compels her to take one adventure after another. In such a context, Terry presents Mildred as the representative of African American women who believe in their own capacities of decision making while getting married in life. Had Mildred been a typical housewife, she would have adjusted herself with her spoiled married life and would not have thought about remarriage. But the heroines of Terry McMillan think in a different manner.

The heroines of Terry McMillan are gifted with an innate power of endurance and it enables them to cope with all kinds of trouble in their lives. In such a context, Mildred is the most suitable example in this regard as she copes with various challenges in life courageously.

Her strong will to power makes her life worthy of living. In such a context, Paulette Richards rightly writes, “Mildred exemplifies everything mainstream society says a mother should not be, and yet, not only does she define herself first and foremost as a mother, but her children’s success vindicates her unconventional style of mothering. Mildred Peacock suggests that “black female-headed households might not be the unredeemable ‘tangle of pathology’ they were commonly supposed to be” (Richards 63).

Thus, in her novel *Mama*, Terry McMillan presents female characters that are no longer stereotypes. The female protagonists of her novel are self-conscious, self-reliant, self-centric, dominant and rebellious. Terry aims at providing a new identity to her female characters.

### **Conclusion:**

In this way, McMillan presents female characters that seem to be more dominant than men. These female characters are no longer submissive but aggressive, violent, rebellious and reactive. They are capable enough in taking their own decisions in life. Instead of sticking themselves to the social norms, they believe in following their own instincts.

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