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Introduction

Needless to say, good fiction is not preaching. If a writer is trying hard to convince you of something, then he or she should stick to nonfiction. These days, our work is often as entertaining as it is informative, thought-provoking as it is uplifting. Terry McMillan¹

Still, hard as it may be to imagine, for me at least, I suppose the time had to come when race would cease to be the obsession of African-American writers, and in its place would be some form of ordinary life—stripped in varying degrees of “context,” depoliticized. If I can feel it in the street—the dislocation that can no longer be healed by inspiring leaders—I shouldn’t be surprised to find it in our literature. I hope for some understanding from novels about African-American life, but perhaps it isn’t there to be had. Welcome to the ’90s. Thulani Davis²

For centuries, although intellectually capable, African American women were responded to in a rather reluctant manner. Similarly, in the literary and academic arena of the last decades of the 20th century, the ideas of many of them were not negated but postponed and confronted with the existing boundaries; consequently, they were held under the assumption that the fruition of their worthy ideas might come in the future. Some, however, rejected to take their time, prepare for the changes yet to come, or merely sit and wait. They came to the conclusion that their intellectual trajectories should be put into practice. These individuals’ aim has been to contribute to the visibility of African American women in literature—whether by means of reading and discussing it, publishing, critiquing, debating with their (male) counterparts, editing, sponsoring, or supporting other women writers.

First of all, it is necessary to bring up the question of terminology. By “contemporary” African American works, books written after about 1970 up to present day are meant. Mainly two terms will be used throughout the dissertation, “African American” as well as “black,” referring to people of African descent living in the United States.³ In case of African American women, “sista”⁴ is applicable, too. Although it seems to be of a limiting nature to refer collectively to such a heterogeneous group, no totalising identity is to be imposed on them. Nothing worse could be suggested by this dissertation than trying to ignore or erase the enormous cultural, social, economic, educational, political, and other differences among black people. The inevitably western-orientated critical discourse of the author of the dissertation will, hopefully, not function as a Eurocentric colonising and expansionist language, but will be compensated for by the knowledge of both primary and secondary sources, as well as a continuous attempt to in fact make use of the distance its author has from this ethnic group in order to come up with, if possible, insightful and objective observations. The African

¹ Terry McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction* (USA: Penguin Books, 1990), xxi.

² Thulani Davis, “Don’t Worry, Be Buppie: Black Novelists Head for the Mainstream,” review of *Disappearing Acts*, *Village Voice Literary Supplement*, May 1990), 26–29. *Contemporary Literary Criticism Select* (Detroit: Gale). Literature Resource Centre, accessed May 14, 2013, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1100003654&v=2.1&u=opave&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.

³ It would also be possible to apply “black American,” “African-American,” or even “Afro-American” to people of African ancestry, as the only difference among these expressions seems to lie in their inconsistent worldwide employment by various critics and scholars. Neither the word “black” nor “white” shall be capitalized; not because of lack of respect, but due to the fact that both words merely designate race; in addition, most African American people themselves mostly do not do so either.

⁴ Or also “sistah.” Various meanings of the word precisely reflect the complex bonds among the characters of the analysed novels and other literary genres. In this case, the word does not denote females who have the same parents, but women who are members of the same race, church, and religious group; additionally, it is used as a form of address to women one has strong feelings of loyalty and friendship towards. *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (Oxford: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 2006), 1335.

American women writers' works and ideas will not be approached as objects of her knowledge, for such stance would be biased and inappropriate.

One of the reasons for choosing the particular topic for the dissertation is the fact that the contemporary African American novel "has become a cultural phenomenon of considerable importance" with more than 1,500 novels published between 1853⁵ and 1980, and an "untold number" published since.⁶ The 1992 novel *Waiting to Exhale* by Terry McMillan spent twenty-four weeks on the New York Times Best Seller List and nearly four million copies were sold.⁷ And besides achieving extraordinary commercial success, McMillan's importance undeniably lies in her ability to break racial barriers.

Maryemma Graham optimistically claims that "[t]o say that the study of the African American novel has become institutionalized with emphasis being placed upon the discovery and training new talent today is not an overstatement. Not only are the African American novelists widely recognized and revered, but they also claim a significant share of the world's highest literary prizes and awards."⁸ In addition, as William Andrews argues, such recognition and great achievement of African American critics "have had a salutary effect on the black community's sense of its own literary resources and on the white literary community's sense of importance of these resources." Still, to read popular African American novels is "to be confronted with difference."⁹ And in comparison with the previous periods of this genre, in the present it is not only the wide range of voices that speak to the reader but it is also the intensity and creativity that are typical of black American novelists who, by doing so, transform their own as well as other literary traditions.

The extremes of perception of African American (as well as other) popular literature stand behind the title of the dissertation, which is Terry McMillan and Popular African American Girlfriend Novel: More Sides to a Story. Its first part refers to a term used by Suzanne Dietzel,¹⁰ and implies the writer's unique position among other African American writers of popular novels due to the above mentioned unprecedented success of her third novel, *Waiting to Exhale*. For decades, black as well as other readers have been more than keen on purchasing the kind of literature which not only depicts young women's lives but also tends to accentuate the importance of friendship and sisterhood. But chick lit¹¹ and Sistah lit are, however, labelled as "froth" and "instantly forgettable" by the so-called respected writers and members of academia.¹² This "instant forgettability" can be, in their opinion, easily related to the books' trivial and predictable plots, flat characters, pastel covers, and other fixed features that result in myriads of new book titles which, in fact, hardly bring anything novel or surprising, despite the numerous branches of black popular novel. What stands behind the

⁵ *Clotel, or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (1853) written by William Wells Brown is considered to be the first novel written by an African American; the first novel published by a black woman is *Iola LeRoy* (1892) by Frances Harper.

⁶ Maryemma Graham, introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 7.

⁷ Farah Jasmynes Griffin, "Thirty Years of Black American Literature and Literary Studies: A Review," *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2, Special Issue: Back to the Future of Civilization: Celebrating 30 Years of African American Studies (Nov 2004): 170.

⁸ Graham, introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 3.

⁹ William Andrews, "Toward a Poetics of Afro-American Autobiography," in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*, ed. Houston A. Baker Jr. and Patricia Redmond (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 79.

¹⁰ Cf. chapter five.

¹¹ Chick lit is primarily a transatlantic phenomenon with a significant cross-exchange among the novels and their media counterparts (films or television series). Other strands of this genre are not written exclusively in English, for there are also the Hungarian, or Indonesian, ("sastra wangi" or "fragrant literature") varieties with numerous audience.

¹² Beryl Bainbridge qtd. in John Ezard, "Bainbridge tilts at 'chick lit' cult," *The Guardian*, August 4, 2001, accessed March 3, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2001/aug/24/books.generalfiction>.

colon of the title has to do with the particular way of storytelling and narrative patterns McMillan (as well as her followers subsequently) has been using, but also modifying in her novels.

This state of things calls for a more considered response. It will be one of the tasks of the dissertation to make a reasonable compromise between the two polarised stances, i.e., the outright dismissal as a trivial fiction and unexamined embrace by fans who insist on the idea that it reflects the realities of life for contemporary single women. Along, issues of identity, class, race, gender, femininity vs. feminism, consumerism, aging, etc. are to appear.

Terry McMillan is generally recognized as a prominent force in contemporary fiction written by African American women writers. Her first novels received rather favourable critical attention and established her reputation as an innovative new voice of middle-class black America.¹³ This led to her participation in editing *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction* in 1990, for she was also rather highly regarded. Then came *Waiting to Exhale*, “a huge best-seller, its liftoff supplied by the jubilant, snappy talk of its female characters—especially when they ragged on men. History and the burden of race didn’t give weight to its pages, as they do in much black fiction.”¹⁴ Terry McMillan garnered fame and her popularity was augmented the success of the Whitney Houston film based on that novel. The mixed attention and reactions that followed could be summed up like this: “While some critics are in favour of McMillan’s direct, unpretentious style and authentic portrayal of African-American relationships and social concerns, others fault her for uneven prose, excessive use of profanity, and thinly veiled sociological commentary.”¹⁵

In the foreword to the book *Terry McMillan: A Critical Companion* Paulette Richards describes the paradoxical situations authors such as Terry McMillan face. On one hand, she not only has written one successful novel but a string of them; fans and specialist readers eagerly anticipate her next books. Each reader “chooses to start and, more importantly, to finish a book because of what he or she finds there.” In her opinion, the real test of any novel is “in the satisfaction of its reader’s experience.” On the other hand, the first and only book-length, literary analysis of McMillan’s works was published as late as in 1999, trying to “add an academic focus to the popular success” already enjoyed by McMillan.¹⁶ Similar gaps exist between enthusiastic reviewers and African American scholars (in particular, these will be mentioned in the analyses) and the more traditional African American critical establishment who find McMillan’s as well as her direct followers’ books “improbable or even dangerously frivolous,”¹⁷ for they do not deal with racial tensions the way African American literature used to in the past as mentioned above.

In order to be able to choose any theoretical framework as suggested in the following chapter, it is necessary to be informed about not only African American literature but also black culture and history as such. This base will serve as point of departure for reading of the literature. This approach, termed as contextual by theoreticians, “is often frowned upon if not dismissed entirely by critics who insist exclusively upon textual and linguistic analysis,” as Deborah E. McDowell comments.¹⁸ Even after decades the point she made about the necessity

¹³ James Wolcott states that the two books “found a niche with readers but had done nothing to separate her from the pack of other praiseworthy.” James Wolcott, “Terry McMillan,” *The New Yorker* 72.10, April 29, 1996, 102.

¹⁴ Wolcott, “Terry McMillan,” 102.

¹⁵ *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (Gale Cengage, 1998), qtd. in “McMillan, Terry,” Enotes, accessed January 15, 2013, <http://www.enotes.com/terry-mcmillan-essays/mcmillan-terry>.

¹⁶ Paulette Richards, foreword to *Terry McMillan: A Critical Companion* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), ix–x.

¹⁷ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 19.

¹⁸ Similar tendencies to evaluate a text merely on “its aesthetic merits, free of such extraneous influences as the experience of the author” are observed and disagreed with by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in “My Statue, My Self:

to combine the contextual approach that “exposes the conditions under which literature is produced, published, and reviewed” with a rigorous textual analysis is still valid.¹⁹

The basic question that is to be raised before proceeding to anything else is whose authority is to be accepted when judging any literary work. Is it that of the first readers or the readers over time, or the aesthetic judgement of the past or present-day critics? What if the readers and/or critics are not able to see the revolutionary significance of a writer and his/her work (as it happened so many times to African American writers)? Selling so many copies of a particular novel, did McMillan affront the prevailing expectations of her day? If her work(s) shift the existing horizon of expectations as termed by Hans Robert Jauss or even produce a new one, how in particular has she achieved this? Answers to these questions are provided not only in the methodological chapter but also throughout the dissertation and especially in the analyses.

Accepting that literary history as seen by Jauss and other reader-reception scholars²⁰ is based on the fact that “the history of reception and impact will reveal itself as a process in which the passive reception of the reader and critic” transforms into “the active reception and new production of the author,” or in which—to put it in a different way—“a subsequent work solves formal and moral problems that the last work raised and may then itself present new problems,”²¹ the analysis of both *Waiting to Exhale* as well as its sequel, *Getting to Happy* (2010), and two other girlfriend novels from 2005, that is *What a Sista Should Do* by Tiffany L. Warren and *The Other Side of the Game* by Anita Doreen Diggs, which exemplify the ramification of African American popular fiction for women, should lead to more complex conclusions. In addition, “[e]xposing the literary-critical biases and prevailing hierarchies raises important questions about the relationship between reader and writer and about how value [of a literary work] is determined and negotiated.”²² The space available in the dissertation does not allow for a similar analysis of the whole corpus of Terry McMillan’s numerous books of various genres.

Synchronic and diachronic approaches are to be applied hand-in-hand with Jauss’ concept of the horizon of expectations, for they complement each other. As he suggests, [t]he historical character of literature appears exactly in the intersection of the diachronic and synchronic approaches. It must be possible to analyze the literary horizon of a certain historical moment as that synchronic system in which simultaneously appearing works can be received diachronically in relation, and in which the work can appear as or of current interest or not, as fashionable, out-dated or of lasting value, or before its time or after it.²³

Furthermore, difficulties of literary history can be solved by “combining comparative methods and modern interpretation,”²⁴ inspired by Sengle who speaks about “carrying out

Autobiographical Writings of African American Women,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Meridian Books, 1990), 181.

¹⁹ Deborah E. McDowell, “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 156.

²⁰ Jauss’ ideas are applied because he gives a historical dimension to the reader-oriented criticism. The term “horizon of expectations” describes the criteria readers use to judge a literary text in a given period of time. The criteria help the reader decide what to expect from a particular genre. It is not the purpose of the horizon of expectations to point out any values of the literary work in question, but to reflect how the work is valued and interpreted after it appears. Neither the horizon of expectations establishes any meaning, for it would be wrong to say that a literary work has a universal meaning—its meaning therefore cannot be fixed or opened to all readers in any period of time.

²¹ Hans Robert Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” *New Literary History*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Autumn 1970): 23–24.

²² Graham, introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 10.

²³ Jauss and Elizabeth Benzinger qtd. in “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 29.

²⁴ Cf. Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 29–30.

comparative interpretation on a wider base.”²⁵ And because in literature a sort of grammar and syntax are typical of certain periods and genres, the structure, style of expression, and rhetorical figures of the selected novels, and their employment is to be taken into account.²⁶ These steps are to be taken in order to be able to find cross-sections and state whether McMillan’s writings have the capacity to virtually mark the process of literary evolution. Numerous questions are to be raised while doing so, for instance whether her work is meant as a dialogue with other major narrative traditions and preceding African American writers.

Suzanne Ferris and Malory Young are among a very small group of scholars who notice that McMillan turns out not to be not only the one who established the African American version of chick lit but also significantly precedes the two works which have been generally accepted as the texts igniting chick lit as a genre, that is, *Sex and the City*, first published in the form of newspaper columns by Candace Bushnell and Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’ Diary*, both from 1996. Simultaneously, McMillan rejects to be connected with the genre, possibly because of the direction the second wave of the genre has taken. As a result, her books will be put to a careful reading in order to find out to what extent she is right. The reasons for choosing the two other particular novels were that they are popular girlfriend novels, were written in 2005, make use of similar narrative patterns, have hardly enjoyed academic attention so far, and reappeared in the African American Literature Book Club charts of bestsellers several times.²⁷

In other words, having a clear picture of the continuities within the black women’s literary tradition, the aim of the dissertation is to cover the two novels by Terry McMillan and, subsequently, to consider two different novels which can be seen as distinct representatives of chick lit and girlfriend novel. Warren’s *What a Sista Should Do* ranks among Christian chick lit; *The Other Side of the Game* by Diggs could be labelled as sistah lit. The dissertation does not claim to be comprehensive; it is of major importance, though, to show how the selected women authors rethink American cultural paradigms and traditions by broadening the general readership. Also, the dissertation attempts to find out whether the contemporary popular novels and the books belonging under this umbrella term tend to reflect the changes in the U.S. society and of course the African American community within the last forty years. Another aim is to point at particular features of the two-faced genre of chick lit both as a means serving to keep women at their place and a genre concerned with real female problems—both possibilities shall be equally explored in order to uncover the reasons for the complexity of women’s responses to chick lit as such. The dissertation will attempt to affirm and appreciate the diversity and functional value of the modern African American popular novels, applying criticism rooted in African tradition where art is defined as communal, and therefore forms an inseparable part of people’s daily lives. Popular culture for women (including those of colour) has taken so many forms that its study would require volumes. Therefore the objective of the dissertation is much more modest, but hopefully useful for examining what has been at stake in analysing texts that appeal primarily to women. Clearly, the popularity of chick lit indicates a degree of responsiveness in women readers that requires a further analysis.

²⁵ Friedrich Sengle qtd. in Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 29.

²⁶ It is, however, not the aim of the thesis to provide a detailed quantitative analysis of the language used in the novel; instead, the occurrence of certain language phenomena is to be merely noticed.

²⁷ AALBC.com (African American Literary Book Club) claims to be the largest and most frequently visited website dedicated to books and film by and about people of African descent. It was founded in 1997 by Troy Johnson and since then it has become a widely recognized source of author profiles, book reviews, book recommendations, active discussions, writer resources, interviews, articles, videos, and film reviews. Cf. AALBC.com, “AALBC.com’s Best-selling Books,” accessed November 11, 2012, <http://aalbc.com/books/bestsellers.htm>.

As far as the methodology goes, it will be explained in detail in the following chapter; here, just in short: it would be at the expense of the analyses to blindly dismiss all trends of the Western literary theory and criticism. Instead, these will be appropriately filtered through an African-centred sieve in order to offer a version of a historically-grounded, contextual, descriptive, and focused reading of the selected novels. It is possible for the dissertation's author to take any stance only on the base of meticulous study of relevant sources, for she is neither African nor African American, which will be partly complemented by looking at things from the outside in a contrastive way.

In congruence with what has been said, the dissertation takes the following steps. First of all, the introductory chapters set up a social, critical, historical, and literary framework in order to enable the dissertation to examine not only the popular girlfriend novels themselves but also their revisionary tendencies of earlier genres (namely the romance novel, bildungsroman, and novel of manners). For, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. suggests, "no literary movement can be understood apart from the institutional and demographic facts of reading and writing that sustain—or fail to sustain—the author and the audience."²⁸ The extratextual context for the discussion of the novels is therefore provided by the first five chapters on methodology and literary theory applied in the dissertation, feminism, literary criticism, literary context, and popular African American novels of the respective period.

The first chapters dedicated to the methodology and mainly theory, critical, and literary context of Terry McMillan and other contemporary popular African American women writers' production can hardly be concluding, for—fortunately—the history outlined in them proves no sign of coming to an end. Considering all the theoretical concepts, critical approaches, and range of writings contained in the dissertation, not to mention what is not included, it is hard not to realize the productive, radical, and far-reaching character of the black literary and criticism activities in the second half and turn of the 20th century. Of course, it is not just due to the changing social conditions of African American people but the fact that black feminist criticism (feminist criticism in general likewise, of course), as Pam Morris observes, has been "inherently dialogic in nature."²⁹ Therefore, it has always engaged in critical debates and/or dialogues not only with patriarchal structures and institution but also itself.

In conjunction with this framework, subsequently (in chapter six and seven), reasons for as well as circumstances of McMillan's success among the readers together with mixed reception by various critics will be considered, and her legacy are delineated. Supposing that there are autobiographical features in Terry McMillan's works requires even more careful consideration of extratextual conditions in order to be able to provide adequate critical standards for the classification of African American literature written by women writers. As it will be further argued, personal experience can hardly be understood out of the social context. The analysis of *Waiting to Exhale* in chapter eight is contrasted to its sequel *Getting to Happy* in the following chapter. These are followed by a discussion of the other two above mentioned novels, which represent different branches of black chick lit, in order to discover both differences and continuity among them, and also to show how the second wave chick lit novels have diverged from their original sources.

As for the analyses, the historical and political content of the novels are not ignored; at the same time, close reading in the form of a partial textual but above all literary analyses are provided, paying attention to the novels' setting in time and place, male and female characters, narrative patterns and point of view, use of the showing and telling style, themes explored, use of humour, general values as presented in the novels, etc. The texture of the

²⁸ Gates, introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 2-

²⁹ Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 164.

sentences, figurative language, use of taboo words, and so on follow. All in all, a careful literary analysis shall be attempted with a few stylistic, as well as partly linguistic notes.

Chapter twelve presents a contrastive discussion of the findings of the analyses. First, it discusses the contemporary (black) chick lit, and considers this phenomenon as something that has developed into a significantly popular and diverse kind of literature which can be further differentiated into numerous subgenres with a potential to overlap partially. The findings of the analyses are presented, taking into account what acclaimed critics and scholars claim as well. The question of degree of readability (in other words, amount of familiar elements the readers can identify with) in relation to each particular novel is debated, pointing at various features that which appeal to the reader's background knowledge on one hand, but enable him/her to come up with his/her interpretation on the other one.

In the conclusion, the dissertation contemplates the contemporary state of popular women's writing, African American literary criticism and its unanimity, demands of the reading public, changing sociocultural conditions in the black American community, realism and verisimilitude accentuated in the contemporary popular literature for women, as well as contemporary black women popular writers' comfort in their domestic world, their concern over the single status women, and attitude to the traditional "personal versus political" dilemma. The position of the present-day (black) chick lit as a descendant of the Harlequin romance and various other black women writers is dealt with in order to realise the existing continuity within the African American literature for women. At last, the role Terry McMillan has played in black women's popular novels not only with her third novel, *Waiting to Exhale*, is discussed together with what she has in common with other women authors of popular fiction, how she transcends it, and what namely contributed to her enormous success. Her belief in the middle-class black audience as well as her cross-racial impact on readers and other authors in the form of a formal legacy are also dealt with. The debate would be incomplete without considering the reasons for McMillan's ability to appeal to her readers to such an extent, her approach to literary works as both aesthetic and functional pieces of art, her rejection of stereotypes, and emphasis put on the spoken and written word, as well as her pioneering mission in depicting sexuality as a natural and healthy part of African American women's lives.

Not feeling authorised to draw conclusions about the readers' psyches, and respecting the impossibility of conducting an exhaustive analysis of every single individual's relation to popular texts, the dissertation will have to reach for other means. The motivation of the dissertation is to analyze the texts that women readers of different skin colour find appealing in order to consider how to best make sense of their needs and desires. To do so, it is necessary to dig beneath the surface of the seemingly escapist nature of the selected books, and take a look not only at the values presented but also the formal properties of the texts, revealing the intricacies of the form and content interplay. Only then conclusions can be reached and the particular ways of how to minimise the contradictions women might suffer in relation to the expression of sexual desire and how the multi-layered plots, and open-endedness of some of them function.

The assumption that it is similarly important to recognize the reader's activities as relevant for understanding of the value and uniqueness of a literary work results in the aim of the dissertation to simultaneously examine the author's attitudes toward their reader and the kinds of readers various texts seem to imply. Taking into account the readers to a relatively large extent and applying the theoretical assumptions which also make moral demands on the reader should not destroy the objective text or exclude other approaches whatsoever in the dissertation's endeavour to unveil the impact of Terry McMillan and other selected black women writers; on the contrary, it should converge toward a new understanding of their discourse.

1 Literary Theory and Methodology Applied in the Dissertation

... every time we open the pages of another piece of writing, we are embarked on a new adventure in which we become a new person—a person as controlled and definable as remote from the chaotic self of daily life as the lover in the sonnet. Subject to the degree of our literary sensibility, we are recreated by the language. We assume, for the sake of experience, that set of attitudes and qualities which the language ask us to assume, and, if we cannot assume them, we throw the book away. Walker Gibson³⁰

The first chapter outlines the basic theoretical and methodological concepts of the dissertation. To start with, it contemplates the relationship between culture and a literary work from the viewpoint of its values and purpose, as presented by a writer. It also explains a piece of literature as something that has the ability to offer (un)mediated truth about human experiences and the world people live in; moreover, a literary work provides the reader not with a guaranteed universal truth but the particular author's stance. Further, the question of the concept of "literariness" and Eurocentric standards often forced upon African American literary works is taken into account, seeking balance between the language and reality in order to explain the reasons for the dissertation's application of the reception and reader-response theory and simultaneous rejection of generalisation of any kind. Since a literary work is approached as written primarily for readers, the importance of strategic stylistic and other choices is dealt with subsequently. When reading, the reader does not function as a passive receptor of what is offered, but he/she actively and creatively engages in the process of reception at a given place and time. (As a matter of fact, the chapter attempts to explain what such theory has in common with Afrocentric literary criticism, so that it does not turn into other set of Western thoughts blindly imposed on a piece of African American literary work.) Afterward, the potential reactions and emotional participation of the reader, including the values in the aesthetic experience of the reader is considered.

1.1 Various Methodological Notes

The aim of the dissertation is to resist the poststructuralist perspective that distrusts any appeal to experience. Simultaneously, as Hortense Spillers suggests in her essay "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," there is no need for appeals to experience to be essentialist and ahistorical. The present day heritage of the multiple oppression black women went through in the past becomes obvious in their "multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory identity, a subject that is not divided in, but rather at odds with language, an identity made up of heterogenous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class."³¹

What still occurs is that African American male scholars' views of fiction written by black women are limited to discussions of the negative images of black men found in the works of these authors. It is the aim of this dissertation to avoid such a gender-specific approach and restrict the reading of the male characters to male-bashing depiction. A similar warning finds expression in Deborah E. McDowell's essay "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" who, however, in turn, points at African American feminist critics' limiting reading of black male writers and negative images of African American women found in their works. She poignantly observes, "[f]eminist critics run the risk of plunging their

³⁰ Walker Gibson, "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers," in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980), 1.

³¹ Teresa de Lauretis, qtd. in Cheryl A. Wall, "Introduction: Taking Positions and Changing Words," in *Changing our Own Words* (Great Britain: Rutgers UP, 1989), 10.

work into cliché and triviality if they continue merely to focus on how Black men treat Black women in literature.”³² Much of what she says is valid today. As Gates adds, “When sexuality, race, and gender are both the condition and the basis of personal identity, they must shape the very possibility of expressive culture.”³³

Trying to depict the thematic complexity of the selected novels as well as what have in common from the viewpoint of themes, narrative patterns, humour, style, autobiographical features, etc. shall not result in hasty generalizations on the basis of several examples. If the dissertation is to find something as a tendency within present day African American popular novels, it must make sure that the parallel found recur with enough consistency to prove these generalizations. Looking attentively at the above mentioned literary features in contemporary African American popular novels has one more function: the dissertation attempts to find and appreciate both the stylistic innovations and what Joyce A. Joyce terms as various “consistent thematic and technical threads” that are “woven through distinctly African-American literary tradition.”³⁴

Meaningful reading of the selected novels should be based on the knowledge of the history of literature written by African American women writers as well as contextual reading of the conditions in which these have been created. Therefore, they will be located in multiple contexts and approached alongside other cultural artifacts of literary and popular culture such as blues, humour, oral tradition, etc., for these have in common that they provide representations of black women, even though women were not directly engaged in their production for a long time. Informed about literary theory and how these artifacts function, taking these into account might help move beyond mere identification of the metaphors they contain. Such relational reading (as suggested for instance by Cheryl A. Wall³⁵) may lead to emphasising the connection between what Gayatri Spivak terms the verbal text and the social text.³⁶ Still, it is not the interest of the dissertation whatsoever to treat the particular examples of popular novels as mimetic representations of sociology, as it has been done many times before.

Accordingly, Afrocentric reading as suggested by Joyce A. Joyce is to be applied:³⁷ as African-centred scholars³⁸ have always understood, “a writer’s personality and art are shaped by culture, and that a writer’s emotional and critical response to the words is shaped by his or her place in the world.”³⁹ In Joyce’s opinion, “society creates the values that become

³² Deborah E. McDowell, “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 157.

³³ Gates, introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 7.

³⁴ Joyce A. Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests: Defining African-centered Literary Criticism* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994), 43–44.

³⁵ Wall, “Introduction: Taking Positions and Changing Words,” in *Changing our Own Words*, 8–9.

³⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Reading the World: Literary Studies in the Eighties,” in *Other Words: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 102.

³⁷ In her reading, Joyce takes ideas of the Black Aesthetic leading theoreticians into consideration. She applies the words “African-centred” and “Black Aesthetic” interchangeably. For more information on the Black Aesthetic and its history, see Joyce, *Conjurers and Priests*, 26–27. Details about the Negritude movement, its relation to African-centred movement, and Molefi Asante’s definition of Afrocentricity in coincidence with the Black Aesthetic movement are given there. Although Trey Ellis’ “The New Black Aesthetic” was written in 1989, that is five years before her book *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, Joyce does not make a mention of that. Nevertheless, her book remains a priceless source of insights into African American literature written by women writers.) More about Trey Ellis and his approval of Terry McMillan’s literary activities is to be found in the sixth chapter.

³⁸ Joyce names numerous African, Caribbean, and African American writers and scholars, among them Leon Damas, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédan Senghor, Nicolas Guillen, W. E. B. DuBois, Addison Gayle, Sonia Sanchez, bell hooks, and others in this respect. *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 13.

³⁹ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 13–14.

important not only in literature, but in the entire network of human development.” In addition, “the primary characteristic of Black art for the African-centred writer and critic is that it be functional.”⁴⁰ Then literature—as bell hooks sees it—has both the capability of serving as a reflection of cultural values (as explained above), and is a potential source of cultural values at the same time; last but not least, literary works can serve as a means of accomplishing social change.⁴¹

One particular myth should be debunked. In this chapter, it is vital to say that although the writers and critics of the Black Aesthetic hold a strong belief that art should be functional, have meaning, and be used to improve societal conditions, “they do not in their praxis, as some scholars suggest, privilege meaning or purpose over craft and style.” (To show that, Joyce—as well as the contributors to her collection of essays—demonstrate a triadic parallel among meaning, mode of expression, and ideology.⁴²) Moreover, the contemporary African American novel is “clear in its rejection of the traditional opposition between literature and politics.” Rather, it functions as “a cultural object in designing its own system for interpretation, often challenging the reader’s understanding, and shows a high degree of technical proficiency.”⁴³

When it comes to issues related to narrative, Franz Karl Stanzel’s classification of various narrative situations⁴⁴ which is constituted by the triad of mode, person, and perspective shall be applied. Each of these constitutive elements “permits of a great number of actualizations which can be represented as a continua of forms” between two basic oppositions (or extremes, if you wish). Due to the fact that the whole system is organized into a circle, particular narrative texts “exhibit an immense profusion of modifications and modulations of certain basic forms. Thus each of the formal continua corresponding to the three constitutive elements can be comprehended as a binary opposition of two discrete concepts.”⁴⁵ The triadic system offers various advantages for the subsequent analysis of the selected novels. As Stanzel explains, the same weight is put to all the three above mentioned constitutive elements. In addition, the narrative situations are systematically arranged in a circle “according to the correspondences existing among them, so that the opposition axes belonging to the narrative situations intersect this circle at equal intervals.”⁴⁶

1.2 Realism and Verisimilitude

The second crucial point is to be made at this moment. The reading of the selected African American women writers’ works as presented in this dissertation is based on the presumption that literary texts can be identified with real life and that language serves as an objective mirror to life. Such approach is consistently associated with what the literary theory knows as “realism.” Consequently, as Morris suggests, the characters are lifelike, their existence is shaped by personal and wider social circumstances; similarly, the events of the narrative are

⁴⁰ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 30.

⁴¹ Cf. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (South End Press, 1990) where she addresses a broad range of issues related to gender, race, teaching, and media, always advancing the understanding that these must be conceived of as interconnected, not isolated strands.

⁴² Joyce, *Warriors*, 30.

⁴³ Maryemma Graham, the introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 10.

⁴⁴ The narrative situations, as suggested by Stanzel, are conceived as ideal types, which does not mean they would be any prescriptive. On the contrary, a failure to match the ideal types is welcome as a possible innovation of poetic qualities of a literary work, as also proven in the analyses.

⁴⁵ The respective binary oppositions are “narrator–non-narrator (reflector)” for the element of mode; “identity–non-identity (of the realms of existence of the narrator and the characters),” for the element of person, and “internal perspective–external perspective (perspectivism–aperspectivism).” Franz Karl Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative* (New York: Press Syndicate of University of Cambridge, 1984), 51.

⁴⁶ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 54–57. The diagram is to be found on page 56. Cf. also pages 60–66.

plausible and represented as a convincing sequence of everyday cause and effect; and, finally, the language and syntax are unobtrusive—all in all, the style preserves the illusion that what is offered is direct. And “the autobiographical form seems the final guarantee that what we read is a true account.”⁴⁷ Simultaneously, language itself never functions as a neutral transmitter of experience, as it is “always implicated in value systems,” and it is selective. Subsequently, works of literature do not have the ability to simply reflect but, of necessity, the author’s decisions what to depict and/or what to include together with what words and structures to use will inevitably stem from his/her subjective perception of values.⁴⁸

The autobiographical features are of special importance in African American women novelists, and therefore deserve attention. As Maryemma Graham observes, the continuous need to explain and “inscribe the self” in a “world that ha[d] historically denied the existence of that self gives both focus and intensity to the act of writing of a story about black life.” To deal with African American novel, then, is to make sense of its paradoxical nature. On one hand, it allows the author “the freedom to create a sustained vision of the world” which is, on the other one, characterized by “a series of counter-freedoms and conflicting visions.”⁴⁹

Realism has been a target to many critics. In *Textual/Sexual Politics* (1985) Toril Moi approaches realism as a conservative form which works to reinforce the existing social order of things. On the other hand—as it will be demonstrated in the analyses—even traditional genres and seemingly conservative techniques can have a politically progressive function. As Morris adds, Moi does not pay a sufficient amount of attention to the urgency with which “many women have turned to literary texts as a means of finding a positive identity in opposition to demeaning cultural images.”⁵⁰ One can hardly ignore to ask what African American women writers have brought to the existing literary tradition by means of masterful blending of realism with oral features of literature, and formal innovations.

1.3 “Literariness” and Application of Eurocentric Standards

Joyce demonstrates how rigid defining rules of literary standards function in current discussion within the African American literary community over “literariness” whose members rather prefer Alice Walker and Toni Morrison to the “non-literariness” of Terry McMillan’s novels and what she generally represents. In particular, Joyce points at applying Derrida’s idea that no literary text provides a reliable representation or account of reality (or the truth, if you wish) about any given subject, and refers to what bell hooks sees as the exclusiveness of literary discourse. Joyce continues, saying that in the discussions, the prevailing idea is that because their novels are more stylistically complex, they are “‘better’ artistic productions than McMillan’s more easy to read, less obfuscated style. Such statements are value judgements based on the fallacious notion that a stable, unchanging definition of literary excellence exists.”⁵¹

There are also other ways in which Eurocentricity is still manifested in contemporary African American literary studies, which takes its toll; for, as a result, contributions of Africans and black Americans to intellectual thought can be “overlooked and even dismissed.” Moreover, similarly to political, social, and economic aspects of American life, “African or African Americans are called on in the intellectual arena primarily for consultation if issues that involve *race*.”⁵² This only underlines her claim that much of critical

⁴⁷ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 64.

⁴⁸ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 65. The question of author’s intention will be dealt with in larger detail later in this chapter.

⁴⁹ Graham, the introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 5.

⁵⁰ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 165.

⁵¹ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 12.

⁵² Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 16. Emphasis added.

theory—if it had incorporated African and African American definitions of art and its function into account—would look very different. Instead, literary theory and criticism still tend to be “an elite, self-enclosed system in which the white hegemony propagates the ideas of Western philosophers, linguists and writers” to some extent.⁵³

Joyce offers other, alternative views of language in two respects, that is, arbitrariness and instability of language. First, her aim is not to ultimately argue against the arbitrary nature of the symbols used in any language,⁵⁴ but to realize that “once the attribution of symbols has been made, they become a part of the social network (albeit a complicated network) which allows human beings to interact and communicate. What becomes important then is the *nature* of communication.”⁵⁵ Joyce thereby seeks stability in cultural values. Second, Western thinkers insist on the fact that language is unstable and that any literary texts contains numerous layers of meaning which, in fact, conflict and oppose one another; by contrast, African-centred writers and historians have demonstrated in their works, “explicitly and implicitly, that the essential value of language lies in [the way it is used].” Besides, in African society, language and culture are inseparable; people and language do not stand in opposition to each other, and “language is the product of reality, or put another way, language constitutes reality.”⁵⁶

Based on her findings, Joyce comes to a warning conclusion, pointing at their self-referential and hypocritical stance: African American critics’ desire to merge with the mainstream depreciates and weakens “the potential of Black language to create the world.” Consequently, rather than attempting to change the self-referentiality to mainstream literary theory and criticism, too many African American scholars have accepted “the impossible task of attempting to separate art from politics.”⁵⁷ It is precisely the ignorance of the postmodern theories of the connection between the text and the real world that makes the dissertation embrace the reception and reader-response theory which do not propose the diminution of meaning or that a literary narrative is self-centred, and its autonomous language could speak for itself. The selected novels in the dissertation are to be seen as pieces of literature which share a direct relationship with the lives of the African Americans at the turn and beginning of the 21st century.

In addition, having learned the rules of the game, as Joyce names it, for the African American scholar “to be accepted by the mainstream, he or she has traditionally estranged himself or herself from the indigenous traditions of African-American culture.”⁵⁸ (Also, in

⁵³ These are, for instance, elitism of modernism, the tendency to divorce the aesthetic dimension of art from the moral reflects the effete nature of Western thought and its emotional sterility, arbitrariness of language, etc. Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 17–18. Joyce is not the only scholar who offers a critical standpoint: the Euro-American (or Western) literary hegemony demanded that not only African American writers but also critics and theoreticians “shaped their craft to satisfy the standard of the white elite.” As many of them wished for respect and acceptance within this elite, they manifested what Gayle, Jr. labels as “the urge toward whiteness.” Addison Gayle, Jr., “The Function of Black Literature at the Present Time,” in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 383.

⁵⁴ As an example of such statement she explains attribution of names in the Yoruba language in Nigeria which is not arbitrary but linguistically codified. Hence the sound of a person’s name with a meaning that is related to circumstances of the environment outside a particular individual. Cf. Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 18–19.

⁵⁵ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 18.

⁵⁶ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priest*, 19.

⁵⁷ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 20–21. And as Larry Neal observes, there are numerous scholars (among them he himself) whose contagious attitude that it is impossible to construct anything meaningful within the Western aesthetic’s decaying structure. Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *Drama Review* 12 (Summer 1968): 29–39.

⁵⁸ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 22.

any case, it cannot be taken for granted that knowing the rules of the game should guarantee that those who were outside of the literary elite will become its fully-fledged members.⁵⁹)

Last but not least, saturated with the intellectual and cultural tradition of the elitist Western heritage, even African American scholars might miss the “humanity of African people,” ignoring that they know what it means to feel and are therefore “free of the emotional entrapment embodied [for instance] in the liberal humanism that Foucault holds in disintegrating and deconstructing.”⁶⁰ All in all, intense feelings of any kind and their depiction is something typical of African American literature.⁶¹

1.4 Whose Stance Matters?

The purpose of the above outlined theoretical observations is only to consider what measures the merit of a particular literary (or any other artistic) work. Is it the often conservative interlocking system of literary standards brought from the outside, internalized, promoted, and applied by scholars whose willingness to be accepted within the mainstream literary theory and criticism might set their tone? Is it, first and foremost, the critics and/or reviewers who should have their say, even if taking into consideration how changeable the criteria and judgements of those who decide what really constitutes the literary canon are? (By which the dissertation does not mean to deny the illuminatory role African American scholars have had whatsoever.) After all, Cheryl A. Wall is one of the few critics who realises that African American women writers are those “whose words elicit and enable [their] own.”⁶² It is considered in the dissertation that writing literature should be equally relevant to the lives of its readers and, therefore, it is the appreciation of a reader and his/her choice that primarily matters.

Taking into account what was uttered above and the “complexity and ambiguity inherent in questions of audience,”⁶³ it is very difficult to speculate about the audience at whom a specific text is directed.⁶⁴ What might contribute to illuminating this subject matter is Terry McMillan’s Introduction to *Breaking Ice*, where her intentions not to prove anything to other than black audience are put in a more than explicit way.⁶⁵ Still, it is virtually impossible for an author to determine conclusively who his/her readers are and will be. Still, as Peter Rabinowitz and other audience-oriented critics argue, authors “cannot make artistic decisions without prior assumptions (conscious or unconscious) [stated or just implied] about their audience’s beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with [literary and social] conventions.”⁶⁶ Consequently, each text makes selections, encodes, and visions its targeted audience, which is precisely what Wolfgang Iser means by his concept of “the implied reader.” Iser states that the aesthetic responses of a reader do not come from nowhere, but he/she is confronted with circumstances arising from his/her own environment, which stimulates him/her to assess and

⁵⁹ In Elizabeth A. Meese’s response to Stanley Fish’s the discussion of interpretative communities, she states: “You become a member [of interpretive communities] when the community makes you one, and not necessarily by virtue of how well you perform critical acts.” Elizabeth A. Meese, “Sexual Politics and Critical Judgement,” in *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. K. M. Newton (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 272.

⁶⁰ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 24.

⁶¹ In particular, Joyce sees a “cry of a human being” who understands “what it means to be human, to suffer,” as one of the dominant themes in the African American literature. Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 24.

⁶² Wall, “Introduction: Taking Positions and Changing Words,” in *Changing our Own Words*, 2.

⁶³ McDowell, “The Changing Same,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 93.

⁶⁴ Cf. Walter Jackson Ong, “The Writer’s Audience Is Always a Fiction,” *PMLA* 90 (1975): 9–21.

⁶⁵ Cf. Terry McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xv–xxiv.

⁶⁶ Peter Rabinowitz, “‘What’s Hecuba to Us?’ The Audience’s Experience of Literary Borrowing,” in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton, 1980), 243.

criticize their surroundings.⁶⁷ Therefore, it will be more than relevant to have a look at the decisions that lie in the style, language, and other strategic choices the selected authors make.

Hans Robert Jauss, other significant reception theorist and member of the Constance School, offers a more detailed analysis of who a reader is in his explanation of a “triangle of author, work, and reading public,” where the latter one “is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but even history-making energy.”⁶⁸ Similarly to Iser, he assumes that the aesthetic responses of a reader stem from his/her own environment, social and historical norms, all of which shape his/her assessment and the stance s/he takes.

It is essential to realise that “a literary text can only produce a response when it is read.”⁶⁹ And “no text was ever written to be read and interpreted philologically by philologists,”⁷⁰ nor, as added by Jauss “historically by historians,” but primarily addressed to a reader, which makes his/her role unalterable both for aesthetic and historical appreciation unalterable. Jauss continues,

The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its audience. For it is only through the process of its communication that the work reaches the changing horizon of experience in a continuity in which the continual change occurs from simple reception to critical understanding, from passive to active reception, from recognized aesthetic norms to a new production that surpasses them.⁷¹

Further, Jauss puts emphasis on the dialogic nature of the historicity of literature which presupposes a relation of a literary work, audience, and new work. Further, he understands history of literature as “a process of aesthetic reception and production which take place in realization of literary texts on the part of the receptive reader, the reflective critic and the author in his/[her] continued creativity.”⁷²

More important for the reading of Terry McMillan and her contemporaries’ works, the analysis of the reader’s literary experience as suggested by Jauss describes “the response and the impact of a work within the definable frame of reference of the reader’s expectations: this frame of reference develops in the historical moment of its appearance from a previous understanding of the genre, from the forms and themes of already familiar works, and from the contrast between poetic and practical language.”⁷³ What Jauss calls “horizon of expectations” encompasses the social norms and historical situation of a given time and place, and also situates the work in relation to others so that the readers’ previous (or background)

⁶⁷ Cf. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Johns Hopkins UP: Baltimore, 1978) as well as *Reader-Response Criticism*, ed. Jane P. Tomkins (Baltimore, 1980). Some of the controversies of “the implied reader” arise from misunderstandings of the concept, others may be traced to the limitations inherent in the concept itself, and indeed to its phenomenological basis. However, despite its imperfection, the Iserian concept of the implied reader has greatly enriched the understanding of the nature of literary reading, a contribution that can never be overestimated. For more details on the reasons for Iser’s critique, see Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (USA: Methuen, 1984), 82–106.

⁶⁸ Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 8. A similar triad of intended meanings is suggested in Umberto Eco’s *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*: intention-operis, intention-auctoris, and intention-lectoris, i.e., intention of the work, author, and reader. In the debate in the book, Eco is driven by his endeavour to explore the ways of limiting the range of admissible interpretations of a literary work and hence of identifying certain readings as overinterpretations. Umberto Eco with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, and Christine Brooke-Rose, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992).

⁶⁹ Wolfgang Iser, preface to *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978), ix.

⁷⁰ Walter Bulst, qtd. in Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 8.

⁷¹ Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 8.

⁷² Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 9–10.

⁷³ Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 11.

knowledge, that is, what they may have already read.⁷⁴ Reader response, then, is dependent upon the extent to which the work does or does not conform to these existing norms and expectations.⁷⁵

In any case, no work, new it may seem, though, appears as something absolutely new, but it always

predisposes its readers to a very definite type of reception by textual strategies, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of the familiar, stirs particular emotions in the reader and with its “beginning” arouses expectations for the “middle and end,” which can then be continued intact, changed, re-oriented or even ironically fulfilled in the course of reading according to certain rules of the genre or type of text.⁷⁶

Jauss suggests several generally acceptable means for a specific reception which a particular author anticipates from the reader. These are “the familiar standards or the poetry of the genre,” implicit relationships to familiar works of the literary-historical context,” and “the contrast between fiction and reality, between the poetic function of the language, which the reflective reader can always realize while he[s/he] is reading.”⁷⁷ All these means are applied throughout the dissertation, first, in order to show how precisely and in what respects McMillan and other selected authors manage or fail to shift or even transcend the horizon of expectations of the black and subsequently other audience. Next, the dissertation attempts to discover whether the selected African American women writers engage in what Jauss terms “culinary approach,” that is, if they either try to satisfy the demands of the consumers (P. Beylin’s concept), also whether “the fulfilled satisfaction becomes the standard of the product,” or whether their works “appear to be solving a problem” (I. Imdahl) when in reality there is no problem.⁷⁸ The application of these ideas in the analyses would simply not be possible without the first five chapters of the dissertation whose aim is to provide a frame for the reading of the four selected novels.

Jauss and his way of looking at literature serve as an inspiration for this dissertation despite its major weaknesses which is a relative neglect of the authorial intention. (Fortunately enough, this weakness can be well compensated for, drawing from Terry McMillan’s Introduction to *Breaking Ice* which reveals her intentions more than sufficiently. Similarly, enough information about the other authors’ intentions can be found at their official web sites.) Jauss’ concepts are to be used for two basic reasons. In essence, first, his theories which are to be applied, considering a literary work as both a potential source of values and something that has the ability to shape the society⁷⁹ (which is called the “socially formative function of literature”). Hence the ability of a literary work to lead to a (social) change and—in terms of reception of literature—to produce a shift of horizon of expectations. Simultaneously, second, a literary work functions as a piece of art which takes the form of the writer’s response shaped by culture, both of which precisely echo the Afrocentric attitude to

⁷⁴ The way that the interacting social categories of gender, race, ethnicity, and class both condition and shape the reader response is dealt with in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts and Contexts* (The Johns Hopkins UP, 1986) and *Reading Sites: Social Difference and Reader Response* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2004), both edited by Patrocinio P. Schweickart and Elizabeth A. Flynn.

⁷⁵ Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 11–12. Reader’s response as determined by his/her background knowledge and previous readings on one hand, and the importance of context on the other one play a vital role in Stanley Fish’s discussion of meaning in literary works. Cf. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980).

⁷⁶ Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 12.

⁷⁷ Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 14.

⁷⁸ Beylin, Iser and Imdahl qtd. in Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 15.

⁷⁹ Cf. hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*.

literature.⁸⁰ That is how the gap between a literary-historical and sociological research by applying the methods of the aesthetics of reception is to be bridged.

1.5 The Process of Reading

As far as the reading process is concerned, although Umberto Eco's discussion of literary works is primarily concerned with the unfinished nature of the postmodern open texts, he still does not underestimate the role of the reader, offering an applicable theory for this dissertation. He sees the text as able "to stimulate the private world of the addressee in order that he/[she] can draw from inside himself/[herself] some deeper response that mirrors the subtle resonances underlying the text." Eco makes a distinction between the standard open works which allow for innumerable individual responses, but—at the same time—ultimately "never allow the reader to move outside the strict control of the author," and the second type he calls "works in movement" compared to "construction kits" which serve the reader to "make the composition."⁸¹

Wolfgang Iser, on the other hand, describes the reading process in terms of "anticipation" (expecting what is to come) and "retrospection" (the read material is bound to become a part of what is kept in the reader's memory). The reader is also involved in picturing the absent or unwritten parts of the text ("gaps") with his/her imagination, and in grouping together the different parts of the text to form "a gestalt of a literary text." The process of reception, then, functions as a continual interplay of modified expectations and transforming memory in the sense of memories about the text.⁸²

Walker Gibson argues that there are two basic kinds of readers distinguishable in every literary experience in addition to the well-known distinction between the author and speaker. There is the "real" individual upon whose knees rests the open volume, and whose personality as complex and ultimately inexpressible as any dead poet's." The second one is "the fictitious reader" who is called "the mock reader" whose "mask and costume the individual takes in order to experience the language."⁸³ Furthermore, he/she is "an artifact, controlled, simplified, abstracted out of the chaos of day-to-day sensation," and is, for instance, easily identifiable in subliterary genres close to persuasion such as advertising or propaganda.⁸⁴ In other words, the mock reader is a role that the real reader is encouraged to play when reading a piece of literary work; and, as Jane P. Tompkins adds, "[t]he mock reader implied by the text gives the reader's experience its shape and valorises that experience as an object of critical attention."⁸⁵

The importance of Gibson's classification lies in his distinction between an individual's response to literature, which is purely subjective, and the process by which such response becomes a form of knowledge, "a process that is determined by the community of interpreters in which the reader belongs."⁸⁶ And, more important, his point of view helps to

⁸⁰ For instance McDowell, too applies the reception theory in "Reading Family Matters," in *Changing Our Own Words*, 75–97 which becomes a tool to analyse critical and fictional texts of Alice Walker.

⁸¹ Umberto Eco, *The Role of Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979), 49–56. Eco suggested the term open work in 1962 first in *Opera aperta*; the same distinction is made in *Lector in Fabula: Role čtenáře aneb interpretační kooperace v narativních textech*, transl. Zdeněk Frýbort (Praha: Academia, 2010).

⁸² Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," in *Reader-Response Criticism*, 57–59.

⁸³ Although Gibson's essay from 1950 does not make any significant move forward, confining to a rather formalist position, it offers a text-centred view which assumes the value and uniqueness of a particular literary work and invites the reader to take an active part in discovering the text's treasures.

⁸⁴ Gibson, "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers," 2.

⁸⁵ Tompkins, "Introduction to Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers," in *Reader-Response Criticism*, xi.

⁸⁶ Tompkins, "Introduction to Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers," xxi.

specify what a “bad” book means. Supposing that it is the reader to whom the book is targeted, “a bad book is a book whose mock reader we discover a person we refuse to become, a mask we refuse to put on, a role we will not play.”⁸⁷

1.7 The Reader: Emotions, Values, and Feelings

For more than thirty years there has been an ongoing debate about the true and/or artificial nature of emotional participation of the reader when reading a piece of fiction in the field of analytic aesthetics.⁸⁸ One of the subtopics relevant for the debate as well as for this dissertation is whether what the reader experiences are true, genuine feelings and emotions, or these are reduced to sheer rationality, which prevents them from fulfilling their cognitive and evaluative functions. That means the basic question remains whether a reference to something fictional (non-existing) or a reaction to a piece of fiction can lead to “feeling [true] feelings”⁸⁹ on the side of the reader.⁹⁰

Contemporary theory, as explained by Vlastimil Zuska, does not reduce emotionality in reading to rationality and therefore approach the reader’s attitude when reading as a true one. Zuska states there are two important factors in relation to the reader’s emotions: on one hand, these are empathy and identification, on the other one, simulation. As far as empathy is concerned, he presents the paradox of fiction which is seen in the “apparent irrationality of emotional responses to fictional, i.e., nonexistent entities.”⁹¹ In other words, the reader is virtually emotionally drawn and moved by a literary work even though he/she is aware of its fictional nature, which is caused by a shift of feelings from characters to the meaning of a text or its content. The self-reflexive experience of the reader, then, is enabled by his/her feelings in relation to a particular aesthetic object;⁹² or, as Theodor Lipps puts it, the aesthetic experience becomes an objectified self-experience,⁹³ blurring the borderline between real entities and fictional ones.⁹⁴ Identification is not very far from empathy; it is a strategy of grasping a fictional text by which a reader makes efforts to identify with the characters. Zuska comes up with two modalities of emotional participation of a reader, first, empathizing with a character himself/herself which goes hand-in-hand with harmony and/or tension; second, empathizing with the fate of the character which makes the reader take the perspective of an observer and therefore puts certain distance between him/her and the aesthetic object.⁹⁵

As far as simulation is concerned, Zuska claims that feelings and emotions are such an essential cognitive factor that they do not fail to lose their importance even in simulated situations. As a result, it is possible to approach the act of reception of a piece of fiction as an act of simulative heuristics united with empathy into characters and events.⁹⁶ And because the

⁸⁷ Gibson, “Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers,” 5.

⁸⁸ One of the first impulses for the debate was probably Colin Radford and Michael Weston’s “How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 49 (1975): 67–93. Other contributing texts is by Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (USA: MIT Press, 1990).

⁸⁹ Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (London: Vintage, 2000).

⁹⁰ Vlastimil Zuska, “Možnost reálných emocí v možných (fikčních) světech,” in *Od struktury k fikčnímu světu*, eds. Bohumil Fořt and Jiří Hrabal (Olomouc: Aluze, 2004), 205–206.

⁹¹ Zuska, “Možnost reálných emocí v možných (fikčních) světech,” 214.

⁹² Zuska, “Možnost reálných emocí v možných (fikčních) světech,” 206–208.

⁹³ Qtd. in Zuska, “Možnost reálných emocí v možných (fikčních) světech,” 208.

⁹⁴ Similarly, Kendall Walton offers a key clarification of this subject matter in his “make-believe theory” which suggests the idea that the “fictional” can be taken to mean “true in the appropriate game of make-believe” or, equivalently, true in the fictional world of the representation. Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (USA: Harvard UP, 1990), 34.

⁹⁵ Zuska, “Možnost reálných emocí v možných (fikčních) světech,” 208–210.

⁹⁶ Zuska’s statement is based on a parallel between the classification of heuristics and feelings into the primary and secondary ones. The primary ones are true, meanwhile the secondary–indirect, if you wish–are only

act of reception naturally tends to be self-reflexive, and the reader changes his/her emotions consciously, the feelings and emotions must be genuine. What is important for the literary analysis of a piece of fiction, then—as Goodman explains—in the process of aesthetic experience emotions become a means of distinguishing what characteristics a literary work possesses and expresses. If emotions are experienced and manifested, they are also to be used in a cognitive manner and correlated with the reader's notion of the world.⁹⁷

Emotions and feelings as part of the reader's experience have to do with values presented in literary works. Generally, literary texts are constructed as objects of beauty, sources of pleasure, but also as conveyors of messages and information. Regardless whether authors claim no practical purpose for their works, most literature constitutes an attempt at conveying persuasively certain values and ideas. In reality the entertaining and beautiful aspect of literary works functions as part of the appeal and attractiveness which the work tries to attach to the ideas which it seeks to convey. The beauty of literature forms a part of its rhetoric which is a device intended to strengthen the overall persuasiveness and impact of the work on the audience. While the entertaining aspect of literature may be rather obvious, understanding the ideas or values which a text advances is not always a simple task, since the ideas of a literary text are almost always presented in an indirect or symbolic form.

The dissertation takes hold of literary works as pieces of art produced by specific human beings belonging to a specific culture at a given historical time, and occupying very definite positions within the structures and hierarchies of their societies. These pieces attempt to promote certain ideas, values, or ideologies. Contemporary African American women writers—rather than making a disinterested or idealistic effort—understand literature as both an aesthetic and functional sort of activity aimed at the promotion and dissemination of cultural values and views of the world which are connected to their interests and needs. (It should be mentioned, of course, that the relation of the author to the powers, institutions, and systems of belief of his/her time can be one of affinity, opposition, or even ambiguity.) Understanding of literature and of particular literary texts therefore depends not only on the isolated reading of certain individual works by African American women writers, and the consideration of their authors' lives and their circumstances, but also upon a critical interdisciplinary examination of the black American history, language, and culture, including art, music, philosophy, religion, politics, etc., of which literature forms part and which it represents.

Applying the principles of reader-response criticism and reception theory as its version should not lead to a denial of objective bases of criticism (that is, an assumption of non-existence of objective texts and readers). “Relocating meaning first in the reader's self and then in the interpretive strategies that constitute it,” the meaning is shaped by a particular contextual situation in the world. The power of the language, then, results in enriching and shaping of the reader in the process of reading. This ability of literature to influence human behaviour and civilise in a rather direct manner enables the personal (as depicted in fiction) to become political.

What if the critics underestimate the depth, spirituality, and values expressed in the quotidian by McMillan and other girlfriend or any other kind of popular African American novels? Her works do not reinforce the stereotypes of the black people, on the contrary. By means of (often subversive) humour she attacks any sense of superiority and insensitivity. Furthermore, McMillan is apparently aware of the relationship between herself as a writer, the reader, and critic, becoming the one who pleases, entertains, and challenges, always testing the limits of the current critical understanding.

anticipated or imagined (such as fear, for instance), which, however, does not mean they would be less palpable. Zuska, “Možnost reálných emocí v možných (fikčních) světech,” 211.

⁹⁷ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 248.

With the boundaries of literary theory still expanding and the recovery of both history and other texts by African American authors, the best reading the dissertation can offer is an open one. Therefore, both continuities and discontinuities in the tradition of black women writing will be taken into account; the objective and subjective realities will be traced; the relationship between the written and spoken will be examined; and the borderline between the high and low will be brought down. All this is motivated by the fact that many African American women writers create against the very same establishment from which they need approval.

Maryemma Graham encapsulates the methodology of this dissertation.

The rise of theory—in contrast to the rise of criticism—has been useful to the study of the African American novel generally, because it has enabled new areas of investigation and validated others. What was once considered marginal to the study of black writing, political and social interpretations, for example, are now widely accepted as standard. ... Many recent scholars see African American literature as having been engaged in a specific productive process that transforms conventional language. These critics interpret the novel as a textual system complete with gaps and silences, one that assumes the reader to be more actively engaged in the making of meaning.⁹⁸

And it is this road the dissertation will attempt to take.

⁹⁸ Graham, the introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 6–7.

2 Mainstream and Black Feminism

...consciousness is everything. Even now, acknowledging inequality begs one to do something about it—and that is a daunting, albeit righteous responsibility. ...

We're not doing feminism the same way the seventies feminists did it; being liberated doesn't mean copying what came before but finding one's own way—a way that is genuine to one's own generation. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards⁹⁹

The aim of this chapter is, first of all, to define what feminism is and is not, and to provide a historical overview of the African American feminism after the 1960s,¹⁰⁰ as it coexisted with the white, i.e., mainstream one, reflecting various very different opinions the acclaimed representatives of both have about the nature of their coexistence.¹⁰¹ The chapter might as well be titled “Mainstream versus Black Feminism;” however, it seems less desirable to seek discrepancies between these two, as much has been written about the immense distance separating them. On the contrary, what connects women, what they have in common, generally speaking, and how the two -isms might complement each other is outlined. Second, the old basic feminist question of the personal versus the political in feminism is to be examined, suggesting a reasonable compromise which would balance both in the 21st century. As a result, the historical background that should shed light on the circumstances and nature of Terry McMillan's works and her contemporaries as well the overall atmosphere in the U.S. is provided in this chapter.

2.1 Some General Notes on Feminism

It is difficult not to notice the apparent backlash¹⁰² and/or even antipathy to (or at least a widespread ignorance of) feminism in some areas in Western society in recent years. One of the reasons might be the partial integration of feminism into mainstream agendas and also the fact that some of the problems feminists targeted have already been solved. In addition, the apathy and complacency of some women who feel sufficiently protected from the concerns raised by the women's movement simultaneously seem to undermine other women's efforts, thereby increasing inequality. Identifying feminism as an irrational backlash, or a deliberate putting oneself into the position of a powerless woman, prevents other women from urging further societal changes, and may paradoxically lead to a rejection of feminism by the very ones harvesting the fruits of its Second Wave. Today's language of empowerment presented by the media in combination with selfishness, a possible result of the 1990s policy of “if it feels good, do it,” has resulted in the presupposition that young women in the Western countries are now in full control of their lives.¹⁰³ The fact is that feminist demands are still voiced to some extent even if these are not explicitly labelled so, or are in fact perceived as stalled changes, though.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 62 and 130.

¹⁰⁰ For a more extensive list of readings for black feminism, see “Suggested Readings for Black Feminists,” The Feminist eZine, accessed April 4, 2013, <http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/blackwomen.html>.

¹⁰¹ For a far more detailed analysis, see Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis, *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black & White Feminist Perspectives* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1981).

¹⁰² Feminism is, according to Baumgardner and Richards, even often “treated as the other F word.” *Manifesta*, 50.

¹⁰³ Katharine Viner, “The Personal is Still Political,” in *On the Move: feminism for a new generation*, ed. Natasha Walter (London: Virago Press, 2000), 15.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Sara Mills and Louise Mullany, *Language, Gender, Feminism: Theory, Methodology, Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 3–6.

In addition, the black feminist movement emerging in the mid-1960s (which will be discussed later in this chapter) is a much more complicated issue, if the argument that African American women confront both a woman question and a race problem is taken into account. In Guy-Sheftall's opinion, it captures the essence of black feminist thought at the turn of the 19th century and would echo among female as well as numerous male intellectuals, academics, and scholars, activists, writers, educators, community leaders, and other important representatives of this ethnic group for generations. She adds that while feminist perspectives have been a persistent and important component of the African-American literary and intellectual tradition since slavery, scholars until fairly recently have focused primarily on the racial perspectives of blacks. This tendency to ignore long years of political struggle aimed at eradicating the multiple oppressions which black women experience[d] resulted in erroneous notions about the relevance of feminism to the black community during the second wave of the women's movement."¹⁰⁵ Therefore, taking a look at African American history from the viewpoint of gender should prevent this dissertation from presenting the faulty opinion that feminist thinking is alien to African Americans or that these women have been mere imitators of their white sisters.

Feminism is a word that—according to Baumgardner and Richards—describes “a social-justice movement for gender equity and human liberation.” Further, as they explain, at the beginning of the Second Wave (in late 1960s) the term “women's liberationist” was the favoured one among radical women. “But soon feminism gained common currency, uniting the radicals and the liberal women's movement under one umbrella term.” Some, however, felt that this merger “compromised the revolutionary ideas of freedom and ushered in an empty prescription for social equality.”¹⁰⁶

For African American women, nevertheless, certain premises characterize what came to be understood as feminism. Guy-Sheftall suggests there has been, first, a special kind of oppression and suffering in the U.S. experienced by black women which are both racist and sexist; second, this “double jeopardy”¹⁰⁷ has caused that the problems, concerns, and needs of black women are distinct from those of both white women and black men; as a result, third, African American women must struggle for gender equality and black liberation. Fourth, and rather important for what has been and will be said in this chapter, there is no inherent contradiction in the struggle to eliminate sexism and racism together with the other “isms” that afflict the human community such as classism and heterosexism. Last but not least, African American women's unique struggle with respect to racial and sexual politics as well as their marginalized status has given them a special view of the world.¹⁰⁸

2.2 The Mainstream and African American Feminism after the 1960s

The Second Wave of feminism covers two decades, i.e., the 1960s and 70s. In comparison with the First one,¹⁰⁹ it is rather well-documented by means of countless documentaries, women's studies courses, newspaper and magazine articles, histories, memoirs, and so on,

¹⁰⁵ Beverly Guy-Sheftall, “Black Feminism in the United States,” in *Essays on African-American History, Culture and Society*, ed. William R. Scott and William G. Shade (Washington, D. C.: U.S. Department for State, Branch for the Study of the United States, 2005), 294.

¹⁰⁶ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 50–51.

¹⁰⁷ The term is a memorable phrase from Frances Beale's famous essay “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” which is later going to be mentioned in this chapter. Many scholars also refer even to the “triple jeopardy” African American women experienced in the past, i.e., discrimination based on three factors: being black, being a woman, and being a member of an economic under-class.

¹⁰⁸ Guy-Sheftall, “Black Feminism in the United States,” 294.

¹⁰⁹ Around the turn of the 20th century, young women “with radical ideas and brave claims on freedom” began pervading the First Wave of feminism. For instance, Emma Goldman pioneered for free-love movement; Zora Neale Hurston and other women associated with the Harlem Renaissance began documenting African American culture and folklore; radical suffragist Alice Paul established the National Woman's Party as a protest against her less radical colleagues and foremothers. Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 72.

which concretize numerous women's contribution to the movement.¹¹⁰ The "modern women's liberation movement" (a term used by Baumgardner and Richards) percolates from at least two sources: the first one is the "political women working in the civil-rights and anti-war movements." This group of women was represented mostly by women with raised consciousness from Northern universities who went to the U.S. South to take part in literary trainings and voter education, volunteering for various organizations, together with Southern community activists. The second group consisted of "awakening middle-class women" who were trying to escape "the feminine mystique"¹¹¹ in order to find meaningful work, and by individual women "looking for equality in Eleanor Roosevelt's day."¹¹²

More important for this dissertation, besides the emergence of key personalities of the Movement as well as the possibility to actually make living as a (predominantly white) feminist intellectual, women's studies literally opened the formerly white and male canon to other ethnic groups living in the United States, for example African American, Native American, Chicano, Asian American, queer, and other studies. Guy-Sheftall further illustrates that "in the 1960s, black feminist struggle came to the forefront in a much more conscious manner, mainly as a result of the failure of the civil rights, black, Nationalist, and women's rights organizations to address special needs and concerns of black women, and heightened consciousness about sexism because of their experiences within the Movement."¹¹³ Discussing this respective period, Baumgardner and Richards refer to the National Black Feminist Organization's statement of purpose together with other priceless books such as the anthology *The Black Woman* (1970) by Toni Cade Bambara¹¹⁴ or the work of Celestine Ware.¹¹⁵ Guy-Sheftall adds Shirley Chisholm's *Unbought and Unbossed* and Audrey Lorde's *Cables to Rage* from the same year.¹¹⁶ Two years later, the U.S. Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment, designed to guarantee equal rights for women. In 1973 the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) officially began in November at an Eastern Regional Conference in New York City, which was a gathering of the first explicitly black feminist organization dedicated to eradication of racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Moreover, its purpose was to remind the Black Liberation Movement of the inclusion of African American women—which, however, does not imply their disloyalty to the race—in the struggle; simultaneously, its members "objected to the women's movement being seen as white." A year after the founding meeting a branch of the Boston chapter of NBFO made a decision to engage in a more radical organization, Combahee River Collective, named after Harriet Tubman's military campaign in South Carolina in 1863.¹¹⁷ In the manifesto, its members expressed their belief that "the only people who care enough about us [black women] to work

¹¹⁰ For more information on the feminist history of the 1960s and 70s as well as the greatest achievements of the movement, see Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 70–74.

¹¹¹ A phenomenon examined by Betty Friedan in her famous 1963 book of the same title.

¹¹² Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 73.

¹¹³ Guy-Sheftall, "Black Feminism in the United States," 303. She gives several particular examples, for instance the displeasure of some African American women in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) about the sexist behaviour of its male members who therefore came to the conclusion that it was necessary to battle both racism and gender oppression; or one of the earliest manifestations of modern women's movement, SNCC Position Paper No. 24, Women of the Movement. Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Guy-Sheftall stresses the importance of Francis Beale's now classic essay on the double jeopardy experienced by African American women (which was mentioned above), also highlighting the inappropriateness of white models of womanhood, black male sexism, widespread sterilization, abuse of women of colour, abortion rights, or women's right to speech. "Black Feminism in the United States," 304. Guy-Sheftall is not the only scholar who accentuates her importance—cf. Wall, "Introduction: Taking Positions and Changing Words," in *Changing our Own Words*, 2.

¹¹⁵ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 76–77.

¹¹⁶ Guy-Sheftall, "Black Feminism in the United States," 303.

¹¹⁷ Guy-Sheftall, "Black Feminism in the United States," 304.

consistently for our liberation is *us*.”¹¹⁸ The same women affirmed their solidarity with progressive African American men who would acknowledge their quest against sexism. Guy-Sheftall stresses not only that they embraced one of the basic feminist principles that the personal is political, but also that they called attention to the critical importance of race and class in feminist theorizing, so often avoided by white women.¹¹⁹

Several important black feminist texts should not be omitted, for instance an article by Michelle Wallace entitled “A black Feminist’s Search for Sisterhood” (1975) and *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979) which provoked much controversy among African American academics and activists due to the conclusions made in both such as the asserted black male rights at the expense of black women. Nztotake Shange’s controversial award-winning Broadway play¹²⁰ *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1976) contributed to the already stirred emotions. The year 1979 was also marked by an article in *Newsweek* which echoed Wallace’s ideas, stating “It’s the newest wrinkle in the black experience in America—a growing distrust, if not antagonism, between black men and women that is tearing marriages apart and fracturing personal relationships.”¹²¹

All in all, the whole 1970s signalled a literary and social awakening among African American women, and the beginning of a clearly defined black women’s liberation movement, whose priorities would significantly differ from those of white feminists, and would result in tumultuous debates within the community. The essence of black feminism of this decade could be symbolized by Bambara’s anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-imperialist agenda with the aim to debunk various myths as well as establish global connections with other women of colour, even in the Third World.¹²² The latter tendency was to continue intensely in the following decade.

The public debate of problematic issues continued in the 1980s not only among feminists but also in fiction of contemporary African American writers such as Alice Walker or Toni Morrison, and the debate grew more virulent. “Explicitly black feminist publications”¹²³ appeared, one of them Patricia Bell Scott, Gloria Hull, and Barbara Smith’s *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (1982),¹²⁴ or *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) by bell hooks (nee Gloria Watkins), in which the impact of sexism on the lives of African American women is delineated, and the devaluation of black womanhood is examined both from the historical and contemporaneous perspective.¹²⁵ In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, she redefines feminism in an unprecedented manner.

Many feminist radicals now know that neither a feminism that focuses on women as an autonomous human being worthy of personal freedom nor one that focuses on the attainment of equality of opportunity with men can rid society of sexism and male domination. Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore, it is necessary to struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels,

¹¹⁸ Qtd. in Guy-Sheftall, “Black Feminism in the United States,” 304. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁹ Guy-Sheftall, “Black Feminism in the United States,” 305.

¹²⁰ Darryl Pinckney speaks about a “choreopoem,” not a play. “The Best of Everything,” review of *Waiting to Exhale*, by Terry McMillan, *The New York Review of Books*, November 4, 1993, 34.

¹²¹ Qtd. in Guy-Sheftall, “Black Feminism in the United States,” 305. The subject matter of sexual politics within the African American community remained topical at that time in numerous black publications; among them *The black Scholar*, *Freedomways*, and *black Books Bulletin*, or *black Male/Female Relationships*. Ibid.

¹²² Guy-Sheftall, “Black Feminism in the United States,” 303. The year 1970 is to be further referred to within the chapter dedicated to the contemporary literary context of Terry McMillan’s work for the publishing of various irreplaceable novels by African American women writers that have changed the direction of the black modern prose for good.

¹²³ Guy-Sheftall, “Black Feminism in the United States,” 306.

¹²⁴ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 76–77.

¹²⁵ Together with Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Alice Walker, and Gloria Joseph, bell hooks would remain one of the most prolific African American feminists and activists, publishing texts on a broad range of issues.

as well as commitment to reorganizing society so that self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires. Defined in this way, it is unlikely that women would join feminist movement simply because we are biologically the same. A commitment to feminism so defined would demand that each individual participant acquire a critical political consciousness based on ideas and beliefs.¹²⁶

In addition, Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press and the first explicitly African American feminist periodical (SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on black Women, 1984) were founded in order to publish works on feminist perspectives on a variety of issues.¹²⁷

As an alternative to “feminist,” the term “womanist” was coined by Alice Walker, following the publication of her collection of essays *In Search Of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983). As a matter of fact, to be called a womanist became preferred by many of the early 1980s women as a “more culturally appropriate way.”¹²⁸ In the book, Walker not only describes the restricted conditions of her ancestors’ artistic expression but, more important for the characteristics of womanism,¹²⁹ defines a womanist as a “black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mother to female children and also a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.”¹³⁰

Africana¹³¹ womanism is another form black women’s quest for liberation got in the late 1980s. It is a term coined by Clenora Hudson-Weems intended as an ideology applicable to all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture and Afrocentrism, and its focal points are the experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women of the African diaspora. In *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (published as late as in 1995), the author argues that “Africana Womanism is not an addendum to feminism, black feminism, African feminism, or Alice Walker’s womanism,”¹³² distinguishing among the -isms.¹³³

The above described diversity of feminism’s branches together with the diversity of issues addressed in the Second Wave is also reflected in the Third one. In addition, since the beginning of the 1990s, there has been an apparent backlash related to feminism’s coming of age. Still, the Third Wave has offered space to the young women who felt neglected by those women’s organizations established by their predecessors, as the Second Wave did not “speak

¹²⁶ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 26. Emphases added.

¹²⁷ Guy-Sheftall, “Black Feminism in the United States,” 306.

¹²⁸ Guy-Sheftall, “Black Feminism in the United States,” 306.

¹²⁹ Although—as Lovalerie King shows—the woman-centred narrative can be traced back to Zora Neale Hurston, it is Alice Walker who has mostly been identified with the literary practices of womanism. Lovalerie King, “African American womanism,” in *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 233–252.

¹³⁰ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi. Baumgardner and Richards approach womanism as a distinct black alternative to often white-centred history whose sympathisers would probably not deny the link to feminism, based on the same beliefs about equality and freedom of both sexes. Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 56. By contrast, Guy-Sheftall, an African American scholar, stresses the Africana womanists’ urge to differentiate themselves from the mainstream feminists, advocating a broader-based way of thinking which would take into account significant differences among women and their experience “of gender because of race, ethnicity, culture, class, and a number of other variables.” Guy-Sheftall, “Black Feminism in the United States,” 306.

¹³¹ “Africana” is the feminine form of the Latin “Africanus,” meaning “of Africa,” and was in fact preferred by the movement over the expression “African.”

¹³² Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (Troy: Bedford Publishing, 1998), 24.

¹³³ Collins further explains, “[a]lthough some Africana women may support the very ideas on which feminism rests, however, many of them reject the term “feminism” because of what they perceive as its association with white women’s cause. They see feminism as operating exclusively within the terms white and American and perceive its opposite as being Black and American.” Patricia Hill Collins, “What’s in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond,” *The Black Scholar* 26 (Winter/Summer 1996): 9.

to their media-savvy, culture-driven generation.”¹³⁴ Interestingly enough, many young women of the period and henceforth have felt that the legacy of independence is something like their birthright; therefore they have not felt any need to necessarily label themselves consciously as “feminists.”

Meanwhile in the Second Wave politics represented an inseparable part of the feminist culture, in the Third one, politics has been *replaced* by culture. What previously used to be identified as the means of women’s oppression and tools of patriarchy (for instance, overgrooming, pornography, and seeing women as sex objects, etc.), paradoxically enough, has become utilized by women who get the wrong impression that they no longer need to be protected from them, since they replace “protective cultural ‘rules’ with a kind of equality.”¹³⁵ The conformity trap becomes obvious: “Culture is always tied to material movements; you are not going to create a revolution through culture,” illustrates Pam Warren.¹³⁶

Baumgardner and Richards call the intersection of culture and feminism “Girlie.” They poignantly admit that embracing “the pink things of stereotypical girlhood” is not “a radical gesture to overturn the way society is structured, it can be a confident gesture.”¹³⁷ Most of the Girlies are straight and belong to the predominantly white middle-class consumer part of the Western society, which clearly explains their embrace of certain issues. Still, in the last couple of years they have been less distant from African American young women than it might seem. The reason is that strong articulate black women—who, however, at the same time, tend to be stereotyped on the very basis of such qualities they display—are something white young women might draw from.¹³⁸

The Third Wave feminism does not differ from the previous one to such a large extent as one might expect. The values and quests are similar; what, however, differs are the style and tactics and the drive of every single new generation to reach something.¹³⁹ Present-day young women’s lives across the racial spectrum are far from what the feminist foremothers imagined for them, trying to free women from the traps of femininity, and what their lives should be like—here lies one of the cores of discrepancies between the two waves. Instead of rejecting the “pink-packaged femininity” ultimately, for instance the Girlies hold tight to and attempt to subvert what once symbolized women’s oppression. Another reason is today’s young women simultaneously fight “the rigid stereotype of being too serious, too political, and seemingly asexual.” (Therefore, the Girlie culture aims to show that not wanting to be sexually exploited does not imply being asexual.¹⁴⁰) On the contrary, being able to claim they are both feminist and sexual becomes one of the key issues. Although their protest is a negation of the previous feminists’ achievements in a way, it can be perceived as a natural phenomenon resulting from a clash of two generations, and can even result in a greater diversity, despite not forming a stronger feminist movement yet.

¹³⁴ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 77.

¹³⁵ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 141.

¹³⁶ Qtd. in Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 161.

¹³⁷ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 236.

¹³⁸ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 139–140. Salt-N-Pepa is mentioned as a particular positive and popular example.

¹³⁹ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 129. For more information on the particular cultural phenomena that played a key role in shaping the Third Wave feminists’ youth, see *ibid.* 129–135.

¹⁴⁰ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 136–137.

Similarly to the Second Wave, the most important achievements are to be listed.¹⁴¹ The year 1991 witnessed a successful attempt to rekindle with feminism (or put a stop to postfeminist disempowerment) in the book *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf who, as a matter of fact, is consciously political and appeals to women who—put metaphorically—like to wear lipstick, but also stand up for themselves, yet are politically not conscious enough.¹⁴² It is equally important for this dissertation to refer to early 1992 Rebecca Walker’s response to *The New York Times*’s effort to declare an era of postfeminism.¹⁴³ In the *Ms. Magazine* she claimed, “I am not a postfeminism¹⁴⁴ feminist, I am the Third Wave.” By this and other statements, she expresses her concern about the contemporary state of things, realizing she owes a tangible action both to herself and fellow young women who are politically pre-conscious and therefore distanced from one another, which makes them more vulnerable.¹⁴⁵

The mainstream media which paid an enormous attention both to Wolf and Walker are, however, rightly criticized by Baumgardner and Richards for two reasons. First, the coverage focused on feminism “as if it were an autonomous construct” rather than taking into account what the concept represents. Second, the broadcasted and discussed feminist action was reduced to a few examples represented by stars and celebrities, ignoring the real issues of the respective period, which shed a misleading light at the entire movement.¹⁴⁶

The Internet magazines in general often provide a distorted picture of reality as well, turning into “more entertainment than investigative reporting.”¹⁴⁷ As Baumgardner and Richards explain, while the Internet magazines seem to look like their professional print world counterparts such as *Time* or *George*, they do not play by the same rules of journalism. What differs is that they rarely have fact-checking departments (because these are no longer perceived as necessary in the hasty process of production of new stories and articles), and are under enormous pressure to bring up fresh stories constantly. Consequently, online information presented in them can contain factual errors, and the misinformed “readers are too nomadic to hold the magazines accountable for them.”¹⁴⁸ What is more, another problem of the Internet is that it provides a limitless space for various thoughts of any kind, new authors, their peculiarities, prejudices, personal issues, and random hostility which can be combined with personal assaulting attacks. Meanwhile in the serious media offence caused ad hominem is much harder to allow to occur, the Internet “thrives on connection, but not human

¹⁴¹ The best-known Third Wave books are probably Rebecca Walker’s anthology *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and the Changing Face of Feminism* (1995), *Promiscuities: Struggle for Womanhood* (1998) by Naomi Walter, Baumgardner and Richard’s *Manifesta* (2000), Merri Lisa Johnson’s collection *Jane Sexes It Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire* (2002), Paula Kamen’s *Her Way: Young Women Remake the Sexual Revolution* from 2000.

¹⁴² She also deals with (dis)empowerment of women in another book, *Fire with Fire: How Power Feminism Will Change the 21st Century* (Random House UK, 1993), which is an appeal to women to embrace power; the book covers other topics, too such as politics and women’s sexual liberation.

¹⁴³ Rebecca Walker is a daughter of Alice Walker and a Jewish American lawyer, Mel Leventhal.

¹⁴⁴ Post-feminism (or postfeminism) is a reaction against some perceived contradictions and absences of the Second Wave one. It has been applied in a rather inconsistent way; it generally connotes the belief that feminism has already succeeded in eradicating sexism, making it fundamentally opposed to the Third Wave intention of a continuous struggle for women’s equality. The phenomenon will be dealt with in detail in the dissertation with the phenomenon of chick lit. For more information about the first occurrence of the word postfeminism (contrary to common beliefs that it emerged at the end of the 20th century) and its implications, see Stephanie Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (USA: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 153–154. More information is also to be found in Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987), 282.

¹⁴⁵ Qtd. in Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 77. Walker’s full explanation of her concept of the Third Wave is to be found in “Becoming the Third Wave,” in Barbara Ryan, *Identity Politics in the Women’s Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

¹⁴⁶ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 79.

¹⁴⁷ Janelle Brown qtd. in Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 107.

¹⁴⁸ Baumgardner and Richards. *Manifesta*, 106.

contact,” offering a potential space for offensive reactions of the readers if not writers.¹⁴⁹ The solution should be an adherence to basic standards and ethics of journalism as well as making a difference between presenting on facts in contrast with suggesting opinion.

The media played an indubitable part in transmitting “perhaps the most profound intraracial tensions around sexual politics that the modern African-American community had ever experienced.” In 1991, a year before *Waiting to Exhale* was published, President George Bush nominated Judge Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court who was subsequently accused of sexual harassment by Professor Anita Hill who worked under him at the Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), which led to televised hearings for several days in October of that year. The reaction to this, opposing the racist and sexist treatment of Hill, followed in less than a month in the form of an article in *The New York Times* entitled “African-American Women in Defence of Ourselves” which responded to the urgency of civil rights for disadvantaged groups in the U.S.¹⁵⁰ What is more, the statement drew attention to a long history of sexual abuse in which black women were stereotyped as “immoral, insatiable, perverse,” and the failure not to underestimate Hill’s sexual harassment charges due to the collective character of African American women.¹⁵¹

The importance of this scandal is indubitable, since—according to Paula Giddings—it was for the first time a sexual discourse within the African American community was not mediated by the question of racism.¹⁵² In other words, as Guy-Sheftall sums up, Hill’s public disclosure of a black-on-black sexual crime provided the catalyst for a broad-based, enlightened discussion of gender issues which has enormous potential for resolving a number of problems relating to sexual politics, male privilege, and unequal power relations within the black community.¹⁵³ What Hill simply did was to show African American women that there is no longer a need to remain silent about objectionable black male behaviour, keeping their face of racial solidarity within the community.

Simultaneously, however, in the 1990s, African American women also found themselves the targets of public attacks, much of which was directly caused by the above mentioned hearings and “propaganda associated with the issue of welfare reform and family values.”¹⁵⁴ In “Listening to the Voices of Black Feminism” E. Frances White expressed her belief that feminists need to revise the movement’s relationship to the concept of the family; to acknowledge that (for women of colour in general) “the family is not only a source of male dominance, but a source of resistance to racism as well.”¹⁵⁵

All taken into account, in this decade African American women became witnesses of a vivid public dialogue about their character. Coming out of the shadows and not being labelled

¹⁴⁹ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 106–107.

¹⁵⁰ Guy-Sheftall, “Black Feminism in the United States,” 306–307.

¹⁵¹ Robert Chrisman and Robert Allen, ed., *Court of Appeal: The Black Community Speaks Out on the Racial and Sexual Politics of Clarence Thomas vs. Anita Hill* (New York: Ballantine, 1992), 292. As Guy-Sheftall points out, although African American women’s voices were not present to a large extent as commentators during the hearings, “a number of important statements by progressive black women, many of whom are feminists, found their way in print in the aftermath of the controversial hearings.” These included, for instance, a special issue of SAGE, a collection of essays by Toni Morrison titled *Race-ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, as well as a number of essays and other texts published in *The Black Scholar*. Guy-Sheftall, “Black Feminism in the United States,” 307.

¹⁵² Paula Giddings, preface to *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Morrow, 2nd ed., 2009).

¹⁵³ Guy-Sheftall, “Black Feminism in the United States,” 307.

¹⁵⁴ Guy-Sheftall, “Black Feminism in the United States,” 307.

¹⁵⁵ E. Frances White, printed in *Radical America*, quoted in Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America* (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 239.

traitors of the community whose credibility would be doubted anymore, at the end of the decade, African American feminists provided useful insights for analyzing also broader issues outside the community. One of the major texts providing understanding to contemporary African American feminism is Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* from 1990, a ground-breaking theoretical analysis which suggests a fusion of activism and theory. The following basic topics resound throughout the book: the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression is reflected both in African American personal (domestic) lives and public (work) place; it is necessary for these women to internalize positive self-definitions, which must go hand-in-hand with rejecting the limiting, denigrating, and controlling stereotypical images; last but not least, the need for an active struggle among African American women to resist oppression and engage in individual as well as group empowerment. Together with bell hooks' *Ain't I a Woman* (published a decade earlier), this book established a solid base for further feminist intellectual activities.

Before the turn of the century, another important critic who attempts to combine a personal reflection with sound scholarship appeared. Karla F.C. Holloway in her *Codes of Conduct: Race, Ethics and the Color of Our Character* reminds the readers that despite the American emphasis put on morality and family values, there are still people who are judged by the colour of their skin. She describes her project as an examination of both ethics and ethnicity in culture, where they become one; this merging, termed as "eth(n)icity," makes her contemplate the moral character of a group.¹⁵⁶

Similarly to 1890s, the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality was accentuated both outside and inside the black community also in the 1990s and, as a matter of fact, Collins returns to this topic in detail in *Fighting Words* (1998), and continues her reflections in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (2004). One of the strongest feminist voices in 1990s showing the insanity of the racial system, Ann duCille, captures "the meaning and the merchandising of race and gender in contemporary society."¹⁵⁷ For her, race means both "a dividend and a continental divide."¹⁵⁸ Black women's involvement in American political life between 1961 and 2001 is analyzed by Duchess Harris in *Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Clinton* (2009), focusing on both on their achievements and failures in gaining political power.

After 2000, the Third Wave of feminism has taken similar interest in the relations between sexism and racism. Rebecca Walker openly deals with topics related to her own biracial status in *Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2000) or *One Big Happy Family: 18 Writers Talk About Open Adoption, Mixed Marriage, Polyamory, Househusbandry, Single Motherhood, and Other Realities of Truly Modern Love* (2009). Studies dedicated to black feminism abroad gain the attention, too. This new focus was displayed, for instance, by the translation of the first anthology of African American feminist texts in 2007 in *Black Feminism—Anthologie du féminisme africain-américain, 1975-2000*, edited by Elsa Dorlin.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ The complex fusion of race and ethics is, for instance, practiced on reading Philis Wheatley and Anita Hill across two centuries.

¹⁵⁷ Ann duCille, *Skin Trade* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996), 7.

¹⁵⁸ duCille, *Skin Trade*, 1.

¹⁵⁹ Elisa Dorlin, ed., *Black Feminism—Anthologie du féminisme africain-américain, 1975-2000* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007).

2.3 Feminism Today

As it was suggested in the opening lines of this chapter, one might ask “What does feminism mean anymore, anyway?”¹⁶⁰ Basically, feminism is exactly what the dictionary says: it is “the belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities as man” or “a movement that works to achieve equal rights for women.”¹⁶¹ Importantly enough, as Baumgardner and Richards add, it also means that women have “the right to know enough information to make informed choices about their lives.”¹⁶² In their opinion, there are three components of feminism: “It is a *movement*, meaning a group working to accomplish specific goals. Those goals are *social and political change*—implying that one must be engaged with the government and laws, as well as with social practices and beliefs. And implicit in these goals is access to sufficient information to enable women to make responsible choices.”¹⁶³ It also means to create an atmosphere of action in which people would be aware of the consequences resulting from their decisions; rooting out homophobia and racism can be seen as continuous goals as well. To sum up, in reality feminism does not restrict individuals, whatever they are, but it welcomes those who are politically conscious. And vice versa, as Baumgardner and Richards point out, one wants to be a feminist just because they want to be exactly who they are.¹⁶⁴

When Rebecca Walker spoke her mind for *The New York Times* in 1992, she meant to show her anger and awareness which had to be translated into tangible action.¹⁶⁵ She also explained what it means to be a feminist from her point of view: it is “to integrate an ideology of equality and female empowerment into the very fiber of my life. It is to search for personal clarity in the midst of systemic destruction, to join sisterhood with women where often we are divided, to understand power structures with the intention of challenging them.” In her opinion, it was exactly the kind of stand many of her peers were unwilling to take; therefore, her text was written as a “plea for *all women, especially the women of [her] generation, for the fight is far from over.*”¹⁶⁶

Equally important, it should be contemplated what feminism is not, as it is often unfortunately described by what it is not, which creates confusion. For instance, Baumgardner and Richards state that although humanism includes both women and men (and especially those who are not privileged), for them humanism implies “a retreat from feminism.” What is more, using humanism as a replacement for feminism is a misuse of the term, since theologically, it is a rejection of supernaturalism, not an embrace of equality between men and women, meanwhile feminism primarily “seeks to include *women* in human rights.”¹⁶⁷ They insist on this idea despite the fact that equality, in their eyes, is defined as “a balance between the male and the female with the intention of liberating the individual.”¹⁶⁸ In addition, feminism is not limited to discussions about sexual freedom, wages, man-hating, and/or chivalry. Still, these are people who put a distance from themselves and feminism, for they do not want to be associated with classic feminist stereotypes that have to do with looking down on the other sex, male bashing, hatred of sex, abandoning families, etc. In fact, any kind of hasty generalizing takes its toll. Last but not least, Baumgardner and Richards identify a behaviour of “injudicious niceness, which is a socialized disease” and often explains why

¹⁶⁰ Guin Turner qtd. in Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 56.

¹⁶¹ *Macmillan Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2002), 514.

¹⁶² Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 56.

¹⁶³ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 56.

¹⁶⁴ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 57.

¹⁶⁵ Rebecca Walker, “Becoming the Third Wave,” in *Identity Politics in the Women’s Movement*, ed. Barbara Ryan (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 80.

¹⁶⁶ Walker, “Becoming the Third Wave,” 80.

¹⁶⁷ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 57.

¹⁶⁸ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 56.

women are reluctant to attempt for equality as one of the significant obstacles in the social change process.¹⁶⁹

All in all, the Third Wave's feminists' goal is not to insert women into traditionally men's roles and vice versa but give women the possibility to break the glass ceiling, making sure that at least rough balance between men and women of all races, classes, ethnicities, religious beliefs, sexualities, etc. is attained. Doing the former would mean replacing one set of inequalities with another instead of changing the system at all, which by no means has to do with equality.

To really comprehend what feminism is today as well as to debunk those above outlined stereotypes of feminists, one must go back to the roots of this movement. A famous historian of feminism, Gerda Lerner, argues that the only constant in women's history is that it is lost and rediscovered, which is repeated,¹⁷⁰ owing to the fact that much of the information on the Second Wave feminism is difficult to reach and therefore often fragmented, or mythologized in a way. Missing the basic concepts and aims of the feminist pioneers leads to actually being disconnected from feminism. The knowledge of the cornerstones of feminism such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* or Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* would enable today's women to make connections and fully understand the original aims of the movement. In addition, a sense of continuity of the movement¹⁷¹ as a result of being well-informed would lessen women's somewhat unlucky need to rebuild their history. Similarly, Alice Rossi in *The Feminist Papers* encourages women to act, for "the public heroines of one generation are the private heroines of the next," meaning that people who achieve great goals in one era are likely to be replicated on the local level for the next.¹⁷² And, after all, it has always been female bonding that somehow contributed to women's overcoming whatever obstacles were on their way.

The Third Wave of feminism has been saturated with the confidence of having more opportunities and less sexism. Unfortunately the expectations of taken for granted equality exceeded reality in a significant way. The British "new feminist"¹⁷³ Natasha Walter shows effectively how many women "relaxed and believed that most arguments around equality had been won, and that there were no significant barriers to further progress." Instead of having reached equality between men and women irrespectively of race, the present day hypersexualized culture reflected and exaggerated the deeper imbalances in power in the Western society, which led to a state she aptly calls "a stalled revolution."¹⁷⁴ The fake rhetoric of empowerment by means of the female body becomes very obvious when exposed to the omnipresent cult of youth. One of the dangers of the popular culture in general is the ban put on women's aging and its subsequent degradation of older women's bodies regardless of colour.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁹ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 65.

¹⁷⁰ Qtd. in Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 151. Cf Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy* (USA: Oxford UP, 1994).

¹⁷¹ Baumgardner and Richards, among others, see continuity of the feminist movement as vital for women of various age groups: "Pragmatically, recounting the stories of feminism shows older women that the next generation is aware of their struggles, and shows younger women that their rebellion has a precedent. Having our history might keep feminists from having to reinvent the wheel every fifty years or so." *Manifesta*, 68.

¹⁷² Qtd. in Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 84.

¹⁷³ Cf. Natasha Walter, *The New Feminism* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1998).

¹⁷⁴ Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago Press, 2010), 8–9. Lisa Belkin calls the same phenomenon "the opt-out revolution," cf. "The Opt-Out Revolution," *New York Times*, accessed November 15, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/26/magazine/26WOMEN.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹⁷⁵ In case of Girlies it becomes even more visible, for the whole concept is based on embracing girlish values—therefore, they cannot age or mature.

As for the solution, to the necessary consciousness of women's place in society drawn from the battles yet won Baumgardner and Richards again refer to feminist consciousness, in other words knowledge of what one is doing and why one is doing it.¹⁷⁶ First, it is precisely this lack of consciousness that slows down the process of social transformation. Second, many women who even consider themselves feminists are on a passive "automatic pilot," moving along according to directions of their predecessors but towards vaguely defined goals and/or ends that have been determined more by opportunism than by feminism.¹⁷⁷ The current state of things may also be caused by a lack of outstanding personalities, leaders, or clear-cut icons.

What the media fail to present is that the above mentioned goals of feminism and expressions of Third Wave activism are carried out by individual women on a daily basis, even though it is on a small scale. In fact, they do things their mothers and grandmothers never even dreamed of doing. Still, a large amount of young women are simply apathetic or do not seem to make sense of the existing restrictions of their daily lives.¹⁷⁸ It is the young insiders, the "pro-choiced-but-passive"¹⁷⁹ women themselves who must share messages to stir young feminists. As it becomes apparent, this problem of feminism nowadays does not lie in the fact that young women would not identify with its goals but the steps and measures they take are rarely reflected back in the mainstream media, as these hardly manage to pay sufficient attention to individuals' everyday actions. Moreover, in order to make feminism work nowadays, it is necessary to achieve certain degree of consciousness and security as well as to have possibilities at one's disposal that would be capable of shaping the mainstreams. Simultaneously, as Baumgardner and Richards object—similarly to bell hooks in the 1980s or Rebecca Walker a decade later—the goal of liberation means a radical restructuring of the society, that is, a goal women can hardly achieve from its margins which, on the other hand, they simultaneously use to gain some perspective.¹⁸⁰

The above suggested lack of interest in the political in wider social-theoretical debates¹⁸¹ (as targeted and repudiated not only by Rebecca Walker, Baumgardner and Richards, or Natasha Walter¹⁸²) necessarily results in a general loss of sense of political correctness, which favours demeaning, trivialised, and sexist ways of seeing women. As Katharine Viner puts it, to accept that the personal is still political means to be realistic, for particular political changes are "tangible and measurable and economic realities have a massive effect on the whole of our lives." The personal—body image, intimate relationships, and women's portrayal in the media regardless of their race—cannot be ignored in this respect.¹⁸³ The goal remains political, attempting to undo "gender imbalances and move a step closer towards bringing about gender emancipation and equality."¹⁸⁴ To conclude, in many ways the personal is more political than ever.

¹⁷⁶ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 83. The two scholars refer to a 1998 *Time/CNN* poll from which it became apparent that more than fifty percent of women between the age of eighteen and thirty-four claimed they were in favour of values but did not necessarily call themselves feminists. *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 83.

¹⁷⁸ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 138. One of the essential drawbacks of movements such as the Girlies results from their disconnection from the previous ones. What prevents the Girlie movement in particular from becoming more organized and efficient is that "it mistakes politics for the Second Wave institutions as well, rather than seeing it as inherent in feminism." *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 86.

¹⁸⁰ Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 81.

¹⁸¹ Mills and Mullany illustrate this shift from a collective political action towards a more individual one by Lazar's terms of "we-feminism" to "I-feminism." Mills and Mullany, *Language, Gender, Feminism*, 4.

¹⁸² For more information about Walter's oscillation between the personal and the political, see *The New Feminism*, 55–82.

¹⁸³ Viner, "the personal is still political," in *On the Move*, 26.

¹⁸⁴ Mills and Mullany, *Language, Gender, Feminism*, 4.

3 Black (Feminist) Literary Criticism

In other words, it is not that black women, in the past, have had nothing to say, but rather that they have had no say. The absence of black female voices has allowed others to inscribe, or write, and ascribe to, or read them. Mae Gwendolyn Brooks¹⁸⁵

From the margins various strategies may be deployed, and varied, indeed contradictory, propositions set forth. Making our positionality explicit is not to claim a “privileged” status for our positions. (...) Making our positionality explicit is, rather, a response to the false universalism that long defined critical practice and rendered black women at their writing mute. Cheryl A. Wall¹⁸⁶

The chapter aims to give a historical overview of African American critics before, of, and after the 1990s, as well as to explain their demands on literature written by black women writers. It will become even more obvious from it that the women of colour who have to do with literary criticism also engage in critique of the atmosphere and conditions in which any creative cultural endeavours originate. Taking into account the potential threads and traps awaiting African American women in relation to literature, their task remains to seek equilibrium between legitimate black feminist inquiry, and what could be labelled as “culture of complaint” that is likely to be associated with any inquiry of a group once disadvantaged to such a large extent.

After some general notes on several important phenomena related to black (feminist) criticism for the most part, it is the task of this chapter to put emphasis on the achievements of the most outstanding representatives of African American literary (and especially feminist) criticism,¹⁸⁷ as they have engaged with what seems to be its most interesting issues since the second half of the 20th century. First, these are suggestions of how to free themselves from the confinement of institutionalised language of poststructuralist theory, and finding tools for examining the history of black women’s literature; second, the interlocking debates over identity, female tradition, and formal innovations become another focal point of black feminist criticism in the respective period. A special attention will of course be paid especially to the 1990s, the period some of whose essential works and ideas were outlined in the previous chapter on black feminism.

3.1 Black (Feminist) Literary Criticism: Some General Notes and Basic Issues

As far as the importance of sharing the African Americans female experience from the viewpoint of literary criticism is concerned, at the first sight, Elaine Showalter’s¹⁸⁸ theory of reading black women writers’ achievements in this dissertation as gynocriticism¹⁸⁹ seems

¹⁸⁵ Mae Gwendolyn Brooks, “Speaking in Tongues,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 125.

¹⁸⁶ Wall, “Introduction: Taking Positions and Changing Words,” in *Changing our Own Words*, 2.

¹⁸⁷ Such approach, however, does not mean that other than black feminist women-centred critics will be excluded or not mentioned. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is a good example of an irreplaceable black male feminist critic.

¹⁸⁸ Elaine Showalter is one of the most significant U.S. critics of the second half of the 20th century. In her influential book *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977), she re/discovers the development of a tradition of women’s fiction from the early 19th century to the 1960s, paying attention to numerous underestimated women novelists who contributed to the craft of women’s writing.

¹⁸⁹ Showalter coined this term in her essay “Toward a Feminist Poetics.” In the field of literary criticism, she describes the development of feminist theory as having three phases. The first one is the “feminist critique,” in which the feminist reader examines the ideologies behind literary phenomena; the second one is called “gynocriticism,” in which the “woman is producer of textual meaning;” Showalter names the last phase “gender theory,” in which the “ideological inscription and the literary effects of the sex/gender system are explored.”

more than applicable. Gynocriticism offers a historical study of women writers as a distinct literary tradition.¹⁹⁰ It refers to a criticism that “constructs a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories.”¹⁹¹ As a matter of fact, the first feminist discussions in general arose over “the relative priority of rereading male-authored texts” and by the subsequent “affirming [of] a woman’s literary tradition.” It was the success of gynocriticism that provoked the first radical questioning by other, namely black, working-class, lesbian, etc. women who expressed their discontent with the universalising concept of “woman.”¹⁹²

Unfortunately, Showalter takes an essentialist and exclusive (if not elitist) approach, leaving out lesbian authors and—more important for this dissertation—women of colour, for which she has been widely criticized. And as Morris adds, gynocriticism can scarcely acknowledge the complexity of the issue of authorial intention, as not all women-centred texts can be assumed to be consciously and deliberately feminist texts “in the sense of the definition of a political agenda.”¹⁹³ Gynocriticism, despite its providing an oppositional attitude to the negative “feminist critique” of male texts, consequently, is not to be applied to the selected books.

Criticism as such in the 1980s did not deal solely with questions of aesthetic and political evaluation of literary works of course; it also engaged in a dialogue between “a humanist individualist feminism associated with American tradition and French-derived poststructural feminism.”¹⁹⁴ It made feminist literary criticism not only women-centred (and therefore dealing with works depicting women’s experiences above all—that is, works about women—and by women), but it also aimed to bring a social change, as explained in the chapter on feminism. Morris sees the black feminist criticism as an enriching force for the feminist literary aesthetics and theory, especially at the end of the 20th century through the debates within feminism over two crucial topics: identity and authority.¹⁹⁵ One of the touchstones of these debates aimed at mainstream feminist criticism became the concept of “the woman” as a category supposedly speaking for all women.¹⁹⁶

Moreover, Jane Spencer’s critical study *The Rise of the Woman Novelist* (1986) could serve as a good example of how to prove that African American women writer’s artistic invention has consistently resisted confinement. In her book Spencer illustrates how seemingly most conservative forms (namely the novel) may be used as tools in women writers’ hands in a rather progressive manner. She argues convincingly that particular examples of women’s writing, first, produced some of the genre’s most substantial achievements and modifications; and, next, contain features that shatter their deep-rooted overt moral conservatism. It results from her findings that women writers are less likely to be intimidated by male traditions than to challenge and shape them according to their needs.

“Towards a Feminist Poetics,” in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (Croom Helm, 1979), 25–36. For a more concise overview of the three phases, see Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 66–67.

¹⁹⁰ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998), 18.

¹⁹¹ Elaine Showalter, *New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 131.

¹⁹² Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 164.

¹⁹³ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 86.

¹⁹⁴ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 164.

¹⁹⁵ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 165.

¹⁹⁶ At the same time, however, until fairly recently mainstream feminism has predominantly tended to speak about white, middle-class, heterosexual, culturally, economically, and professionally privileged women. Naturally, the African American, lesbian, underclass, etc. women felt an urge to cope with such reservations of mainstream feminism. For more details, see the chapter on feminism.

As it is also implied by Spencer, when it comes to particular genres feminist critics' efforts to establish, explore, and describe in detail women's tradition of writing, the novel is the preferred literary genre. Despite its less prestigious status at its beginning,¹⁹⁷ it seems to be the literary form women writers in general made their own. (Still, mainstream literary criticism paid little attention to the African American women writers' novel well until the 1970s.) Besides,

[f]or a people prevented from reading and writing by law, it is not surprising that the novel writing and novelists have since become highly valued within African American culture. The very idea of "African American novel" then *and* now precipitates an intense debate about the form and function of any belletristic genre. Embedded in the term is a history of achievement and a cultural heritage that raises as many questions as answers.¹⁹⁸

As countless critical studies prove, it would be a mistake to claim women writers have not been equally involved in poetry as well, though. For African American women writers especially the poetic traditions associated with spoken or sung forms with orality such as folk songs, chants, riddles, children's rhymes, and other forms played a vital role. Women's centrality to these forms is worth mentioning in two respects: due to the way they contributed to their flourishing but, equally important, they functioned as sources of regenerative power and imaginative vitality for them, their audience, and later also to the more prestigious forms of literature.¹⁹⁹

Another essential question African American criticism asks is whether women's writing is essentially different from writing by men. Are the aspects of style, form, and explored topics of African American women writers, as suggested by critics, seen to be inherent, constituting, and even identifying or are they to be regarded as what Morris describes as "an oppositional aesthetic"?²⁰⁰ Numerous attempts throughout the history of women writer's criticism have proved that attempts to construct an essentially female aesthetics can actually lead to a distorted picture of women's writing. Especially if intimate, exclusively female experience and biology are taken into consideration, as Morris demonstrates, "the problem is that it tends to reproduce a female aesthetic as an aesthetic of *suffering*."²⁰¹ And, as it will be indicated continuously throughout the dissertation, suffering and victimization should probably be the last remedies most of the acclaimed popular African American women writers have at their disposal. Last but not least, overtly intense emphasis put on the linking of women's imagery to the female body results in numerous feminist critics' opinion that women's works on such topics give them an exclusive ability to depict bodily subject matters.²⁰²

¹⁹⁷ Morris observes that for most of the 18th century and even into the 19th one, the novel, having been without classical origins, was perceived "as a relatively new genre" and therefore "the least prestigious of literary forms ... [and] suited for the light entertainment of women readers. Thus there was less resistance to women taking up this literary form than any other." *Literature and Feminism*, 78.

¹⁹⁸ Graham, introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 1.

¹⁹⁹ In comparison with African American women (and other groups of oppressed people in general, of course) who were denied literacy for a long time and therefore oral forms of literature became the most and only available ones for them, "[white educated] women have found it particularly intimidating to claim entry into this elevated discourse," Morris observes in connection with women's sense of distance from the language of poetry. *Literature and Feminism*, 79. Cf. Cora Kaplan, "Language and Gender," in *Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism* (Verso, 1986), 69–93.

²⁰⁰ What is more, the same scholar raises a noteworthy question whether such kind of strategies is expected to be encountered in "the literature of any subculture responding to a largely hostile dominant group." She comes to the conclusion that the above described features (namely literary forms, themes, and preoccupations) are rather to be approached as an aesthetic of opposition that something typical and universal of (white) women's writing. Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 84.

²⁰¹ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 84. Emphasis added.

²⁰² Cf. Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 85.

3.2 Development of the Contemporary African American Criticism

Houston A. Baker, a significant black male critic who was among the first ones to bring the insights of poststructuralist theory to the study of black literature,²⁰³ provides a basic classification of African American criticism into three phases between the 1950s/60s and early 1980s in his highly regarded essay titled “Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature.” In his opinion, the 1950s and early 60s were “Integrationist,” in which black authors of both sexes believed that entry into the mainstream of American culture would be not only possible but also desirable. The next generation was dominated by the “Black Aesthetic,” closely linked to the Black Power Movement, and its quest for a unique black identity and culture in contrast with the long-existing institutionalised American racism and its consequences, such as, e.g., demeaning stereotypes of both black men and women. The period is significant because it meant an ultimate celebration of authenticity of all forms of black cultural activity; at the same time, it remains one of the most turbulent periods as far as the relationships within the African American community are concerned. Third, at the end of 1970s, the Movement gave way to “Reconstructionism,” which lasted until 1980s. According to Baker, reconstructionists are critics influenced by European poststructuralism, and therefore should be aware of the danger of essentialist totalising definitions of identity. Instead of trying to reflect the truth of the black experience or using literary works to affirm black identity as in the previous phase, for these critics “black” is to be rejected as a mere binary opposition to “white,” an idea that logically resulted in a dilemma of whether to turn away from blackness as a source of pride.²⁰⁴ Later, this approach was heavily criticised for plaguing the African American black academy, for instance by McDowell in “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism.”

Morris’ question “Where do [black] women writers figure in the forty-year history of Afro-American criticism?” suggests poignantly their absence in the history of male criticism and writing.²⁰⁵ Since the early 1970s, Barbara Smith—one of the earliest voices and pioneers of black feminist and lesbian criticism—has not only played a significant role in building and sustaining black feminism in the United States but has been active as a critic, teacher, lecturer, author, scholar, and propagator of black feminist thought. Her landmark essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” was written as late as in 1977, and first published in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* five years later. She opens it with saying, “I do not know where to begin. ... All segments of the literary world—whether establishment, progressive, black, female, or lesbian—do not know, or least act as if they do not know, that black women writers and black lesbian writers exist. ... It seems overwhelming to break such a massive silence.”²⁰⁶ Smith exposes the double oppression of racism and sexism, speaking for an African American literary tradition that had been devalued and excluded from the Western literary canon; in addition, her lesbianism makes her situation even more complicated.

Smith’s awareness of the role power and privilege play in determining literary values makes her simply essential for the black feminist criticism. As it was suggested in the chapter on feminism, in the Black Aesthetic period (the 1960s and 70s) the policy of black empowerment was male-dominated: black manhood was represented in terms of power and sexuality, rejecting the suspicions within the U.S. racist society. At the same time, women

²⁰³ Baker became the first African American president of the Modern Language Association in 1992. Farah Jasmine Griffin, “Thirty Years of Black American Literature and Literary Studies: A Review,” 167.

²⁰⁴ Cf. a revised version of the essay: Houston A. Baker Jr., “Discovering America, Afro-American Literary Criticism, and the Study of Expressive Culture,” in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), 64–112.

²⁰⁵ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 176.

²⁰⁶ Smith, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” in *Speaking of Gender*, 56–70.

who objected to the male literary chauvinism, or who were “reluctant to perform a secondary and nurturing role to writing men” were more than susceptible to accusations of betrayal of African American values and breaking the solidarity within the community.²⁰⁷

There is an important milestone in the history of African American literary studies to be mentioned at this point. In 1974 African American studies at the University of Pennsylvania were founded, which played a central role in the development of the field of black American studies, particularly in the first decades of its existence. It took some years before its fruits were harvested, taken from the viewpoint of African American feminist criticism; still, its importance remains undeniable, especially as a place where students have been given a chance to engage in studying also African American poetry. Distinguished writers such as John Edgar Wideman, David Bradley, Lorene Gary, or the poet Elizabeth Alexander graduated there; the university produced a generation of remarkable literary critics, namely Michael Awkward, Lindon Barrett, Nicole King, Kim Hall, Jennifer Devere Brody, and Stephen Best. During Houston Baker’s tenure, the Centre for the Study of Black Literature and Culture became a site of various conferences and lectures that contributed to the progress of this particular field of study.²⁰⁸ Baker, together with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Hortense Spillers, Mae Henderson, and others²⁰⁹ are related to the Centre.

By the late 1970s some critics began to refuse the politically oriented approach of the Black Arts movement thinkers. Stepto and Gates encouraged a “move away from so-called sociological readings” of African American literature, which enabled wider ranks of students and scholars to deal with it.²¹⁰ And, as Cheryl A. Wall sums up, “if white feminists were apt to locate themselves on the margins of discourse, Washington and other black feminist critics in the 1970s and early 1980s tended to position themselves and the writing they addressed at the center. It proved to be an enabling perspective.”²¹¹ Last but not least, emphasis on African history and culture, as well as the manifestations of African culture in black American society remained the central focus of the scholars of the period.²¹²

Since the 1980s, African American feminist critics have asserted a powerful presence, establishing a tradition of black women writers who had been long forgotten. A precise and well-argued picture of how African American women writers fell “victim to arbitrary selection” before 1970,²¹³ their writings having been either omitted or judged inaccurately by preconceived critics,²¹⁴ is given by Deborah E. McDowell in her essay “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism” published in 1980. She focuses on selected writings of black feminist critics, discussing “their strengths and weaknesses and suggesting new directions toward which the criticism might move and pitfalls that it might avoid.”²¹⁵ Beside defining the

²⁰⁷ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 176.

²⁰⁸ Griffin, “Thirty Years of Black American Literature and Literary Studies: A Review,” 166–167.

²⁰⁹ This group of scholars is also known as the Norton generation, for they edited the Norton Anthology of African American Literature in 1997. Griffin also emphasizes their importance due to the institutionalisation of black literary studies in the last decades of the 20th century. Griffin, “Thirty Years of Black American Literature and Literary Studies: A Review,” 167.

²¹⁰ Cf. *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction* (1990) edited by Fisher and Stepto or *Black Literature and Black Literary Theory* by Gates and Anozie from 1984. Griffin, “Thirty Years of Black American Literature and Literary Studies: A Review,” 167.

²¹¹ Wall, “Introduction: Taking Positions and Changing Words,” in *Changing our Own Words*, 4.

²¹² Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 35.

²¹³ Deborah E. McDowell, “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism,” *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 14, no. 4 (Winter 1980): 153.

²¹⁴ Interestingly enough, these include both early white female Anglo-American critics such as Patricia Meyer Spacks and black male ones, for instance Robert Stepto (African American women were completely absent from the table of contents of his *From Behind the Veil: A Study of African-American Narrative*), Robert Bone, or David Littlejohn. McDowell, “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism,” 153–154.

²¹⁵ McDowell, “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism,” 154.

methodology, as she suggests, black feminist critics need to specify the extent to which their criticism intersects with that of their white colleagues, instead of merely challenging them; which is possible to do only if informed well about black culture.²¹⁶ Similarly, McDowell expresses her belief that the immediate concern of African American feminist critics lies in developing a fuller understanding of black women writers who have not yet received the critical attention but also in a throughout examination of what has been written by African American male authors.²¹⁷ In the 1980s, while Alice Walker or Sonia Sanchez are taking their readers on imaginary journey back to Africa in their fiction, examination of the manifestations of African culture in African American folk traditions emerges as a new topic of black feminist criticism of the period.²¹⁸ In 1984 Houston A. Baker publishes *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, an important study of a blues-based literary tradition.

In *In Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) Walker addresses the same topic as Barbara Christian²¹⁹ later in her most famous critical study *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition* from 1980. Similarly important, Christian (as summed up in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*), who became a symbol of the widespread reaction against the rise of theory already in the 1970s, identified in her scholarly activities with an earlier 20th-century tradition of African American literary critics who put emphasis on the practice of literature, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, etc. (In their opinion, theory becomes “a more dynamic rather than static activity, embedded in stories, riddles, proverbs, and play with language.”²²⁰) By these debates and other scholarly activities African American feminist critics contributed significantly to the debate with poststructuralism. In short, in this decade black feminist critics made significant contributions in terms of restoring the tradition, but also reached further by “rethink[ing] the very concept of tradition,” taking into consideration also African American women’s novels which seemed not to exist in intertextual relation.²²¹

These and other developments are for instance outlined by Cheryl A. Wall in the introduction to *Changing our Own Words* (1990). She stresses the importance of the contributors of the collection, pointing at their professional commitment and borrowing from Audre Lorde the conviction that “black women’s writings has been for [them] ‘necessary bread.’”²²² She explains what black feminist critics’ work consist of: in order to make sense of what they deal with, they should engage in reading texts which remained uninterpreted for a long time; after or concurrent with these readings should come “more relational [, that is

²¹⁶ McDowell, “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism,” 155–156.

²¹⁷ McDowell, “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism,” 157.

²¹⁸ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 35.

²¹⁹ It might be of some interest that she became the first African American woman to be granted tenure at UC Berkeley in 1978.

²²⁰ Vincent B. Leitch, general ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W&W Norton Company, 2001), 2255–2256. Her discussion of the role of literary theory is for instance very visible in “The Race for Theory” from 1988. She argues that privileging the European poststructuralist theory, Gates or Baker basically overlooked (or even suppressed) the traditionally diverse theorising among African American thinkers. Christian explains that she herself did not pay enough attention to the Western philosophers’ takeover in the literary world, feeling there were “more pressing and interesting things to do, such as reading and studying the history of black women.” Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Spring, 1988): 67.

²²¹ Wall, “Introduction: Taking Positions and Changing Words,” in *Changing our Own Words*, 6. Washington suggests a similar idea in her afterword to *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition (Everywoman: Studies in History, Literature, and Culture)*, ed. Marjorie Lee Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Indiana UP, 1985).

²²² Wall, “Introduction: Taking Positions and Changing Words,” in *Changing our Own Words*, 1.

contextual,] readings that put individual texts into dialogue,” in which she agrees with McDowell.²²³

Another, far more painful topic, resulting from black feminist critics’ denial of being marginalised, is their endeavour to fully embrace “a sense of identity as contingent, constructed and performative.” In “Living Memory,” Toni Morrison contends racism as a pathological phenomenon about which there is nothing celebratory rather than “a discourse to be reconstructed,”²²⁴ pointing at the total dislocation and loss of identity. She observes that “in terms of confronting where the world is now, black women had to deal with ‘post-modern’ problems in the nineteenth century and earlier. ... Certain kinds of dissolution, the loss and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability.”²²⁵ In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” she argues for the importance of autobiographical forms for African American literature as something that unites individual and group identity, drawing a line between the individual’s life and the life of the tribe.²²⁶ In this respect, any author’s identity is not regarded as unitary but as “we,” which is “disturbing to people and critics who view the artist as the supreme individual.”²²⁷ As Morris sums up, for Morrison identity is always a political concept based on the community as social group.²²⁸ These and other opinions echo in Morrison’s literary works as well, as it will be discussed in the chapter on the African American literary context.

To summarise the decade, Sherley Anne Williams’ words from a paper presented at the African Literature Association Conference in 1987 can be used.

Feminist criticism ... challenges the fundamental theoretical assumptions of literary history and criticism by demanding a radical rethinking and revisioning of the conceptual grounds of literary study that have been based almost entirely on male literary experiences. Some of the implications of this radical revisioning have already been realized in Afro-American literature. The works of forgotten black women are being resurrected²²⁹ and critics are at work revising the slighting, often misinformed critical opinions of their works. We have a fuller understanding of these writers because feminist criticism has begun to eliminate much of the phallogentrism from our readings of their work and to recover the female aesthetics said to distinguish female creativity from male.²³⁰

In 1990 the New Black Aesthetic era begins and Henry Louis Gates Jr. becomes a part of the effort to resurrect, explain, and canonise the African American women’s literary heritage. He put together a unique collection of essays, *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, dealing with literature which ranges from an enlightened re-reading of the 18th century poet Phyllis Wheatley to interviews with and expositions of such contemporary poets and novelists as Gwendolyn Brooks, Octavia Butler, and Rita Dove. His aim is to “demonstrate explicitly how the texts of black women configure into a tradition, both thematically and structurally.”

²²³ Cf. Wall, “Introduction: Taking Positions and Changing Words,” in *Changing our Own Words*, 8.

²²⁴ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 177.

²²⁵ Toni Morrison, “Living Memory,” *City Limits* (31 Mar–7 Apr 1988): 11. Qtd. in Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 177.

²²⁶ Toni Morrison, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” in *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*, ed. Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford UP with Open University, 1990), 306.

²²⁷ Toni Morrison, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” in Dennis Walder, ed., *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents* (Oxford: Oxford UP with Open University, 1990), 330.

²²⁸ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 177.

²²⁹ McDowell’s Beacon Press series on black women’s fiction reissued a number of out-of-print novels, for example *The Street* by Anne Petry, *One of the Family*, and *Iola Leroy*; Rutgers University reissued *Quicksand* and *Passing* by Nella Larsen. In 1987 several important works on African American women writers were published, for example Jean Fagan Yellin’s definitive edition on *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, or Hazel Carby’s priceless work *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Novelist*. Mary Helen Washington, “The Darkened Eye Restored,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 40. Having these texts at their disposal, black American feminist critics were able to trace what Barbara Smith termed the thematic, stylistic, and linguistic commonalities in African American women’s writing.

²³⁰ Sherley Anne Williams, “Some Implications of Womanist Theory,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 69.

By means of revisionist approach applied to the texts themselves, the tradition is defined and emerges in the book.²³¹

In the same anthology of critical essays Gates asks himself a basic question, i.e., what effect the explosion of black women's writing had upon scholarship has had. He stresses the growing attention and institutionalisation of African American literature in traditional English departments as concomitant with the growth of black women's literature. His opinion is shared by Baker who foresees that "the convergence of feminist and Afro-American theoretical formulations offers the most challenging nexus for scholarship in the coming years." In addition, he is aware of the fact that it will result in a further reshaping of literary canon as "forgotten, neglected, or suppressed texts are rediscovered."²³² The enormous audience consisting predominantly of African Americans but also women of other skin colour has resulted in a creation of a market which seems "larger and more consistent than that enjoyed by black authors since perhaps the abolitionist movement." And, needless to say in this respect, in the 1980s and 90s, the production of text by black women was followed by criticism by and about black women to a similarly large extent. Works by scholars such as Barbara Christian, Hazel Carby,²³³ Valerie Smith, Gloria Hull, Mae Henderson, Susan Willis, Barbara Smith, Deborah McDowell, Trudier Harris, Houston Baker, Gloria Watkins, Barbara Johnson, and by many others were published, republished, or scheduled to appear soon.²³⁴

Similarly important, in his attempt to catch the "polyphony of voices—female and male, black and white, gay and straight—that his anthology seeks to present, Gates admits that the newer critics learned from some of the earlier faults of both black nationalist and women's movements. In the introduction, he explains the reasons for black feminists' embrace of the politics of inclusion, since black women had never responded with a counter-politics of exclusion, themselves having been excluded from representational authority for a very long time.²³⁵

Just to outline briefly what *Reading Black, Reading Feminism* contains in the first section of the book titled "Constructing a Tradition," a unique place is occupied by Mary Helen Washington²³⁶ with her interest in the rebirth of black women's writings in "The Darkened Eye Restored: Notes Toward a Literary History of Black Women" where she rejects and transcends male-centred literary history, which she sees not as an act of repudiation but enlightenment. Barbara Christian suggests a critique of the often uncritically received so-called "high" culture in black feminists academia, urging them to "look low" and "retrieve that low ground,"²³⁷ that is to return to the vernacular upon which the African American literary tradition is founded to a large extent in "The Highs and Lows of Feminist Criticism." Michelle Wallace whose *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (mentioned in the chapter on feminism) proved to be a substantial intervention in the generation of contemporaneous black women's literary movement, examines the revolutionary challenge black feminist creativity could represent to white male cultural hegemony. Sherley Anne

²³¹ Cf. Gates, introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 7.

²³² Baker, qtd. in Gates, introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 4.

²³³ Carby's *Reconstructing Black Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1989) offers one of the earliest and most comprehensive studies on black female writers including Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, Anna Cooper, and Ida B. Wells among others.

²³⁴ Cf. Gates, introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 5.

²³⁵ Gates, introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 7.

²³⁶ Griffin sees Washington not only as a pioneering figure who was among those who entered elite, predominantly white institutions, but also as someone who engaged in "archaeological work of location and republishing fiction of black writers." "Thirty Years of Black American Literature and Literary Studies: A Review," 167.

²³⁷ Barbara Christian, "The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism," in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 44.

Williams advocates for the womanist perspective and its ability to illuminate people's understanding of both women and men under patriarchy. Hazel Carby's "The Quicksands of Representation: Rethinking Black Cultural Politics" offers distinct political and discursive senses of representation in black writing, contrasting Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset who, in her opinion, adapted but did not go beyond the form of the romance. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson offers linguistic insights of Mikhail Bakhtin into tracing the interplay of glossolalia and heteroglossia.

The second part of the book, titled *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, offers numerous discussions of various topics and black authors, such as Barbara E. Johnson's response to Sherley Anne Williams' attempts to reread the representation of black males in the African American canon in the feminist manner. Other subject matters examined by famous names among whom there are Elizabeth-Fox Genovese, Selwyn R. Cudjoe, bell hooks, Marianne Hirsch, Valerie Smith, etc. deal with particular African American authors (both prosodists and poets)²³⁸ and phenomena related to their writing such as autobiographical writings; community, class, and patriarchy; romance, marginality, and matrilineage; breaking the opposition between the private and public; the nature of the feminine and its redefinition; the marginal versus central with respect to conventionality, and so on.

The year 1994 bore witness to the publication of three important books. The first one is *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, edited by Angelyn Mitchell in which some of the essays from *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* reappeared. The second one is Madhu Dubey's *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* where she continues launching a comprehensive interrogation of black aesthetic discourse and its relationship to both African American women novelists and literary criticism. She offers selected novel reviews and a critique of what she terms "black feminine identity."²³⁹ The third book is *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests: Defining African-centered Literary Criticism* by Joyce A. Joyce, which surely deserves attention.

Joyce's outstanding project lies in an intense and continuous effort to establish connections of literary theory, criticism, and characteristics indigenous to African-American literature with those of African origin in order to grasp them in their richness, which is something Maya Angelou and others only started gently in the 1970s.²⁴⁰ She does so on the basis of her proud statement that

[i]n the contemporary African-American novel, a precise parallel exists between meaning, mode of expression, and ideology. Traditional Euro-American literary tools fall short of unearthing the total craft of these novels. Yet, in order to appreciate these works fully, the reader and literary critic must bring them to a knowledge of African-American cultural, social and political history.²⁴¹

At the same time, she admits that the intellectual contributions of Africans and African Americans have yet not "become a part of the integral network of Euro-American intellectual thought."²⁴² It is, therefore, her aim to challenge the trends in contemporaneous cultural and literary history.

²³⁸ These include for instance Philis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs, W. E. B. du Bois, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, Gloria Naylor, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Octavia Butler, etc.

²³⁹ Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (USA: Indiana UP, 1994), 14–32.

²⁴⁰ As it was stated above on several occasions (and as also Joyce notifies), since the 1960s African American literature and criticism adopted the artistic criteria established by the European and American white hegemony, which was a concession demanded by intellectual and cultural forces.

²⁴¹ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 1.

²⁴² She also points at the contradiction between the 1990s' sparsity of African Americans with Ph.D. degrees and the "Great Migration" of blacks to predominantly white institutions. Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 4 and 291.

Joyce's importance lies in two endeavours. First, she provides a detailed reading of how and why black American scholars shaped their ideas constantly to satisfy the hegemony while the hegemony assumed that its intellectual thoughts were connected with the interests of black Americans, drawing a parallel between the oppressor and the oppressed.²⁴³ Second, and more important, she makes accessible alternate approach of those African, African American, (such as bell hooks and Sonia Sanchez) and Caribbean scholars who have held quite different stances.

A year later Deborah E. McDowell published her collection of essays "*The Changing Same*": *Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory*.²⁴⁴ In the book she primarily examines the way African American literature had been constructed and viewed within the U.S. universities but also taken into account some of the forces that suppressed and devaluated black feminist theory and literature in the academy. The book is a genealogy of her work from the 1980s written in the form of personal as well as professional reflections combined with traditional essays. She basically agrees with bell hooks, calling for black feminist criticism to "transcend the boundaries of the university setting."²⁴⁵ Dealing with literary theory, she notices the paradox of the theory's reduction "to a very particular practice,"²⁴⁶ which results in the reluctance of the academy to take and validate the culturally specific approach to African American women's writings. In particular, narrow Eurocentric definitions of theory put, in her opinion, the black feminist criticism in its opposition. Therefore, she demands a discourse—suggested by black women, naturally—which would resist the institutionalised language of poststructuralist theory, and give African American scholars the strength to uncover the history of black feminism as well as literature on their own terms. Her collection of essays about black women novelists offers an insightful dialogic example that enables her to apply her previous theoretical implications. All in all, the book provides a rich portrait of the manners in which the black feminist criticism had changed between 1980 and 1995, transforming from scattered, minimally included in the course syllabi, into trying to bridge discourse, local knowledge produced in this discipline, and institutional departments.

In 2002 Madhu Dubey reflects upon the question asked by Wahneema Lubiano "What is at stake for positioning a reading of a black American novel within the discourse of postmodernism" in her article "Contemporary African American Fiction and the Politics of Postmodernism." In the discussion she includes earlier debates identifying certain stylistic features of African American fiction that are also favoured in postmodern literary and cultural theories,²⁴⁷ but their existence does not lead critics such as Robert Elliott Fox, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., or Brian Philip Harper to coming to the conclusion that black fiction since 1970 would be a "subset of postmodern culture."²⁴⁸ She reveals the wide range of generic routes

²⁴³ Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* from 1957 is one of the targeted examples, especially for its Euro-American literary theory's divorce from issues concerning meaning and the individual subject, insisting on the idea that "reality is not reflected by language but produced by it." Eagleton, qtd. in Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 10. For more information on Joyce's rejection of poststructuralism, deconstruction, literary work as a purely social construct, elitism of literary studies, etc. see pages 9–12. The latter issue is as well dealt with by bell hooks in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*.

²⁴⁴ A part of the book was published five years later within *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, namely "Generational Connections and Black Women Novelists," which was reprinted from *New Literary History* Winter 1987), 281–302.

²⁴⁵ Deborah McDowell, "*The Changing Same*": *Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 21.

²⁴⁶ McDowell, "*The Changing Same*", 169. For more information about this topic, see the chapter "Transcendences: Black Feminist Thinking: The "Practice" of "Theory,"" 156–176.

²⁴⁷ These include "generic instability, narrative discontinuity and irresolution, intertextual parody, and textual self-reflectivity." Madhu Dubey, "Contemporary African American Fiction and the Politics of Postmodernism," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 35, no. 2/3 (Spring–Summer 2002): 151.

²⁴⁸ Dubey, "Contemporary African American Fiction and the Politics of Postmodernism," 151.

through which postmodern African American novelist engage with historical and contemporary social reality, including “the extravagant anti-realism of Ishmael Reed, the marvellous realism of Toni Morrison, the experimental metafiction of Clarence Major, the historiographic metafiction of John Edgar Wineman, and the neo-realism of Toni Cade Bambara,” capturing the richness and complexity of formal innovations of contemporary African American fiction.²⁴⁹

The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel edited by Maryemma Graham from 2004 represents another important step in the history of black criticism. In the three parts of the collection, black feminist critics have their word, which—as it was clarified above—is something that has not always been taken for granted. There are essays about the African American novel and history, the New American novel, and African American voices from margin to centre. A year later, “*The*” *Columbia Guide to Contemporary African American Fiction* by Darryl Dickson-Carr was published. In the overview which functions as an introductory chapter it offers a meticulous discussion of the black American fiction (and often deals with culture as well) of the second half of the 20th century. On the other hand, the books *Contemporary African American Novelists: A Bio-bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* edited by Emmanuel S. Nelson (1999) and *100 Most Popular African American Authors: Biographical Sketches And Bibliographies* by Bernard Alger Drew (2007) illustrate the growing interest not only in works by African American women writers but also in their personal lives.

The heritage of literary foremothers and their impact on contemporary black women writers is also examined by Cheryl A. Wall in *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (2005). Two years later *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000* by Barbara Christian, one of the founding voices in black feminist literary criticism, was published between the release of her second landmark book *Black Feminist Criticism* and her death in 2000 (edited by Gloria Bowles, M. Giulia Fabi, and Arlene R. Keizer). The book collects several writings, in particular eloquent reviews and essays, evaluations of black feminist criticism as a discipline, reflections on black feminism in the academy. These are organized into three sections titled Defining Black Feminist Criticism, Reading Black Women Writers, and Black Feminist Criticism in the Academy.²⁵⁰

In return to the challenging character of African American literature and its liberatory aspirations, in *Contemporary African American Fiction: New Critical Essays* edited by Dana A. Williams in 2009, she shows how varied the discourses raised in and by this literature are. In the introduction, Williams addresses the basic concern she had on her mind when compiling the collection, that is, the investigation of “the ways in which contemporary African American fiction attempts to *free us*,” highlighting the need for clear connections to be made between general progress or achievement and communal and personal liberation of African American people.²⁵¹ What is more, the presented essays examine what forms of influence the antecedent texts and traditions in black American fiction have on contemporary texts which create new traditions; in other words, (similarly to the reception aesthetics theorists) the book seeks to trace how this literature “dialogues with broader literary and cultural traditions to better accommodate the complexity of the African American living in the contemporary moment.” Every single essay takes a different approach to the broad concept of liberation but, more important, they have in common that their aim is to free the literature

²⁴⁹ Dubey, “Contemporary African American Fiction and the Politics of Postmodernism,” 168.

²⁵⁰ Cf. Barbara Christian, *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000* (University of Illinois Press, 2007).

²⁵¹ The scholar returns to the question Sonia Sanchez raised in a subtitle to her play in her 1975, *Uh Huh, But How Do It Free Us?* Dana A. Williams, introduction to *Contemporary African American Fiction: New Critical Essays* (USA: The Ohio State University, 2009), 1.

discussed in them from its critics and “their self-interested concerns.”²⁵² The contributors are, for instance, Reggie Scott Young, Jennifer A. Jordan, Tara T. Green, Majda R. Atieh, Sandra Y. Govan, or Eleanor W. Traylor.

In her alternative reading Karla F. C. Holloway (who was mentioned in the chapter on feminism) in “Legal Fictions” (forthcoming from the Duke University Press at the end of 2013) argues that the social imagination of race is expressly constituted in law and is expressively represented through the imaginative composition of literary fictions, as long as the U.S. law continues to look upon the black body as discrete and insular.²⁵³

In conclusion, African American women writers’ endless resourcefulness and daring productivity reflected in criticism should not be forgotten. Although Morris speaks for women writers and critics in general, her claims are pinpoints well applicable on the black American ones.

Working within an unsympathetic cultural tradition, women writers have turned their very anger into a source of creativity, have laughed away the female monsters threatening them in male texts, wittily reshaped male canonical forms, reworked old myths, turned apparent conformity into artistic innovation and boldly challenged high culture on its own ground. We read women writers adequately by recognizing and responding fully to these multiple achievements.²⁵⁴

²⁵² Williams, introduction to *Contemporary African American Fiction: New Critical Essays*, 1–2.

²⁵³ Karla FC Holloway, “African and American Studies,” Duke University, accessed March 15, 2013, <http://aaas.duke.edu/people?Gurl=&Uil=39&subpage=profile>.

²⁵⁴ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 83.

4 Literary Context: African American Women Writers' Renaissance

It is no small matter that more than a few young people aspire to be African American novelists today when a new black novel is appearing almost daily. ... it is very much related to the growth and popularity of the African American novel in our time. The novel continues to serve both an ideological and a social purpose, affirming the need to reflect lived reality across class and gender lines, attending to its own improvisational nature, embracing and resisting the past, deepening our sense of who and what it means to be black in a postmodern, postcolonial world, and demanding all the while to be seen as art. Maryemma Graham²⁵⁵

First of all, it is necessary to return to the idea of overlapping activities of outstanding African American women activists, scholars, feminists, feminist critics, theorists, writers, poets, playwrights, publishers, editors, etc., even though it was outlined in the previous two chapters. Within the literary context of the last three decades of the 20th century, it results in a phenomenon that could be described as African American literary critics' failure to remember some black women writers until these became reread and re-evaluated by African American feminists.

In this chapter a closer look will be taken at what women's writing is in general as well as at fiction (or prose, if you like) written by black women writers after 1970, which is marked as the beginning of African American women's literary renaissance.²⁵⁶ In the last three decades of the 20th century much has changed in African American women's writing. Due to the limits of the dissertation, these changes will be, however, outlined only in brief. If some works and authors are footnoted only, it does not imply they would not deserve attention; the reason is they might be looked up much more easily than their newer counterparts which are mentioned within the text.²⁵⁷ This more general chapter precedes the dissertation's in-depth examination of African American popular novel and its subgenres whose flourishing was enabled by the black women writers' renaissance.

4.1 Women's Writing and African American Women Writers

In *A Room of One's Own*²⁵⁸ Virginia Woolf's main aim is to outline the numerous difficulties and obstacles of emergent women writers, basing her discussion on problems Shakespeare's similarly gifted fictitious sister Judith might have faced. Among these, she stresses lack of education—despite Judith's being as bright as her acclaimed brother—, money, and opportunity; also male hostility as far as the audience as well as fellow writers are concerned, and, last but not least, the absence of any kind of a nurturing female tradition. Sixty years later, a similar approach is taken by a feminist critic, Carolyn Heilbrun, in her rereading of the classic story of Penelope, Ulysses' wife, as a metaphor for the newly emergent women writers. Her point is that “through all recorded history, women have lived by a script they did not write.”²⁵⁹

²⁵⁵ Graham, the introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 7.

²⁵⁶ *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, xv.

²⁵⁷ For instance, “*The*” *Columbia Guide to Contemporary African American Fiction* by Darryl Dickson-Carr (USA: Columbia UP, 2005) provides an excellent overview of the black authors and their works.

²⁵⁸ “*A Room of One's Own*” is an extended essay, first published in 1929, based on a series of lectures she delivered at the Cambridge University a year before. While this text in fact employs a fictional narrator and is designed as a narrative to explore women both as writers of and characters in fiction, it is considered non-fiction. The main argument of the essay is both a literal and figural space for women writers within a male-dominated literary tradition; as a result, the essay is generally seen as one of the basic feminist texts. Cf. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Orlando: First Harvest Inc, 1989).

²⁵⁹ Carolyn Heilbrun, *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women: Feminist Essays on Literature* (Women's Press, 1991), 108.

Before these two, numerous white women noticed similar issues, among them for instance Jane Austen, Simone de Beauvoir, and others. But as Pam Morris suggests, “women writers have not been quite so non-existent” as they all imply. Nonetheless, the “concord of their views provides strong testimony to the near-invisibility of women’s literary presence.”²⁶⁰ It is, therefore, one of the basic missions of feminist research to discover and make available more writing from previous periods of history, and from a great variety of cultures as well. And due to the amount of new anthologies and new editions of women’s writing, women’s existence and these literary productions turn into indisputable facts. This leads Morris to raise new questions for literary studies, such as how to respond to all this women’s writing, for what reason to welcome it, whether new critical skills should be developed in order to comprehend it, and, importantly, whether it is essentially different from writing by men.²⁶¹ Providing often overlapping answers to these questions shall clarify Terry McMillan’s enormous appeal to her racially mixed audiences.

Two acclaimed scholars explain basic conditions for the acceptance of women’s writing. Catherine Kerrigan, the editor of an anthology of *Scottish Women Poets* (1991) comes up with a particular reason for welcoming collections of women’s writing which is simultaneously not less important to consider, dealing with writing by women of colour in general. Often, an individual woman’s writing cannot be fully appreciated unless she is evaluated within the context of women’s tradition.²⁶² (Likewise, the author of a pioneering work of feminist criticism from 1976, titled *Literary Women*, Ellen Moers, claims that in order to bring to light the hidden tradition of women’s creativity, the importance of mutual influence of women writers—irrespective of their skin colour—should be demonstrated. For it is their appreciative way of listening to one another that is the kind of interaction long ignored in canonical histories.²⁶³) Still, as Moers observes, “each of these gifted writers had her distinctive style; none imitated the others. But their sense of encountering in another woman’s voice what they believed was the sound of their own is, I think, something special to literary women.”²⁶⁴ The very same description, too, as it will be proved soon, can without a doubt be applied on the African American ones.

Moreover, as it was argued in the previous chapter, many of the consciousness-raising feminists of various periods of time used “female-anchored texts” to battle women’s feelings of isolation and inadequacy.²⁶⁵ Morris explains the importance of female bonding: Finding their own emotions, circumstances, frustrations and desires shared, named and shaped into literary form gave (and continues to give) many women, some for the first time, a sense that their own existence was meaningful, that their view of things was valid and intelligent, that their suffering was imposed and unnecessary, and a belief in women’s collective strength to resist and remake their lives.²⁶⁶ In her opinion, the recognition of the bonds of friendship, love, and loyalty existing among women is “perhaps the most persistent positive feature of women’s writing.”²⁶⁷ To recognize this also means to question the numerous male-written texts which aimed to present relationships among women in terms of rivalry and betrayal.

²⁶⁰ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 59.

²⁶¹ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 59.

²⁶² Catherine Kerrigan, introduction to *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1991), 8.

²⁶³ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women*, (USA: Women’s Press, 1986), 43.

²⁶⁴ Moers, *Literary Women*, 66.

²⁶⁵ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 62.

²⁶⁶ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 62.

²⁶⁷ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 61. Countless examples could be mentioned, but perhaps one of the widely known one is Alice Walker whose strong bonds to Zora Neale Hurston directed much more than her literary activities. For more information on the subject matter, see Cheryl A. Wall, *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (USA: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 5–24.

In comparison with white women whose writing could serve as “an insider’s account of the economics” and the “drudgery” of everyday existence,²⁶⁸ having been denied this position in the U.S. society for a very long time, it would be much more appropriate to refer to African American women by means of what Patricia Hill Collins labels “the outsider within,” which is a curious social location, “a peculiar marginality that stimulated a distinctive Black women’s perspective on a variety of themes.”²⁶⁹ It is precisely for this reason that Alice Walker demeaned Woolf’s essay *A Room of One’s Own* for its exclusion of women of colour and women writers who do not have any means for obtaining the independence and cannot therefore afford the luxury of a room of their own.²⁷⁰ In *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* Alice Walker expresses her particular reasons for that.

Virginia Woolf, in her book *A Room of One’s Own*, wrote that in order for a woman to write fiction she must have two things, certainly: a room of her own (with key and lock) and enough money to support herself. What then are we to make of Phillis Wheatley, a slave, who owned not even herself? This sickly, frail, Black girl who required a servant of her own at times—her health was so precarious—and who, had she been white, would have been easily considered the intellectual superior of all the women and most of the men in the society of her day.²⁷¹

The above explained sense of solidarity with other women and—of course women writers in particular—makes women writers benefit crucially in two ways. First, it has led many women writers to feel an urge to bear witness and to use their work deliberately (if not strategically) to, as Morris states, “testify and protest against oppression and suffering inflicted on women by particularly brutal regimes or events.” Women’s willingness to speak out defiantly for other women in the traditionally male domain of politics and protest is what is distinctive about them.²⁷² Besides, it is equally vital to notice the power to celebrate, for not all women’s writing records pain, suffering, unacknowledged work, victimization, etc.²⁷³ Conversely, as Morris explains in the first chapter of *Literature and Feminism*, male-authored texts in the past tended to construct female characters as passive objects, which resulted in voyeuristic and nearly invariably judgemental approach to them. In women’s writing, female characters are less likely to be taught to be ashamed of their own bodies and sexuality as contemptible, or to deny their femininity. Writing by women can balance women’s views of themselves, “celebrating [their] sexuality and articulating the pleasure and beauty of the female body without shame or apology.”²⁷⁴

The forms of bonding and creativity depicted by the above mentioned authors differ to a large extent too. Toni Morrison, Alice Walker likewise, focus on the creativity women bring to everyday quotidian life—for instance in the capacity to bestow grace and a kind of practical beauty on the commonplace in their books. Similarly, Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* portrays patchworking, quilt making, hair braiding, cooking, and other beneficial as well as healing activities black women characters engage in. McMillan’s and other contemporary authors’ up-to-date depiction of protagonists’ dining, exercising in the gym, talking on the phone for hours, etc. has basically the same purpose but is set both outside and inside their homes, reflecting the socioeconomic changes which took place at the turn of the 21st century.

²⁶⁸ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 63.

²⁶⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000, second edition), 11.

²⁷⁰ Walker does recognize that Wheatley is in a position far different from the narrator of Woolf’s essay, since Wheatley and other women writers exist outside of this “room” Woolf sets aside for women writers. This strategy employed by Walker becomes a pragmatic tool in her hands by which she calls attention to the limits of Woolf’s essay. As an alternative, she suggests the metaphorical space of “our mothers’ gardens,” honouring Woolf’s similar endeavour of seeking space for women writers in general.

²⁷¹ Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, 235.

²⁷² Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 62.

²⁷³ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 62.

²⁷⁴ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 64.

All in all, unlike Bloom's "anxiety of influence" or Gilbert and Gubar's "anxiety of authorship," the model of female tradition is more enriching than restrictive.²⁷⁵

Returning to the issue of what distinguishes African American women's writing from their male counterparts' writing, in Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's opinion, it is favouring (rather than repressing) of "the other in ourselves." That basically means that black women writers speak from a multiple and very complex social, historical, and cultural position which effectively constitutes their subjectivity. Doing so, they enter a dialectics of two kinds: the dialectic of *differences* (for which Barbara Christian would use the term "creative dialogue"), based on their complex subjectivity, and *dialectic of identity* with those aspects shared with others.²⁷⁶

Features of the oral are one of the basic attributes of writings by African American women writers. For instance, Morrison consistently strives for evoking the sense of community by making use of the oral story-telling tradition in her fiction of African American and African culture. It is no accident that the title of the 1987 conference "Changing our Own Words"²⁷⁷ refers, as Wall explains, to an idiom in the African American vernacular: "changing words" is an recurrent expression in Hurston's and other writers' works which, in fact, means exchanging of words, that is, a conversation.²⁷⁸ The features of the oral and the particular forms of the call and response pattern will be dealt with in more detail in the analyses.

Silence and the (usually female) protagonist's becoming voiced from voiceless is one of the recurring themes in works by African American women writers in the last decades of the 20th century. Henderson ascribes it to the fact that they "have encoded oppression as a discursive dilemma, i.e., their works have raised the black woman's relationship to power. "Quiet as it was kept"²⁷⁹ or just slowly released by Hurston, Morrison, Marshall, Walker, and other important writers, hand-in-hand with gaining more self-esteem and autonomy, black

²⁷⁵ The first term refers to model configuring a white male poetic tradition shaped by a conflicting dialogue between literary fathers and sons; the second one points at white women writers' sense of "dis-ease" within a patriarchal tradition. Cf. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (USA: Oxford UP, 1997, second edition), and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Yale UP, 2000, second sub-edition). It might be of some interest, though, that Alice Walker sees a parallel with what Gilbert and Gubar suggest, referring to her African American ancestors with the following words: "crazy Saints, ... forcing their minds to desert their bodies and their striving spirits sought to rise." *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, 231.

²⁷⁶ Gwendolyn Henderson, "Discursive Diversity: Speaking in Tongues," in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 119. Henderson bases her observation on what Christian wrote about Audre Lorde: "As a black, lesbian feminist, poet, mother, Lorde has, in her own life, had to search long and hard for *her* people. In responding to each of these audiences, in which a part of her identity lies, she refuses to give up her differences. In fact she uses them, as woman to man, black to white, lesbian to heterosexual, as a means of conducting creative dialogue." Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives in Black Women Writers* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 209.

²⁷⁷ The conference "Changing Our Own Words: A Symposium on Criticism, Theory, and Literature by Black Women" was attended by, e.g., Gloria Hull; papers were presented by Houston Baker, Hazel Carby, or Mary Helen Washington. Speakers were asked to reflect on the most fruitful contexts for the analysis of writing by black women, whether theories particular of these writings should be developed, and if so, what should the sources of the theories be, how to alter traditional critical categories, and so on. Wall, "Taking Positions and Changing Words," 10. The conference inspired Cheryl A. Wall to use the same title for the collection of essays she edited two years later. She implies two things by the title: first, she refers to transformed views of African American literature and criticism reached by feminist scholars; second, the essays themselves should produce more fruitful exchanges of critical discourses. "Introduction: Taking Positions and Changing Words," in *Changing our Own Words*, 15.

²⁷⁸ Wall, "Taking Positions and Changing Words," in *Changing our Own Words*, 10–11.

²⁷⁹ A paraphrase of the opening lines of the famous novel *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison (1970) which refers to the silenced tragic story of Pecola Breedlove narrated by Claudia MacTeer.

women protagonist of the modern novels become able to speak for themselves, by contrast. (A similar shift from detailed analyses of conservative black communities and consequences of not being able to fit in have gradually given preference to much less rigid boundaries prescribed for African American women.²⁸⁰)

The theme of journey has central to writings by black women from the very cradle of their literary activities.²⁸¹ Although the same motif can be found in countless works by African American male authors, it is used in a very different way. As Maryemma Graham states, “the African American novel has paid frequent attention to themes of migration, racial confrontation and adjustment, and the struggle for human, civil, and equal rights” since the early twentieth century.²⁸² The black female’s journey is also a personal and psychological one, for it produces consciousness; at times touching the social or even political.²⁸³

What has also been distinguishing the black women’s writing from other literatures at the contemporary scene is a “sense of historical community and its peculiarities;” some of their texts are “porous to history and propose an articulation of power that is more decentred and nuanced than most of us are accustomed to.”²⁸⁴ It is caused by the fact that for many of them writing and rewriting has become a part of the process of cultural revisionism. Its purpose is to offer innovative and provocative impulses that are intentionally self-reflexive, as well as to look more deeply into the human consciousness in order to uncover the psychic wounds. To give a different meaning to the past in new topical ways simultaneously becomes a bridge between the past, present, and a better future.

Loss of identity and its reconstruction (together with the reconstruction of history) form a red thread not only in Toni Morrison’s works. Her concern with identity as something black women cannot afford to lose is often depicted within a community, for the sense of one’s identity is inevitably rooted in the community’s sense of identity. Her mythic and folk tales²⁸⁵ draw from the past and record the routes to the present of the lives of ordinary African American people; Lalita Tademy, by contrast, chronicles four generations of women born into slavery in *Cane River*;²⁸⁶ meanwhile Terry McMillan deliberately refuses to look back, as she no longer feels any need to do so. This basic difference does not prevent them, however, from depicting women as central and powerful figures, for both give expression to a sense of a woman’s community based on affections and common experience.

After all, Mary Helen Washington states that “one of the main preoccupations of a black woman writer has been the black woman herself.”²⁸⁷ Similarly, Deborah E. McDowell adds that “imaging a black woman as a ‘whole’ character or ‘self’ has been a consistent preoccupation of black female novelists throughout their literary history.”²⁸⁸ Gates—referring to black characters in general—notes that “the single most pervasive and consistent assumption of all black writing since the eighteenth century has been that there exists an unassailable, integral, black self ... whole ... knowable, retrievable [and] recuperable.”²⁸⁹

Some of the African American women writers even go beyond the limits of their communities, examining and returning to their very roots in order to find a source of empowerment. As Christian explains, often the women protagonists achieve harmony, turning

²⁸⁰ For instance Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1974) could be mentioned.

²⁸¹ Cf. McDowell, “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 153–159.

²⁸² Graham, the introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 6.

²⁸³ Compare with the canonical books by Ralph Ellison, Imamu Amiri Baraka, or Richard Wright.

²⁸⁴ Gates, introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 16.

²⁸⁵ This strategy is employed, i.e., in *Sula* or *Song of Solomon* (1977), etc.

²⁸⁶ Lalita Tademy, *Cane River* (Warner Books, 2005).

²⁸⁷ Mary Helen Washington, introduction to *Black-Eyed Susans* (New York: Anchor Books, 1975), x.

²⁸⁸ McDowell, “The Changing Same,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 94.

²⁸⁹ Henry Louis Gates, “Frederick Douglass and the Language of the Self,” *The Yale Review* 71 (1981): 604.

to the ancient African wisdom, and realizing the importance of their belonging to a certain community.²⁹⁰ Africa and African women are important motifs for Walker in *The Color Purple* (1980), Morrison in *Tar Baby* which was published a year later, or Marshall in *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983).²⁹¹

The central position the genre of novel occupies in writings and therefore also critical reflections by African American women was outlined in the previous chapter. In present-day enormous variety of novels there is no longer any force that would dictate the development of thematic and formal conventions. Still, the social mission of the novels often bears a special relationship to the history of this ethnic group. As Graham says, “its aesthetic significance lies in the rhetorical strategies and metaphorical language the author uses to reenact if not resolve the novel’s inherent tensions.” These tensions can, for instance, appear in the form of conflicting literary traditions, e.g., dramatic tension borrowed from African-derived oral forms or traditional Western literary forms, sentimentalism and realism, Gothicism and naturalism, use of the blues, folk tales, slave narrative, etc. What also differs from novel to novel is the value placed on narrative closure. What is more, in novels, the lives of black people are “presented through a veil of humor or satiric displacement that defies simplistic analysis.”²⁹²

Generally speaking, Morris rightly states that “twentieth-century female writers can look back on powerful precursors of the same gender.”²⁹³ The same can be said about African American women writers only to some extent. It is only in the last three decades of the 20th century that literary daughters could think back through literary foremothers. As early as in her 1892 collection of essays, Anna Julia Cooper²⁹⁴ argues for the recognition of the black woman’s literary tradition in a very articulated manner. Her claim to the authority of an African American woman’s voice as well as her challenge to black male authors had taken a very long time—to be precise—until 1970, to manifest itself in a literary tradition of its own.²⁹⁵

4.2 Development of African American Women Writer’s Fiction after 1970

The New Critics avoided any kind of political intent in art, “calling for the autonomy of art divorced from politics.” But the rise of Black Studies in the 1960s “put an academic face on the Civil Rights Black Power Movements and forced reconsiderations of scholarship, bringing a new generation of black intellectuals to the fore. An increase in cultural production became one of the byproducts of the resurgence of interest in African American life and culture” of the 1960s and 70s.²⁹⁶ And black American (men and) women novelists made sure they would respond to these developments with an explosion of their talents.

As far as fiction by African American women writers is concerned, the above mentioned year 1970 was more fruitful than any other.²⁹⁷ Several irreplaceable novels first saw the light

²⁹⁰ Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*, 181.

²⁹¹ In contrast with Marshall’s scholarly approach and engagement, Alice Walker is sometimes criticized for her limited understanding of the cultures and peoples of the African diaspora. Simon Gikandi, “Paule Marshall and the search for African Diaspora,” *New West Indian Guide*, vol. 73, no. 1–2 (1999): 84.

²⁹² Graham, the introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 4–5.

²⁹³ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 70. For more information on the relationship between establishing a literary tradition, the “affiliation complex”—as labelled by Gilbert and Gubar—, and the topic of possible rivalry with or anxiety to predecessors, see pages 70–71. Their warning at overidealising of the kinship and relationship among women writers is dealt with by Morris on pages 72 and 73, *ibid*.

²⁹⁴ Cooper was mentioned previously in the chapter on feminism as a prototypical black feminist.

²⁹⁵ Cf Gates, introduction” to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 1–2.

²⁹⁶ Graham, the introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 2–3.

²⁹⁷ Griffin also adds Paule Marshall’s long-awaited masterpiece from 1969, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. “Thirty Years of Black American Literature and Literary Studies: A Review,” 168. It might be of some

of day, namely *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* by Alice Walker, and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, in which the triple jeopardy of sexism, violence, and economic exploitation within the African American community are openly discussed.²⁹⁸ In addition, Toni Cade Bambara's anthology titled *The Black Woman* "came to the forefront of Afro-American literary creativity."²⁹⁹

One of the most profound changes brought by the 1970s was that the black authors of both sexes started appealing to the African American community as their audience, and a new black generation who introduced novel trends in culture and brought new topics to discussion emerged, causing a substantial progress in terms of self-exploration in African American prose. The extent to which these writers were able to make "a commitment to an exploration of self, as central rather than marginal, is a tribute to the insights they have culled in a century or so of literary activity."³⁰⁰ In addition, "in the first novels [written by black women writers in the early 70s] there is clear evidence of the influence of 1960s feminism with its stress on masculinised sexual codes perpetuating female oppression. But this perspective is developed by more emphasis being placed on the politics of female desires."³⁰¹ As a result, as Christian explains, black women writers expressed their concern that it was not only the white dominant society that should change, but the black community itself where women had to struggle against the definitions of gender often became a major threat to their members' survival.³⁰² In addition, already successful authors such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, Alexis DeVeaux, Toni Cade Bambara, etc., not only spoke about long-lasting friendships among women, but also explored lesbian relationships, similarly based on mutual understanding and love, but also physical attraction. As far as the formal innovations are concerned, in brief, the books could be characterized by complicated nonlinear narratives, rich and sensuous language, as well as unconventional African American female characters.

By the mid-1970s, there was noticeable shift in the African American protagonists as they are depicted in their search for a recognizable self within their community. Revolting against the often restrictive community, they often find themselves situated outside of it.³⁰³ Next, African American women characters started to be depicted as politically conscious, joining, e.g., the Civil Rights Movement as Meridian in Alice Walker's novel of the same title from 1976. In this period, they also claimed their heritage, maternal ancestry and sexuality.³⁰⁴ By the end of the 1970s, black women writers managed to define their distinct cultural context, responding to and criticising canonical male writers, as well as the male-center politics of the black power movement and black arts movement. They revealed many aspects of the interrelationship of sexism and racism in their society; but, primarily, "challenged the prevailing definition of woman in American society, especially in relation to motherhood and sexuality."³⁰⁵

General emphasis put on the above mentioned topics by the media in that decade, as Gates warns, resulted in a somewhat distorted picture of the African American interrelationships: "Much has been made—too much—of the supposed social animosities between black men and women and the relation between the commercial success of the black

interest that in 1970 alone, twenty-seven novels by African American men and women writers appeared. Graham, the introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 3.

²⁹⁸ Wall adds to this description the phrase "corrosive effects of racism and poverty." "Introduction: Taking Positions and Changing Words," in *Changing our Own Words*, 3.

²⁹⁹ Gates, introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 2.

³⁰⁰ Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*, 172.

³⁰¹ Linden Peach, *Toni Morrison* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1995), 138.

³⁰² Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*, 178–9.

³⁰³ *The Bluest Eye* or *Sula* (1974) by Toni Morrison could be mentioned in this respect.

³⁰⁴ Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*, 179.

³⁰⁵ Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*, 180.

women's literary movement and the depiction of black male sexism." By contrast, the popularity African American women's writings reached in the 1970s "has nothing to do with anti-black male conspiracies," widely expected, he says. Instead, their success stems from the literary merits the works offer, for they have "generated a resoundingly new voice, one that is at once black *and* female, replete with its own shadings and timbres, topoi and tropes."³⁰⁶

In new literary works of the 1980s and 90s, African American women writers continued in exploration of the themes from the previous decade, presenting innumerable styles of life, which resulted in an enormous diversity of the fiction, as far as the themes and characters are concerned. Nonetheless, what the books have in common basically was that they deal with sexism and racism within the black community, intersection of class, race, and gender.³⁰⁷ Despite such diversity, most of these women writers ask the same question, which is what community exactly must African American women belong to in order to understand themselves most effectively in their totality as African American and women.³⁰⁸ Several above mentioned black women writers came of age, and Andrea Lee, Lucille Clifton, Sherley Anne Williams, Nztotake Shange, Alexis Deveau, Adrienne Kennedy, Kristin Hunter, Octavia Butler, Terry McMillan, Marita Golden, Maya Angelou, Joyce Carol Thomas, Paule Marshall, Gwendolyn Brooks, Rita Dove, Thulani Davis, Audre Lorde, Sonia Sanchez, Gayl Jones, A. J. Verdelle, Michelle Cliff, and others only testify what was said above about the richness of styles, topics, and forms.³⁰⁹

In 1990, as feminist critic Hortense Spillers observes, "[t]he community of black women writing in the United States now can be regarded as a vivid new fact of national life."³¹⁰ In the same year, Gates sums up the distinctive features of black literary movement that give it a special place in black literary history in his introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*. In the first place, despite the bitter public debates about the political implications of black male sexism, the movement did not promote itself as bombastically and self-consciously as, for instance the Harlem Renaissance or Black Arts Movement did before. Next, meanwhile most older black male writers denied other authors' influence, black female authors claim proudly their descent from other black women literary ancestors or foremothers, which only shows the importance of female bonding. The same scholar also sees black women's writing between 1970 and 1990 both as "an extension of the Black Arts Movement" and "its repudiation" as well as a political activity indeed, but, "it [took] its craft too seriously to be dismissed as merely propaganda."³¹¹ (As Graham explains, meanwhile earlier authors "may have felt that to be political somehow diminishes the status of their art, contemporary black novelists see this dual mission in complementary rather than oppositional terms."³¹²

³⁰⁶ Gates, introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminism*, 2.

³⁰⁷ Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*, 180.

³⁰⁸ Cf. Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*, 180. These for instance include *Tar Baby* (1980), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992) and *Paradise* (1999) by Toni Morrison; *The Women of Brewster Street* (1980) by Gloria Naylor and *The Salt Eaters* by Toni Cade Bambara from the same year; Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) or *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992); *Marked By Fire* (1982) by Joyce Carol Thomas; *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo* (1982) and *Betsey Brown* (1985) by the poetess and prosodist Ntozake Shange; Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) as well as *Daughters* (1991); and last but not least also *Zami* (1983) by Audre Lorde.

³⁰⁹ For instance *Brothers and Sisters* (1994) and *Singing in the Comeback Choir*, published four years later, by Bebe Moore Campbell, A. J. Verdelle's debut novel *The Good Negress* (1995); *Blacker Than a Thousand* (1995) and *The Gettin' Place* (1997) by Susan Straight, a white woman writer depicting African American communities and characters could be referred to.

³¹⁰ Qtd. in Gates, introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 3. As a matter of fact, a similar phenomenon can be noticed outside the U.S.; black Caribbean women writers, too stood in the midst of a major international literary movement around 1990.

³¹¹ Gates, introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 3-4.

³¹² Graham, introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 7.

The growing number of these women writers' readers together with their critical success prepared the ground for other astonishing trend of the 1990s, that is, the rise in African American commercial (or popular, if you wish) fiction. Most scholars attribute this to the unprecedented success of Terry McMillan's third novel, *Waiting to Exhale*, by which she helped to establish not only a powerful market in black women readers but, possibly even more important, attracted readers across different ethnic groups. The novel, the circumstances of its origin, and various other forms of black popular literature, however, are to be analysed in detail in the following chapters.

There is one crucial phenomenon that makes the African American fiction at the end and turn of the 21st century different from the previous ones and that is the fact that in the books, often the characters move from one place to another, this time not only northwards but also from the West Indies and other former English speaking colonies.³¹³ Literary representations from the standpoint of African or Afro-Caribbean diasporic populations in the U.S. have become as important as the African American ones. In this respect, several outstanding black women writers and their works should be named: Jamaica Kincaid and her popular essay "A Small Place" (1988), the novel *Lucy* (1990), *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1995) or *My Garden* (1999) in which she commented on one of her most favourite places.³¹⁴ Similarly to Kincaid, a half Welsh and half Guyanese woman writer Charlotte Williams reflects on the advantages and conflicts her heritage has provided her with, e.g., in her novel *Sugar and Slate* from 2002. Another author representing post-colonial literature is Dionne Brand who wrote *At the Full and Change of the Moon* in 1999 or her memoir *A Map to the Door of No Return* published two years later; as well as Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian-born American author debuting in 1994 with her first novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* or a family memoir *Brother I'm Dying* published in 2007. These women writers share interest in questions of racial and gender identity both in their former countries and diaspora.

On the whole, the prose written by African American women writers in this period of time covers issues and topics as diverse as racism, education, family (and especially mother-daughter) relationships, lesbianism, etc.; frequently, the theme of colonization and the process of personal destructuralisation are conveyed. The circumstances often forced the protagonists to take personal inventories of their lives and try to find a balance between their desire for love and companionship, as well as the responsibilities of mothers and wives.

As far as the fiction published by African American women writers in the new millennium is concerned, a rather dramatic turnover can be observed. There are the women authors familiar to us from the previous decades such as Walker and her *Now Is The Time to Open Your Heart* (2005) or *Devil's My Enemy* (2008); novels *Love* (2003) and *A Mercy* (2008) by Morrison; *Bicycles: Love Poems* (2009) by Nikki Giovanni; *The Fisher King: A Novel* (2001) or *Triangular Road* (2009) by Marshall, and Kincaid's *Mr. Potter* (2002) or her several autobiographical books on gardening or her travels such as *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalayas* (2005), etc. More important, a totally new generation writing in a very different way about various topics has emerged. In this respect, Bernice L. McFadden and her

³¹³ Christian also stresses the importance of this question as a new quality of the literary works from the 1980s; it is important to make a note that before, the conditions of black women were restricted also in terms of space. *Black Feminist Criticism*, 181.

³¹⁴ As a matter of fact, Kincaid (who comes from Antigua) does not claim any sort of responding to earlier women writers; indeed, her black Caribbean descent makes her different from the listed African American women writers. Together with black American ones, black Caribbean women writers indisputably belong to the most powerful and loud literary voices that have been drawing attention since the last decades of the 20th century. An extensive writers' exile in the United States not only from the Caribbean complicates the attempts to classify the latter group, which, on the other hand, contributes to realizing of the fluidity and partial overlap of both.

2006 self-discovery novel *Nowhere Is a Place* and LaShonda Katrice Barnett, Terry O'Neal, Crystal Wilkinson, Lisa Teasley, Wanda Phipps, Rebecca Walker, and many others could be named.³¹⁵

In conclusion, contemporary African American women novelists are aware of various forms of transculturalism and transnationalism, "exploring what it means to be a part of a 'diasporic' and 'creolized' or 'postcolonial' world, where boundaries and borders are always being redefined." New themes have emerged from identity struggles in the post-Civil Rights and Black Power eras, such as sexual liberation, intragroup relations, including themes as gender and class identity, gay and lesbian themes. As it was suggested above, the contemporary black American novel "creates a narrative space for exploring the politics of race and identity," while often "maintaining a primary focus on historical subjects and themes."³¹⁶ By contrast, in popular novels, attention seems to be directed more toward contemporaneous and topical issues.

4.3 Literature and More

The newly gained literary power of black American authors is also reflected in their other activities connected with literature in the black literary movement. Toni Morrison played a key role as an editor at Random House when the movement began; having written several best-selling novels herself and having published works by formidable figures such as Gail Jones or Angela Davis, she also inspired by her own example young authors (Gloria Naylor, for instance). And her continuous unprecedented fidelity in a new black readership who would be keen on reading women-oriented texts led to even more publications.³¹⁷ In addition, black women's knowledge that good writing is likely to find a publisher played an important role in the period.

When it comes to cultural and public activities of black women in the second half of the 1990s and the turn of the 21st century in general, there would be literally hundreds of names to be mentioned not only in relation to literature. There are numberless playwrights (Ntozake Shange), singers (Nina Simone), jazz and other musicians, journalists, activists (Angela Davis) as well as civil rights activists or former civil rights movement activists (Bernice Johnson Reagon), educators, lawyers (Marian Wright Edelman), lecturers (Alice Walker), actresses and performers (Maya Angelou³¹⁸), reporters and talk show hosts (Oprah Winfrey), business executives, environmentalists (Wangari Muta Maathai), athletes, and sportswomen (the Williams sisters), not to mention prize winners and so on.³¹⁹

The discussion would be incomplete without mentioning various anthologies which contributed to the institutionalisation of literature written by African American women.³²⁰ As Gates appositely states, their importance lies in the fact that "every anthology defines a canon

³¹⁵ For a more detailed account and information about the particular black women authors, see "African American Writers," A Celebration of Women Writers, accessed November 1, 2012, http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/_generate/AFRICAN%20AMERICAN.html.

³¹⁶ Graham, introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 11.

³¹⁷ Gates, introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 3.

³¹⁸ It is worth mentioning that it was Maya Angelou, a singer, actress, activist, and writer, she came to much wider attention in 1993 when she recited a poem of her own composition at the first inauguration of President Bill Clinton. Women's History, "Maya Angelou Quotes," About.com, accessed February 4, 2013, http://womenshistory.about.com/cs/quotes/a/qu_maya_angelou.htm.

³¹⁹ For further details, see "Women's History, Notable African American Women," About.com, accessed February 4, 2013, http://womenshistory.about.com/od/africanamerican/a/black_women.htm and http://womenshistory.about.com/od/africanamerican/a/black_women_2.htm.

³²⁰ *Some of Us Are Brave* edited by Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith is not mentioned on purpose, for it is a collection of essays that have to do with feminism and literary criticism more than fiction; still, the book's role in making black women in literature a part of university syllabuses is undeniable.

and thereby serves to preserve a tradition in what is designated as its most representative parts.” In addition, when it comes to literature written by black people, anthologies “have carried a literary inheritance along from generation to generation, projecting an author’s works from loss.”³²¹ On the other hand, as Washington warns, it has to be recognised that “the creation of the fiction of tradition is a matter of power, not justice,” and “that power has always been in the hands of men—mostly white but some black.”³²² Before 1970s and especially 80s, black women writers were often absent from official black histories and literary criticism.³²³ It was up to the previously mentioned names to put the pieces of the puzzle of the black women’s literary past together.³²⁴ The most important anthologies of literature written by African American women include Toni Cade Bambara’s one titled *The Black Woman: An Anthology* in 1970, as mentioned in the chapter on feminism; Mari Evans’ *The Black Woman Writer (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation* from 1984, or Marry Helen Washington’s *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860-1960* three years later, as well as her collection of short stories *Black-Eyed Susans* from 1989 are other good examples; put together, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, first published in 1997 (edited by Gates and McKay) and republished in a new edition in 2003.

To summarize, Washington’s observation seems still topical and applicable, even in the 21st century. “If there is a single distinguishing feature of the literature of black women—and this accounts for their lack of recognition [in the past]—it is this: their literature is about black women; it takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings, and deeds of black women, experiences that make the realities of being black in America look very different from what men have written.”³²⁵ In their quests, the black women would hardly succeed without the support of their fellow female members of their communities, as Walker illustrates in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* in a rather original manner.³²⁶ For the most part, women talk to and about other women, “mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends, lovers” who are vital to their growth and well-being³²⁷ as well as men are. Not only it is true that they share intimacies others would not be able to grasp fully, but also offer a multi-dimensional view upon them. Furthermore, such vivid communication serves as a strong tool in their quest for a fully developed self. And it is one of the dissertation’s concerns to examine how large extent these women in girlfriend novels are vital to one another’s personal and emotional growth and well-being.

The mission of an African American woman artist has remained not a simple one, but highly challenging, for she has aimed to refute the various stereotypes and myths about the black women as well as black people in general.³²⁸ In order to be able to do so, a woman writer of colour must first deal with the black life as it is, employ black characters, and depict

³²¹ Gates reminds the reader that some works by African American women writers have been preserved exclusively in anthologies. Introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 5.

³²² Gates, introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 5–6. Washington, “The Darkened Eye Restored,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 32.

³²³ And the absence of anthologies of black fiction over the two decades proved to be one of the impulses for Terry McMillan to come up with *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction*.

³²⁴ Washington’s famous and widely cited words from her essay “The Darkened Eye Restored: Notes Toward a Literary History of Black Women” may shed some light on the testifying function of these texts which reveal the truth about the oppressive form black women’s existence took in the past.

³²⁵ Washington, “The Darkened Eye Restored,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 35.

³²⁶ By redefining art Walker opens space for those entitled to be called artists. A similar appellation is done by Paule Marshall in her personal appellation “The Poets in the Kitchen,” in *Reena and Other Stories* (New York: Feminist Press, 1983), 3–12.

³²⁷ Mary Helen Washington, *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women (1860-1960)* (New York: Anchor, 1988), 35.

³²⁸ A similar idea is suggested by Paule Marshall in Marcia Keizs’ “Themes and Style in the Works by Paule Marshall.” *Negro American Literature Forum*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 67–76.

them in full—in their richness and complexity. Second, her responsibility lies in the necessity for doing so according to the highest literary standards. Last but not least, the emerging goal is to “act as the political voice of Black people, they must at the same time awaken spiritual consciousness, foresee future dangers and educate.”³²⁹

³²⁹ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 39.

5 African American Popular Novel

That analytical rigor seldom coexists with popular entertainment is no secret; yet for this endeavour such as a marriage or at least cohabitation is imperative. The critic of mass fiction commits to her discipline but cannot fully desert what came to endear her to it: its humor, identification, delight, and fun. It is, quite simply, difficult to translate popular literature into academic discourse while retaining the elements that draw its audience. The academic reader is not a popular one. Between the dutiful scholar and devoted reader the tug-of-war commences. We wrestle with these forces; the fight survives as the text. Stephanie Harzewski³³⁰

The phenomenon of African American popular women's writings is to be clarified, including its most important kinds, that is, the romance, romance novel, chick lit, and its subsequent branches, as well as the reasons for their general condemnation. Still, they are known as mainstream genres with a recognizable set of narrative conventions which—as in case of chick lit—are accompanied by a humorous emphasis. In addition, continuity among the above listed kinds should be traced, for they depend on and draw from one another, the purpose of which is to show how complex (and undesirable) it is to strictly categorize McMillan's novels.

5.1 Popular Fiction and Culture: Their Definition, Mixed Reception, and Growth of African American Audience

Popular fiction in comparison with other fields of African American literature belongs to a relatively unexplored terrain both as far as literary history and criticism go. As Susanne B. Dietzel explains, the reasons for this exclusion (or oversight) are diverse, ranging from “academic practices and aesthetic standards that qualify a text for which inclusion in the canon, to the politics of publishing, and the stereotypes or myths that persist about African American readers and their habits.”³³¹

Unanimity does not seem to exist in how to unequivocally define the popular novel, in fact. As Dietzel suggests, it can be defined on the basis of a number of copies a book by a particular author sells, or his/her success can be measured by the number of novels sold altogether; its genre or formulaic nature of a book can also help define it; it can be approached as a commodity in the literary market (for instance as a book which starts a series of spin-off books, as it was in case of McMillan's third novel), its success amongst its intended audience, and so on.³³²

Numerous scholars, critics, and academics teaching African American literature have limited their efforts to dealing with, reviewing, promoting, and canonising those examples of fiction that fail to fit the prevailing aesthetic and literary standards. That is why they warn, as Griffin puts it, that “the literary quality and the political and social vision of Black fiction suffer with the rise of black commercial fiction.”³³³ The paradox, as presented by Dietzel, might make the situation clear: meanwhile the New Criticism allowed for the inclusion of several women writers and writers of colour in general, “it has kept in place a rigid division between high and low, or elite and mass culture, an emphasis on invention over convention, and a distinction between literary and commercial forms of literature that have shaped literary and reading practices to this day.” According to the New Criticism, the only worthy literature that therefore deserves attention is the independently created one which does not “respond to

³³⁰ Harzewski, introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 23.

³³¹ Susanne B. Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” in *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 156.

³³² Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 157.

³³³ Griffin, “Thirty Years of Black American Literature and Literary Studies: A Review,” 171.

the demands of the literary marketplace or the audience, as does much of the popular fiction.”³³⁴

Besides, similar standards and hierarchies happen to exist within the study of African American popular culture which has almost exclusively concentrated on music, film, and popular (folk) heroes, in particular with the emergence of rap, hip-hop, and black youth culture in the 1980s and 90s. In general, popular culture studies give priority to rap, hip-hop, and black film over romance, mystery, and science-fiction. In Dietzel’s opinion, “[m]uch cultural studies scholarship has focused on the representation or misrepresentation of African Americans in the popular culture at large, and *little attention has been paid to the ways in which African American themselves have represented themselves in popular genres or in literatures that are written primarily for the entertainment of a black reading public.*”³³⁵

Farah Jasmine Griffin concisely considers the reasons for what she calls “an explosion of literary production by people of African descent” in the past forty years. Although these people have been publishing their work for centuries, this has been an era of “institutionalizing and diversifying literature, identifying and creating market for it, and formalizing its study.” Besides that, there are other factors and trends that contribute to the richness of contemporary African American fiction in general. These also include the number of positions advertised for teachers of African American literature; the increase in scholarly monographs about Black literature; the publication of the Norton Anthology of African American Literature, ... edited by a number of powerful and influential African American critics of African American literature; the impact of literary theory on the study of African American literature and subsequently on methodologies in other disciplines that explore Black life in the Americas; the publication of more books by Black women writers; the rise in the production of Black commercial fiction; the creation of new literary and artistic institutions outside of the academy, such as Art Sanctuary ... and the Before Columbus Foundation ...; the number of prestigious prizes won by African American writers (e.g., Toni Morrison’s Nobel Prize and Alice Walker’s Pulitzer); and the emergence of the Internet as a site of publication, distribution, and discussion.³³⁶

Tania Modleski agrees with the essential importance of the Internet in the creation and dissemination of popular culture, since it enabled “the fans to interact with other fans in expressing their views about their favorite television shows, films, comic books, and many other forms of popular culture.” In addition to this new globalisation, “people who were once considered to be passive consumers have become creators (or at least ‘revisers’),” altering the course of, e.g., serialised novels.³³⁷

Naturally, as Griffin sees it, there are more factors that contribute to the increase in the number of African American book buyers. On purpose, the expansion of the black middle class since the Civil Rights Movement is put first among them. This emerging class, as Griffin explains, has “greater resources, more disposable income, and a *thirst for middlebrow images of themselves in literature, film, and the visual arts.*”³³⁸

Among other reasons for the flourishing of contemporary African American literature, there has been a rise in the number of African American bookstores. These are bound to keep

³³⁴ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 156.

³³⁵ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 156–157. Emphases added.

³³⁶ Griffin, “Thirty Years of Black American Literature and Literary Studies: A Review,” 165. Walker received the Pulitzer Prize in 1983 for *The Color Purple*; Rita Dove’s Pulitzer Prize from 1987 should be mentioned in this respect, too; Morrison’s Nobel Prize for Literature dates back to 1993.

³³⁷ Tania Modleski, introduction to *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York: Routledge, 2008, second edition), xxvii.

³³⁸ Griffin, “Thirty Years of Black American Literature and Literary Studies: A Review,” 171. Paradoxically enough, as it becomes obvious from the following statement, the same Griffin who celebrates the expanding African American literature reproves of the fact that in some African American bookstores, instead of more classic works, “a bevy of self-help books, popular romances, and sentimental greeting cards” are sold. Nonetheless—which should be appreciated—willing not to romanticise the past, she admits that there were “a lot of bad poems read at the more politically informed meetings, just as there are pages of awful prose at the more contemporary gatherings.” Ibid.

books by black authors on their shelves for a considerably longer time in comparison with the larger chains. Next, according to Graham, since the last decade of the 20th century there has been a rise in African American book clubs across the United States as well as the appearance of publications devoted to books by black writers. (She sees the proliferation of the black book clubs as “one of the signs of the tenuous boundary separating the academic and nonacademic worlds where reading of novels is central to both.”³³⁹) Last but not least, in the 1970s and 80s, as Dietzel illustrates in agreement with Griffin, literature aimed at black readers was restricted to specialty publishing houses and black-owned publishers, or occasionally published African American writers at a major publishing house. After 1990, by contrast, several major publishers have brought African American imprints or series directed at African American readers to its repertoire, such as One World Books at Random House, Amistad at HarperCollins that publishes both critical works and commercial fiction; there are also Walk Worthy books established by Warner Books, or Dafina, an imprint of Kensington Publishing, etc.³⁴⁰

Dealing with what contributes to contemporary black popular fiction, it would be a negligence not to refer to one particular publishing house aimed at mass African American audience, and that is the Los Angeles based Holloway House that commands “a major part of African American popular fiction market and therefore also African American fiction as a whole.” It has “steadily recruited black authors,³⁴¹ expanded its list of paperback originals, and has called itself “the world’s largest publisher of black experience paperbacks since the 1970s.” It covers an enormously wide range of forms such as crime and violence fiction, “ghetto realism, ... detective stories, thrillers, historical novels, romances, family sagas, confession stories, autobiographies, and fictionalized autobiographies, as well as erotica and pornography.”³⁴²

Despite the enormous growth in African American audience, still, black people are hardly fully and equally represented in the book industry business. Griffin speaks about “a dearth of Black literary agents, editors, marketing personnel, sales representatives, publicists, and buyers for chain stores.” As a result, the same diversity and quantity, which has been identified in African American fiction, cannot be attributed to the book industry where “the real danger exists for the future of Black literary culture.”³⁴³ As Dietzel puts it, doors are still closed to more than a few black writers, and little attention is paid to marketing and publicity. Even if the situation is not the same everywhere, still the exclusionary practices of the literary marketplace “have been equally dismissive of African American popular fiction: to be sold successfully for a literary work or a piece of fiction does not guarantee it will appear on the radar screen” of *Publishers Weekly* or *The New York Times*.³⁴⁴ (This very fact resulted in the dissertation’s choice of two 2005 particular novels which are well-liked and purchased by the African American readers, but whose rather rare reviews are limited the plot synopses and possibly also final “to-purchase-or-not-to-purchase” verdicts. Such lack of attention on the

³³⁹ The publications include for instance the *Quarterly Review of Black Literature* and *Black Issues Book Review*; not to mention that *Ebony* and *Essence* provide three of four pages to new releases by black authors in every single issue. Graham, introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 7.

³⁴⁰ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 165; Griffin, “Thirty Years of Black American Literature and Literary Studies: A Review,” 170.

³⁴¹ Among them, there are for instance Donald Goines, Joe Nazel, and Odie Hawkins. Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 161.

³⁴² Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 161.

³⁴³ Griffin, “Thirty Years of Black American Literature and Literary Studies: A Review,” 170. She also (quoting Dodson) adds that according to the Associations of American Publishers in 1999, only 2.4 % of editorial employees were of African descent. *Ibid.*

³⁴⁴ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 157.

side of critics proved to be an even better and more intriguing reason for dealing with the particular novels, especially in comparison with countless reviews of McMillan's first works.)

Nevertheless, availability of books authored by African American writers has never been limited only to bookstores. Dietzel enlists other ways in which black books can reach their readers, such as self-publishing by "serious authors" and outlets that report to bestseller lists, which results in reaching certain status outside mainstreams economies of book publishing and the book trade. The alternative network through which African American authors can distribute their works includes "subscription and book clubs, and those venues easily accessible to the black community such as barbershops and beauty parlors, and through author programs or corner stores, church fairs, and community festivals," or book parties.³⁴⁵

As far as the aspiring authors of popular novels themselves are concerned generally, to be fair, it should be pointed out that not all of them care as much about the craft of writing than they do about the sales, failing to perceive themselves as part of politically engaged literary tradition. Instead of believing their books will become tickets to the world of wealth, they should realize that their emergence was enabled by the previous major social movements, and often within politically charged context, even if indirectly. What is more, Wells is correct, saying "[w]hat is certain is that when a chick-lit writer claims kinship with prominent women novelists of previous centuries, she is trying to have it both ways: profiting from the literary association of her predecessors without acknowledging her own financially driven compromises and evasions." Last but not least, the authors often compete with one another; yet, simultaneously, there exists a sisterly defense of a fellow author or of the genre as a whole," for in order to reach higher sales figures, for instance, "successful chick-lit authors are frequently called on to provide what publishers term 'advance praise' for each other's new work." Despite that, they "studiously avoid comparing a new chick-lit novel to its *direct* predecessors, preferring to reach further into literary history."³⁴⁶ This is caused by one aim, and that is to present the genre in a better light than it actually is.

When it comes to the contemporary vantage point, Dietzel describes African American popular novels' fluidity and flexibility as follows. It is and has been "a growing and constantly shifting field that is *governed as much by the mainstream market demands, trends, and formulaic conventions inherent to different genres, as by the literary tradition and the demands of an African American reading public to see itself reflected in literature.*" This statement is only underlined by the existence of a wide range of African American popular fiction forms, including "easy-to-read bestsellers, genre or formula fiction, such as the romance, mystery, detective fiction, fantasy and science-fiction (which are not as numerous as other forms), as well as pulp fiction or ghetto realism." In comparison with the respected "high" literature written by acclaimed authors such as Morrison or Walker, the popular novel is often grounded in the "'real' and 'immediate,' making explicit reference to the African American experience and issues of concern to the black community," whether it be in texts whose target group is a middle-class female or urban male audience.³⁴⁷

If popular fiction is to work and be not only temporarily attractive for its readers but maintain a body of devoted readers, two conditions must be fulfilled, as Dietzel suggests. First of all, it must necessarily "embody elements of recognition and identification."³⁴⁸ Stuart Hall adds it must do so, "approaching a recreation and identification of recognizable experiences

³⁴⁵ Dietzel, "The African American novel and popular culture," 157.

³⁴⁶ Juliette Wells, "Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History," in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss, Mallory Young (New York: Routledge, 2006), 57. Emphasis added.

³⁴⁷ Dietzel, "The African American novel and popular culture," 159.

³⁴⁸ Dietzel, "The African American novel and popular culture," 159. Both concepts of recognition and identification can be easily related to Jauss' "horizon of expectations" and the emphasis he puts on the reader's background knowledge.

and attitudes to which people are responding.”³⁴⁹ Or, as a scholar of pulp fiction in particular claims, many readers “seek a better understanding of the world, in which they live. And these writers provide them with characters and episodes they know and can identify with from their daily living.”³⁵⁰ Second, “rather than just holding up a mirror to African American life and affirming the realities of some aspects of black life, it can also serve as a powerful vehicle of critique, often explicitly indicting the social and political forces that create and maintain racial inequalities.”³⁵¹

But the boom experienced by the African American popular fiction came in the 1990s due to a new phenomenon some call “sister-girl”³⁵² and “brotherman” novels to which the rising amount of both hardcover and paperback originals by black American authors gave birth. Dietzel characterizes the two new genres as “sometimes steamy novels [that] cover ups, downs, and sexual politics of romantic relationship from either a female or male perspective.”³⁵³ And it was nobody else but Terry McMillan who started this transformation with *Waiting to Exhale*. Lisa Guerrero calls her properly a “popular and successful founding force in the genre of African American women’s popular fiction” whose 1992 novel *Waiting to Exhale* “heralded the arrival of an original model of the African-American woman and solidified the presence and marketability of sistah lit.”³⁵⁴

It is necessary to relate this phenomenon to the increasing purchasing power of African Americans who represent the target group of these novels. The increase of the middle- and upper-middle classes during 1980s and the following decade led to a greater market of black readers.³⁵⁵ What Dietzel calls the “renaissance in African American mass market publishing,”³⁵⁶ can be attributed to an interplay of various factors; among them there are changes in the class structure of the African American community, consolidation of the publishing industry, as well as the newly emerged (often female) authors willing to deal with contemporary issues. The existence of fewer publishing houses, relatively more attention paid

³⁴⁹ Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (Boston: Routledge & Paul Kegan, 1981), 233. Similar meditation over the author’s expectations placed on the reader and Eco’s clarification of steps involved in textual cooperation are offered by Umberto Eco in *Lector in Fabula*. The “close work” is more explicit, as if it were tailored with a particular group of readers on the author’s mind; by contrast, “open works” allow for innumerable individual responses, but still these are always under the control of the author to some extent, for he/she makes conscious and strategic stylistic choices. These choices lie in references to other works, explicitness/implicitness, allusions, use of certain grammatical structures, syntax, etc. *Role čtenáře aneb interpretační kooperace v narativních textech*, 65–84. The way McMillan and other representatives of popular African American fiction negotiate these two extremes, and how much space is the reader given in his/her cooperation when reading will remain one of the basic questions in this dissertation.

³⁵⁰ Qtd in Gwendolyn Osborne, “The Legacy of Ghetto Pulp Fiction,” *Black Issues Book Review* (September 2001): 50.

³⁵¹ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 159.

³⁵² The term “sister-girl” partially overlaps with “black chick lit” or “sistah lit” used in *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, and will be henceforth used as synonymous with “girlfriend novel,” as termed by Dietzel.

³⁵³ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 166.

³⁵⁴ Lisa A. Guerrero, “‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White,” in *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, 90.

³⁵⁵ Dietzel refers to a 1994 study that showed African Americans spent more than \$ 175 million per year on books, and that book purchases between 1988 and 1991 rose by 26 % in the black community. In addition, these figures have continued to climb and reader demand for black fiction increased even more in the second half of the 1990s. “The Trouble with Success,” *Publishers Weekly* (December 12, 1994), 33; and African American Book Club Summit (an organization with more than 350 members), both qtd. in Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 166.

³⁵⁶ It remains, however, a question whether it is appropriate to consider this boom as a rebirth of black mass market publishing, for African American literature had never been published in such amounts before, as a matter of fact.

to bestsellers and money-makers, not to forget advances in technology that resulted in new advertising and promotional strategies³⁵⁷ responsible for diffusion and availability of books—all these also contributed to this phenomenon.

Because the African American popular novels for women tend to revolve around the growing black middle class, Dietzel does not hesitate to label them directly as “black novels of manners,” focusing on “chronicling the social and love lives of the black petty bourgeoisie,” which makes them more than close to chick lit. Similarly to their 18th- and 19th-century predecessors, contemporary African American popular novels for women deal with “social customs and mores;” they also include the pursuit of happiness and romance, all that in combination with professional success. It becomes as a no surprise then that emphasis is placed on material possessions constituting or marking the newly emerged class, such as career, education, clothes, houses, cars, taste, etc. Most important, though, is “how characters relate to each other in these new social circumstances; women and men, parents and children, gays and straights, all struggle to figure out where one belongs and what blackness means in the twenty-first century.”³⁵⁸

The causes that enabled the flourishing of the African American (popular) literature after 1970s (as explained both by Griffin and Dietzel), vice versa, later also became the effects of the “renaissance” in the second half of the 1990s. These changes became visible in the further increase of African American book clubs, black-owned publishing companies, proliferation of black authors, establishing of black writers associations, and writing workshops, and abundance of web sites.³⁵⁹ The key role the internet and computer technology have been playing becomes obvious when taking into account how greatly these have been contributing to the increased availability of black popular fiction. Not only have they given numerous authors the opportunity to have their works published, but also to promote themselves. Last but not least, an old method of self-publishing has become used again, facilitated by dissemination of literature through the internet. The above mentioned demographic changes and demand for novels were also naturally noticed by the mainstream publishing industry: in the early 1990s, publishers have begun to regard black Americans as potential customers and consumers, which even resulted in recruiting African American authors who could write in those popular genres.³⁶⁰

If it had not been for the African American female audience, no such changes would have happened. The African American Literature Book Club claims that as much as 84 % of its members or visitors are middle-class, college-educated women,³⁶¹ “a profile that may easily characterize the majority of contemporary African American readers.” Again, it was Terry McMillan who is “generally credited with inaugurating this renaissance in commercial fiction with the publication and success of her novel *Waiting to Exhale*.” By doing so, McMillan has given rise to the so-called “girlfriend novel.”³⁶² Much has also been done for black culture and literature by African American women writers by Oprah Winfrey, a tireless promoter of both known authors as Toni Morrison or Maya Angelou and those lesser-known ones such as Pearl Cleage (discussed below), Lalita Tademy, and others. Oprah’s Book Club

³⁵⁷ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 166.

³⁵⁸ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 168.

³⁵⁹ Again, the African American Literature Book Club has played a significant role in this respect due to its wide scope of activities which include promoting the diverse spectrum of African American literature, satisfying readers’ book buying needs, serving as a resource and vehicle of expression for both aspiring and established writers, making literature more accessible to a broader spectrum of readers, fostering an appreciation for reading, and so on. “About Us,” AALBC.com, accessed November 10, 2012, <http://aalbc.com/aboutus.htm>.

³⁶⁰ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 166.

³⁶¹ “Company Description,” AALBC.com, accessed November 10, 2012, <http://aalbc.com/aboutus.htm>.

³⁶² Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 167.

has become a touchstone for judging a novel, as the books featured at her web site³⁶³ hardly fail to reach bestseller status. In Gates' words uttered in 2001, "one of the greatest changes in publishing over the last 10 years has been the realization that black readers are a large and growing market."³⁶⁴

It is not only the black audience that has been in favour of popular novels by African American (women) writers. McMillan's cross-over appeal "not only dispelled the myth that blacks don't read but also showed publishers that white readers will pick up a black author for entertainment."³⁶⁵ The increasing Americans' capacity "to identify with black characters; the black experience is a metaphor for the larger human experience"³⁶⁶ in the new millennium did not pass unnoticed by Gates either.

In addition to McMillan, there are other African American women authors who present popular novels for modern black women. Pearl Cleage, a novelist, playwright, short story and non-fiction writer, as well as April Sinclair depict their fates and everyday struggles with careers and relationships interwoven with the African American cultural specificities and current social changes facing black women. Besides that, their novels develop topical themes such as racism and racial prejudice, sexuality, spread of AIDS/HIV, threat of imprisonment, and others. Pearl Cleage's *The Brass Bed and Other Stories* (1991), *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* (1997), or *I Wish I Had a Red Dress* (2001) could be mentioned. Later she published *Babylon Sisters: A Novel* (2005), *Seen It All and Done the Rest* (2008), or *Just Wanna Testify* (2011).³⁶⁷ April Sinclair's first major success came with the release of her national bestseller, *Coffee Will Make You Black* in 1994, and she wrote a sequel to the novel titled *Ain't Gonna Be the Same Fool Twice* a year later. Her latest novel is *I Left My Back Door Open*, published in 2000.

5.2 Sources of Popular African American Novel

Even Barbara Christian, the first scholar to write a book-length analysis of the African American women's literary tradition in 1980, suggests a critique of the often enthusiastically received so-called "high" culture in black feminist academia, urging them to "retrieve the low ground."³⁶⁸ And, returning to the potential definition of what it means to create a popular piece of art, according to Dietzel, if its popularity is to be measured by "subject matter, by success among its intended audience, and meeting audience demands, then popular fiction has always been integral to African American literature." She sees black American literature not only "grounded in oral tradition, the most popular of all cultural practices," but—as some critics have argued—"African American literature has its roots in popular literary forms from its very beginning." Similarly important, if taking into account that African American popular fiction is directed at a broad black readership, then its roots are to be discovered in black-owned publications such as *The Colored American* and various other magazines whose target

³⁶³ "Books," Oprah's Book Club, accessed January 20, 2013, http://www.oprah.com/book_club.html.

³⁶⁴ Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Making Books," *The New York Times*, July 26, 2001, accessed November 30, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/26/books/making-books-books-by-blacks-in-top-5-sellers.html>.

³⁶⁵ Dietzel, "The African American novel and popular culture," 167.

³⁶⁶ Gates, "Making Books." By contrast, in Lisa A. Guerrero's opinion (speaking specifically about popular women's writing), although it is not clearly the case that the readers of chick lit and sistah lit, which is its subgenre, are exclusively of one race or the other, "it is obvious that even as African-American women can enjoy and, on multiple levels, relate to ... literary chicks, it is more difficult to see themselves in these white heroines. Similarly, white women are certainly able to root for and empathize with the heroines of ... sistah lit, but a distance remains between their own realities and those of the black female protagonists." Guerrero, "'Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves': Chick Lit in Black and White," in *Chick Lit*, 91.

³⁶⁷ Cf. Pearl Cleage's official website, accessed March 5, 2013, <http://www.pearlcleage.net/index.html>.

³⁶⁸ Cf. Christian, "The Highs and Lows of Feminist Criticism," in *Reading Black Reading Feminist*, 44–51.

group have been African Americans which have “regularly featured literature designed to appeal to a broad readership.”³⁶⁹

Dealing with other sources of contemporary popular black fiction, Dietzel names for instance detective tradition, adventure fiction of Frank Yerby,³⁷⁰ science fiction, fantasy, and others.³⁷¹ It might be of some importance that Yerby himself expressed a similar attitude to the genre of novel as McMillan; in “How and Why I Write the Costume Novel,” he writes, the “novelist’s job is to entertain” and therefore a novel is meant to please readers as well as to “help the endure the shapelessness of modern existence.”³⁷²

Thanks to scholars such as Christian and Dietzel who recognize the importance of what was described above, black women popular novel authors³⁷³ such as McMillan can make use of the vernacular, humour, colloquial speech, and other orality features, mixing them masterfully with the modern.

5.2.1 Romance Novel as a Productive Type of Contemporary Popular Novel and Predecessor of Black Chick Lit

What was said above about major publishers and their imprints directed at African American readers becomes even more interesting in relation to a particular genre of popular literature, and that is the romance.³⁷⁴ As Dietzel comments, the romance publishers preceded this trend as early as in the 1980s. (Sandra Kitt, the most prolific and best-known black romance writer, published her first book for Harlequin in 1985.) More important, today black romances “flourish in a market where they have both an independent audience and cross-over appeal.” The second largest publisher of romance literature after Harlequin³⁷⁵ is Kensington Books whose series of imprints titled Arabesque generates about ten per cent of the publisher’s internet sales. Similarly, BET enterprise has introduced Sepia, its imprint of trade paperback and mass market titles.³⁷⁶

It is inevitable to identify the close connection between romance and contemporary popular forms including chick lit. (Whether applying the term “romance,” “romance novel,” or “Harlequin novel,”³⁷⁷ it is essential to differentiate between the traditional historical

³⁶⁹ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 158.

³⁷⁰ Dietzel points out that despite millions of sold books he has been obscured and omitted from histories of African American fiction, which exemplifies the dilemma of a the black popular novelist, for scholarship for his work is “virtually non-existent.” “The African American novel and popular culture,” 161. Bruce A. Glasrud and Laurie Champion add that Yerby—similarly to McMillan and others—has been “criticized for not exploring race issues, and ignored when he did.” “The Fishes and the Poet’s Hands: Frank Yerby, A Black Author in White America,” *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 23 (Winter 2000): 15–21.

³⁷¹ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 159–164.

³⁷² Frank Yerby, “How and Why I Write the Costume Novel,” *Harper’s Magazine* (October 1959): 145–150.

³⁷³ Dietzel gives various examples of significant black authors who are listed alphabetically; just to name some female ones: Nikki Baker, Connie Briscoe, Octavia Butler, Bebe Campbell Moore, Odie Hawkins, Barbara Neely, Valery Wilson Wesley, etc. Susanne B. Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 170.

³⁷⁴ Both the term “romance” and “romance novel” are consistently used as synonymous, e.g., by Susanne B. Dietzel, Tania Modleski, or Barbara Fuchs. What the romance and chick lit have in common is discussed in detail for instance by A. Rochelle Mabry in “About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary ‘Chick’ Culture,” in *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, 191–206.

³⁷⁵ A basic difference should be made between the romance novels and the new line of chick lit novels called Red Dress Ink published by the same company since 2001 with an intention put as it follows: “Red Dress Ink is a women’s fiction program that depicts young, single, mostly city-dwelling women coping with the pressures that accompany a career, the dating scene and all the other aspects of modern life in America.” “Harlequin Launches” qtd. in Mabry, “About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary ‘Chick’ Culture,” in *Chick Lit*, 194.

³⁷⁶ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 165.

³⁷⁷ Cf. Barbara Fuchs, *Romance* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 124–130.

romance or “suspense romance” as well as “time-travel romance” on one hand and their modern successors represented equally by the three labels mentioned above on the other one.

As suggested above, the romance became one of the most successful genres as early as in the 1980s. To make sure the genre is well-specified, the dissertation approaches the romance as the “class of literature which consists of romances; romantic fiction, especially a love story; that class of literature which consists of love stories.” In particular, the romance novel,³⁷⁸ as limited to the purposes of the dissertation, can be defined as “a romantic novel or narrative.” The Arabesque romance is the African American counterpart to the Harlequin romance which can be characterised as follows:

Harlequins are well-plotted, strong romances with a happy ending. They are told from the heroine’s point of view and in the third person. There may be elements of mystery or adventure but these must be subordinate to the romance. The books are contemporary and settings can be anywhere in the world as long as they are authentic.³⁷⁹

Women across the racial lines make no exception and they have given origin to what Modleski terms “multicultural romances” that have appeared in recent years.³⁸⁰

The importance of the reader in case of the romance novel is undeniable. As Modleski points out, in case of the Harlequin one, the “invariably happy, utterly predictable endings and strictly limited point of view” prevent the reader from a “simple identification with the guileless heroines;” what is more, the reader is “superior to her in knowledge.” When it comes to soap operas—whose basic principles such as a larger amount of characters, open-endedness, episodic (sub)plots, etc. are employed by McMillan and other black popular literature authors to some extent—the position of the reader seems to be even more complicated, for he/she is “invited to identify with many characters.” Simultaneously, as Modleski warns, plurality of identifications does not necessarily mean empowerment of women; on the contrary, in soap opera-like works, multiple identifications of a reader can possibly result in “a sense of powerlessness,” for the reader experiences the suffering of one character that he/she knows to be the price of another character’s happiness.³⁸¹

What the critique of popular romances despises in particular is their escapist nature. A particularly effective parallel is drawn by Modleski who—despite the fact that she refers to a television commercial for Harlequin Romances—has a point: women who tend to succumb to what she calls “disappearing acts,” and therefore “vanish quietly behind the scenes” should better “start making themselves more visible.” This, however, is not very likely to happen if the women readers continue to feel an urge to escape into the “sugary pink selflessness.”³⁸²

As far as the women characters are concerned, in the romance, “the heroine of the novels can achieve happiness only by undergoing a complex process of self-subversion, during which she sacrifices her aggressive instincts, her pride, and—nearly—her life.”³⁸³ The same cannot be said about the heroines of chick lit, “the most recent and beloved form of women’s popular culture,”³⁸⁴ in which they actively negotiate their identity. As John Cawelti stated in 1976, “[t]here seems to be little doubt that most modern romance formulas are

³⁷⁸ The term “romance novel” will be used hereinafter in order to differentiate it from the vast amount of the romance genre transformations throughout the history, beginning with the classical romance, medieval European romances and their cycles, and so on.

³⁷⁹ Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, 28. For more guidelines of Harlequin romances, as far as the plot, obstacles between the protagonists, and their happy reunion that form an indisputable part of this genre, see *ibid.*, 28–35.

³⁸⁰ Modleski, introduction to *Loving with a Vengeance*, xvi.

³⁸¹ Modleski, introduction to *Loving with a Vengeance*, xvii.

³⁸² Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, 28–29.

³⁸³ Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, 29.

³⁸⁴ Modleski, introduction to *Loving with a Vengeance*, xi. As a matter of fact, the worldwide popularity of this kind of literature has led one author to refer to the phenomenon as a “pandemic—the avian flu, if you will, of the literary world.” *Ibid.*, xxii.

affirmations of the ideal of monogamous marriage and feminine domesticity. No doubt the coming age of women's liberation will invent significantly new formulas for romance, if it does not lead to the total rejection of the moral fantasy of love triumphant."³⁸⁵

5.3 Chick Lit: The Most Culturally Visible Form of Postfeminist Fiction

In the last two decades, major publishers have launched books "capitalizing on a particular kind of feminine angst, fictionally rendered humorous or, as some readers have claimed, archetypal."³⁸⁶ Often these books are autobiographical or semiautobiographical adventures of their protagonists who are mostly single black urban professionals, some of whom work in the media industry. They provide an insight into their love life, dating system, and possibly also document a shift in the climate of the American feminism. Such novels, labelled (black) chick lit, are mostly set in the contemporary large cities and reflect their fast pace, high energy, and consumerism. Depiction of single women irrespectively of their skin colour (possibly surrounded by other single women), their relationships, and economic status become the basic focal points of such novels.

Although it was not their intention whatsoever, what Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell did was to promote the entertainment reading now known as chick lit with their anthology title *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (1995)³⁸⁷ and the sequel, *Chick-Lit: No Chick Vics* (1996). Simultaneously, they encouraged the practice of interpreting the mainstream chick lit as what Harzewski calls "a pointer to a postfeminism age."³⁸⁸ This collection of contemporary American women writers' avant-garde fiction served as a direct inspiration for the theoretical formulations of postfeminism and provoked media coverage that would "attach the unhyphenated *chick lit* to this milieu."³⁸⁹ As a result, it would be virtually "perfunctory" to analyse chick lit without considering its meditation with feminism. "While the market for the Harlequin romance exploded with the advent of the second-wave feminism, chick lit emerged in what has been described as a postfeminist era, and it has frequently been pointed to as evidence, if not the cause, of feminism's debilitation."³⁹⁰

As it was outlined in the second chapter, postfeminism shares feminists' aims of empowerment to some extent, but distances itself from the Second Wave's strategy of collective and public political action, characterized by further development of or reaction against feminism, especially in the acceptance of masculine ideals or of the traditional feminine role." As a result, postfeminism can be seen as both an extension of the Second Wave feminism and a backlash of feminism in a sense. Harzewski suggests that the multiple and contradictory meanings ascribed to postfeminism reflect "feminism's growth beyond a

³⁸⁵ Qtd. in Harzewski, "Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners," in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, 29.

³⁸⁶ Harzewski, introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 3.

³⁸⁷ Mazza and DeShell originally intended to use the word "chick lit" in an ironic manner to refer to the vague postfeminist attitudes, and "not to embrace an old frivolous and coquettish image of women, but to take responsibility for our part in the damaging lingering stereotype." Therefore, ambiguity forms the very core of this literary genre. Cris Mazza, "Who's Laughing Now? A Short History of Chick Lit and the Perversion of a Genre," in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, 18.

³⁸⁸ Due to James Wolcott's article titled "Hear Me Purr" from May 1996 which only heightens the controversy of chick lit and actively manipulates the anthology's title, discrediting its original artistic intent, it has been taken for granted that postfeminism is to be automatically found in the mainstream chick lit, pointing at the "flirtational" type of voice used in the novels. In his shift from feminism to postfeminism, Wolcott touches the old polemical edge, implying an exchange of political seriousness for desperate longing for female desirability. Cf. "Hear Me Purr: Maureen Dowd and the Rise of Postfeminist Chick Lit," *The New Yorker*, accessed January 20, 2013, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1996/05/20/1996_05_20_054_TNY_CARDS_000376455.

³⁸⁹ Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 148.

³⁹⁰ Harzewski, introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 8.

unified political agenda and its fracturing into competing, sometimes antagonistic strands.”³⁹¹ Last but not least, confusion exists between postfeminism and the Third Wave, for these two share some overlap in history. Third Wave feminism (explained in the second chapter)—especially in comparison with the Second one—“perceives itself as more voluptuous, more unapologetically libidinous . . . , and like the chick lit protagonist, aims to manipulate power to its advantage within the dominant social system as opposed to the radical feminist advocacy of a separatist culture.” It takes the form of recent nonfiction produced by social theorists;³⁹² while chick lit is a literary genre whose protagonists offer both critique and fascination with popular media; simultaneously, the attempt to negotiate these power matters by means of a skilful production of the media.

Among all these confusing stances, Stephanie Harzewski offers a rather consistent and applicable solution, suggesting examining chick lit as “an implicit commentary on feminism’s gains and deficiencies.” Postfeminist theory, in her opinion, tries to understand feminism’s legacy and blind spots in order to “mark a new theoretical juncture, or to arrive at a blueprint for the future.”³⁹³ These debates resonate in chick lit: “In productive frictions between ties to the romance and the bildungsroman’s emphasis on individuation, chick lit yields social observations that work concomitantly with feminist philosophy and critical heterosexuality studies.” Postfeminism, then, maintains a more ambivalent view of independence than the Second Wave feminism, and its manifestation becomes “propelled by twenty- and thirty-something women negotiating the tensions between feminism and femininity. Chick lit replicates it in its formal structures and generic amalgamations the quandary of multiple and contradictory meanings confronted in a taxonomy of postfeminism.”³⁹⁴

The second sort of definition worth consideration is by Suzanne Ferris and Malory Young who say that from the perspective of literary criticism, it can be defined as a form of women’s fiction on the basis of subject matter, character, audience, and narrative style.”³⁹⁵ Modleski characterises the genre of chick lit as novels which “detail the trials and tribulations of young women [so-called “singletons”] searching for mates and/or struggling in jobs, often in the publishing world, while doing a lot of shopping on the way.”³⁹⁶ Most scholars, including Modleski, trace the genre back to *Bridget Jones’s Diary* by Helen Fielding from 1996, and claim the genre is best exemplified by the HBO series *Sex and the City*. Meanwhile the first wave of chick lit adhered rather closely to this book’s formula, the later novels have become much more diverse; on the other hand, the publishers and novel marketers have insisted on instantly recognizable cover designs (often pastel, picturing stiletto heels, handbags, purses, and other accoutrements of modern femininity, or even the protagonist themselves). As Modleski points out poignantly, their marketing strategies therefore “work to obscure novels that may deviate in important ways from the original formula.”³⁹⁷

Despite the recovery of a more nuanced consideration of women’s writing in the last three decades, chick lit as a genre regardless its richness has become a target of many critics as well as writers themselves, and—interestingly enough—the genre’s former editors, which Harzewski sees as a sign of “a resurgence of antinovel sentiment directed as a new segment of

³⁹¹ Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 151.

³⁹² Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 152.

³⁹³ A very different reading of postfeminism is offered in Modleski’s book *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a “Postfeminist” Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991), which is her reaction to the “Literary Feminism Comes of Age” 1987 article in the *New York Times Magazine*. She constantly argues that texts proclaiming postfeminism are engaged in undermining the feminist project and she therefore sees postfeminism as a kind of misogyny intended to direct the U.S. society back to a prefeminist world.

³⁹⁴ Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 150.

³⁹⁵ Suzanne Ferris and Malory Young, introduction to *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, 3.

³⁹⁶ Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, xxi.

³⁹⁷ Modleski, introduction to *Loving with a Vengeance*, xxi–xxii.

women authors.” They have been classified by “the neologism *chickerati*,” and “popular fiction characterized by its antagonists as consisting of ‘connect-the-dots plots’ recognized by ‘identikit covers.’”³⁹⁸ It is not only due to the uniform formula required from the books; some even claim that because of its enormous harmful impact on the readers,³⁹⁹ it can be said “to be contributing to the demise of the Western civilization.” Namely, in an article by John Ezard that appeared in the *Guardian*, both Beryl Bainbridge and Doris Lessing label the genre as “froth” which “wastes people’s time.”⁴⁰⁰ As Harzewski observes, their aim is to partly “prevent their own novels from being classed one day as beach reading.”⁴⁰¹ In addition, it is judged as a “pink menace to both the established and debut women authors who perceive it as staging a coup upon literary seriousness and undoing the canonical status of earlier works from *Pride and Prejudice* to *The Bell Jar*.”⁴⁰²

The mere existence of such novels does not elicit anxiety among critics, academics and writers. What, however, is alarming and disquieting is that the readers take what is written in chick lit novels as facts, or tend to aspire to what is presented in there as ideals, which is bound to lead to a “dumbing-down effect”⁴⁰³ of this kind of literature. The most critical stance has been taken by Elizabeth Merrick, the editor of an anthology titled *This Is Not Chick Lit: Original Stories by America’s Best Women Writers* (2006),⁴⁰⁴ which was a reaction to Lauren Baratz-Logsted’s *This Is Chick Lit* from the same year.⁴⁰⁵ Merrick denigrates the genre by contrasting it to what she considers to be real literature.

Chick lit’s formula numbs our senses. Literature, by contrast, grants us access to countless new cultures, places, and inner lives. Where chick lit reduces the complexity of the human experience, literature increases our awareness of other perspectives and paths. Literature employs carefully crafted language to expand our reality, instead of beating us over the head with clichés that promote a narrow worldview. Chick lit shuts down our consciousness. Literature expands our imaginations.⁴⁰⁶

Chick lit, then, is not only bad, according to Merrick, but it has also contributed to ignorance or obscurity of the literary fiction produced by some of the U.S. most gifted women.⁴⁰⁷

A debate like this one reveals much, uncovering the discrepancies at the literary market such as disagreement about the kind of reading considered proper for women and blaming one another for misfortunes in the publishing world which is said to be male-dominated. The romance novel’s heritage does not lie just in formal similarities and typical features but also in the mixed feelings with which both the romance novel and chick lit have been received. Sounding as a post-feminist, Radway (similarly to Charlotte Brunsdon) makes a significant observation concerning the participants of the process of reception of these kinds of literature: “writers and readers are themselves struggling with gender definitions and gender politics on their own terms and that what they may need most from us struggling in

³⁹⁸ Harzewski, “Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners,” in *Chick Lit*, 30.

³⁹⁹ Cf. Nina Bahadur, “Body Image Affected By Chick Lit, Study Finds,” accessed November 20, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/23/body-image-chick-lit-study_n_2534838.html.

⁴⁰⁰ John Ezard, “Bainbridge tilts at ‘chick lit’ cult.”

⁴⁰¹ Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 147.

⁴⁰² Harzewski, introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 5–6.

⁴⁰³ Harzewski, introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 3.

⁴⁰⁴ The collection provoked an unexpectedly stormy reaction by chick lit authors: cf. Elizabeth Merrick, “This Is Not Chick Lit: What’s in a Title?,” *Huffington Post*, accessed February 16, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elizabeth-merrick/this-is-not-chick-lit-wha_b_26838.html.

⁴⁰⁵ Cf. Lauren Baratz-Logsted, ed., *This Is Chick Lit* (Dallas: Benbella Books, 2006).

⁴⁰⁶ Elizabeth Merrick, introduction to *This Is Not Chick Lit: Original Stories by America’s Best Women Writers* (New York: Random House, 2006), ix.

⁴⁰⁷ Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 151. Lynn Harris’ *Death by Chick Lit* (USA: Berkley Trade, 2007) is a parody for its fans that, in fact, serves to validate the genre. Asking what chick lit would be without its conventions and device, Chicklit Club offers a list of ten most frequent clichés and character stereotypes. “Top 10 Chick Lit Clichés,” Chicklit Club, accessed March 20, 2013, <http://www.chicklitclub.com/top10cliches.html>.

other arenas is our support rather than our criticism or direction.”⁴⁰⁸ On the other hand, Modleski is not the only one who is not in favour of putting the feminist critical political attitude aside, insisting on the feminists’ obligation to apply “first and foremost an engaged criticism” when studying popular culture in order to raise consciousness about the way women are depicted.⁴⁰⁹

Chick lit is often discussed within the framework of the history of women’s writing for three reasons. First, naturally, it is due to its kinship with its predecessors belonging to the group of women’s writing.⁴¹⁰ Second, it is suggested widely that it is not for the first time the “lady novelists” have made it rather difficult for the female writers of serious fiction to be acknowledged by men.⁴¹¹ Third, as far as the legacy of prior works is concerned, more than the kinship to the romance novel,⁴¹² the chick lit’s connection to the novel of manners is accentuated.⁴¹³ There are several journalists who attempt to establish other canonical lineage between the chick lit and its predecessors, suggesting a link to Erica Jong or Larry McMurtry. Other anticipators of *Bridget Jones*, in Felicia Lee’s opinion, are popular black women novelists Terry McMillan, Connie Briscoe, and Benilde Little, labelled as “mid-wives of chick lit.”⁴¹⁴

The above explained retroactive attempts to label canonical works as kindred to chick lit happen to be accompanied by a similar yet inverse process in which new fiction by women writers is “erroneously classified as such, whether through blurbs or cover art, in an effort to take advantage of the genre’s popularity.”⁴¹⁵ Satirical aspects of the novel of manners, extension of Jane Austen’s comic legacy, and new elements of adventure fiction are brought into the contemplative tradition of the novel of manners.⁴¹⁶ Simultaneously, the chick lit label is given without hesitation to numerous novels by and about women, matters of the heart such as home, relationships, and family, which contributes to the already dubious reputation of the genre even more.⁴¹⁷

⁴⁰⁸ Radway qtd. in Joanna Russ, “Somebody Is Trying to Kill Me and I Think It’s My Husband: the Modern Gothic,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 6 (1973): 667.

⁴⁰⁹ Modleski, introduction to *Loving with a Vengeance*, xv.

⁴¹⁰ For a meticulous analysis of chick lit’s strong ties to the prose romance novel, popular romance, and novel of manners, see Harzewski, “Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners,” in *Chick Lit*, 31–43.

⁴¹¹ Rebecca Traister juxtaposes the present day debates over chick lit and several examples from the history of literary women’s denunciations of women’s popular literature, referring to George Eliot and her essay from 1856, titled “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” for instance. Cf. Rebecca Traister, Salon, “Women’s studies,” accessed April 15, 2013, http://www.salon.com/2005/11/01/chick_lit_3/.

⁴¹² Modleski makes a worthy point: “While chick lit, unlike its predecessors, does not often comment directly on romances, many novels may be read as tacitly criticizing the hopes romances appear to offer women. In this respect, it may be seen as the current form of antiromantic romances that date back at least a couple of centuries.” Modleski, introduction to *Loving with a Vengeance*, xxiv.

⁴¹³ Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 144.

⁴¹⁴ Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 144–145.

⁴¹⁵ Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 146. And meanwhile reviewers rarely invoke women writers of previous generations, writers of chick lit “frequently invite us to view their works as descendants of women’s literary classics: Plum Sykes by invoking Edith Wharton, Helen Fielding by modeling *Bridget Jones’s Diary* on Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, and Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus by choosing a passage about governess from *Jane Eyre* as the epigraph to their 2002 novel *The Nanny Diaries*.” Wells, “Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History,” in *Chick Lit*, 48–49. In connection with Austen, it is vital to recognize the importance of the 18th-century women novelists in general, but this time from a rather different viewpoint, for their keen interest in the heroine’s inner consciousness is one of the inherited features of present day women’s writing.

⁴¹⁶ Harzewski, introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 3.

⁴¹⁷ For more information, for instance listen to the author-panel discussion with bestselling authors Jane Smiley, Ellen Sussman, and Janis Cooke Newman. “Women’s Literature vs. Chick Lit,” Live Fully, accessed April 28, 2013, <http://www.paloaltojcc.org/events/2013/04/28/cultural-arts/women-s-literature-vs.-chick-lit/>.

The standard chick lit plotline is fuelled by depiction of several themes. These are the contemporary courtship behaviour and its social motives (reflected in values, the position of women in the society, and the protagonists' fortune at the marriage market), wrestling with urban material temptations in the form of compulsive shopping, extensive self-grooming; and/or indulging; dress codes, and so on. Besides that, there is a (quasi-)romantic plotline, the stance taken tends to be critical, subversive, and even reserved, which is often infused with a large portion of humour and the fact that the heroines feel free to behave as they wish, for there is no requisite endorsement of their behaviour.

The ambiguous polemics about what chick lit is in fact should be clarified by having a look at its further development, since the "in some instances sardonic" quality of pieces of literature presented in the anthology by Mazza and DeShell differs significantly from the posterior commercial production. Harzewski recognises two types of chick lit. The first group, that is, "the original version," hardly shares commercial chick lit's "capitulation to the marriage plot and investment in romantic ideology." In fact, the very nature of original version of chick lit is against the protagonists' inclination toward "fine consumables and the profligate tendencies." By contrast, "the second wave of chick" lit has reached much larger groups of audiences because of its "greater proximity to conventions of mass fiction, such as verisimilitude, chapter demarcations, and linear plotting." Both groups have in common that they say no to "identification with 'victim' or separatist politics."⁴¹⁸ Numerous authors' unwillingness to be associated with the genre is hence apparently caused by what it has turned into on its way, not by its original intentions.

Ferris and Young offer a more detailed overview of the second wave of chick lit which, in their opinion, "has crossed the divides of generation, ethnicity, nationality, and even gender;" these categories can even accumulate. It has given rise to the "hen lit," "matron lit," or "lady lit" focused on the women over forty (*Getting to Happy* could easily be ranked among these); or what Joanna Johnson calls "chick lit jr." with adolescents as the target group (Tiffany L. Warren's series for adolescent readers can be mentioned). There is also "mommy lit," adding new complexity to the old women's dilemma of career versus family with its classic representative *I Don't know How She Does It* (2003) by Allison Pearson. "Ethnick lit" includes two subgenres, "Sistah lit"⁴¹⁹ and "Chica lit." For Mallory and Young, *Waiting to Exhale* is a perfect example of the first one where the focus is changed from "the naïve single white woman seeking a fairy-tale romance to a more experienced black woman opting for the reality of friendship." Chica lit presents the lives, loves, and friendships of Latina protagonists. The second-generation Chinese American and Indian American chick lit authors have made their debut too. Other particularly intriguing subgenres are "Christian chick lit" or "church lit" and "lad lit" (which is also termed "dick lit" represented for instance by Nick Hornby, Scott Mebus, and Kyle Smith). The genre has also proliferated into "bride lit," "wedding fic," and its regional variation "southern fried chick lit."⁴²⁰ Chick lit, sistah lit, and their respective film versions "have been responsible for creating pop culture reflections of modern women that are at once honest, empowering, and profitable."⁴²¹ It would be oversimplifying to look as sistah lit simply as a "chick lit in black face," for—as Guerrero puts it—the race informs the ways in which these two and their protagonists diverge, especially in "their attitudes toward and relationship to men, marriage, and the struggle for worth,

⁴¹⁸ Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 150.

⁴¹⁹ Guerrero does not capitalise "sista lit" and says it has contributed to the "unalterably changed attitudes and imaginations of the large female consumer public" at the end of the 20th century. "'Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves': Chick Lit in Black and White," in *Chick Lit*, 87.

⁴²⁰ Ferris and Young, introduction to *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, 5–7.

⁴²¹ Guerrero, "'Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves': Chick Lit in Black and White," in *Chick Lit*, 87.

fulfilment, and respect” in three different points of view: socially, politically, and historically.⁴²²

Speaking about the relation between African American literature and the chick lit umbrella term, one must ask also about other reasons for the intensity of the above mentioned condemnation black women writers display. Harzewski explains that “[a]s chick lit has expanded to portray women of color as well as married, divorced, and widowed protagonists, its wider inclusion might compromise the canonical standing of other women-oriented texts.”⁴²³ Rita Felski even suggests—as it was hinted in the chapter on feminism—that “given the diversity of feminist positions, it is in fact impossible to draw any once-and-for-all line between the ‘feminist’ and ‘women-centered text.’”⁴²⁴ Still, if a novel is female-oriented, set in a city, and makes use of the first-person point of view, it does not make it automatically a chick one.

5.3.1 Narrative in Women’s Writing: From the Romance Novel to Chick Lit

There is a variety of strategies that make the women protagonists’ desires and motivations the focus of the story, the first-person narrative being the essential yet not the only one. Still, it is the “heroine’s voice, conveying the notion that these novels, although fictional, are authentic, in-depth accounts of women’s experiences.” This move toward the first-person narration is viewed as “an especially significant change from the third-person narration employed in most traditional romance novels” by A. Rochelle Mabry.⁴²⁵ (Modleski explains that one of the effects of the third-person perspective in the romance novel was to reinforce the protagonist’s status as an object of a primarily male gaze.⁴²⁶ The third-person limited narrative, also works to “minimize the contradictions women suffer in relation to the expression of sexual desire.”⁴²⁷)

Mabry deals with “techniques that make [the chick lit novels] ‘feminine,’ both in the stories they tell and the way they address their readers or viewers.” She basically agrees with Annette Kuhn who writes that one of the distinguishing characteristics of women’s genres as textual system “is its construction of narratives motivated by female point-of-view.”⁴²⁸ In Mabry’s opinion, the shift described above not only “strengthens the heroine’s voice and increases the reader’s opportunities to identify with her but also offers at least a temporary escape from the feeling of constantly being watched or controlled by a male-dominated society,” which is—fortunately—not the case of the self-sufficient four protagonists in *Waiting to Exhale*.

Morris puts women writers’ use of the first person narrative voice as well as their tendency to employ autobiographical narrative to “the special pleasure of recognition that comes from finding their own feelings and experience given shape in literary form.” Their choice therefore facilitates the process of reading as “interpersonal communication,” for “women readers as much as women writers seem to desire the sense of community that comes from ‘encountering in another woman’s voice what they believed [is] the sound of their

⁴²² Guerrero, “‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White,” in *Chick Lit*, 88.

⁴²³ Harzewski and McMillan qtd. in *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 147.

⁴²⁴ Rita Felski, “The Novel of Self-Discovery: A Necessary Fiction?,” *Southern Review* 19.2 (July 1986): 132.

⁴²⁵ Mabry, “About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary ‘Chick’ Culture,” in *Chick Lit*, 195–196.

⁴²⁶ Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, 56.

⁴²⁷ Modleski, introduction to *Loving with a Vengeance*, xvi.

⁴²⁸ Annette Kuhn, “Women’s Genres,” in *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 437.

own.”⁴²⁹ Such pattern of call and response is something the black literary tradition would hardly exist without.

5.3.2 Marriage, Domesticity and Disillusionment in Black Chick Lit

As explained in the previous subchapters, in the 1990s, a “flood of pop novels elevated the tribulations of the single, careerist, twenty-and thirtysomething of the world to entertaining and eloquent farce.” Guerrero describes the white protagonists and their attitude to finding a partner as “generally middle class,”

in search of love, though arguably most chick lit deals with the desire for romantic relationships as an ironic fantasy, at once coveted and mocked. The protagonists seek not the grand love portrayed in the classic romance but rather a modern love that is only extraordinary in the difficulty of finding a man who is single, heterosexual, committal, manly, sensitive, successful, and attractive all at the same time. ... [H]appiness, though often involving sex, *always*, and quite problematically, involves a deal of monogamous coupling, the promise of domesticity, and the comfortable routinisation that domesticity seems to provide.⁴³⁰

Marriage, as a matter of fact, is neither the ultimate goal nor the ultimate result in much of chick lit; however, it “does occupy an idealized place in the minds of many chick lit protagonists.” Guerrero sees the chick lit’s problematic relationship to the codified as commodified institution of marriage, as presenting one of the central negotiations the protagonists are constantly making as a part of the process of making sense of their lives.⁴³¹

The same domesticity which is longed and hoped for by white chick lit relationship-oriented protagonists gains a very specific connotation with their black counterparts in *sistah* lit. The black heroines are, therefore, often portrayed as “running *from* domesticity in an attempt to assert an identity that is unconnected to histories of forced compliance with the roles of caretaker, breeder, and sexualized object.” Therefore, black chick lit represents not only a mere reflection of new African American womanhood at the turn of the 21st century but also “a revolution *for*” this new womanhood.⁴³²

What is also significant for both chick and black chick lit’s simultaneous comic and tragic appeal to the reader is the protagonist’s “being successful and independent in society while being rendered ‘less than’ by the same society,” because she is single and childless.⁴³³ Taking into account the demographic changes at the turn of the 21st century, the identification of the female readership regardless their colour of skin becomes obvious, for much of the genre’s popularity can be attributed to the reality of the readers who find themselves in what Guerrero terms as “the virtually uncharted territory of being professionally powerful and relationally adrift.”⁴³⁴ These changes result in their greater professional expectations and a seeming right to claim advantages than those their mothers and grandmothers had on one hand (in the form of economic stability, self-determination), and still hope for the same romance preceding having a family as their female predecessors on the other.

Simultaneously, due to their special position within the U.S. society, black women at the turn of the 21st century represent “an unprecedented challenge to American social structures” that had put them at the absolute bottom of the social hierarchy of the society for centuries, and normalised their available space to the limited boundaries of servants and sex objects. This “indelible connection between black women, the domestic sphere, manual service labor, and the underclass had existed for so long in the American popular imagination

⁴²⁹ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 64.

⁴³⁰ Guerrero, “‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White,” in *Chick Lit*, 88.

⁴³¹ Guerrero, “‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White,” in *Chick Lit*, 88–89.

⁴³² The notions of double and triple jeopardy were discussed in the chapter on feminism. Guerrero, “‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White,” in *Chick Lit*, 90.

⁴³³ Savannah Jackson, one of the four protagonists of *Waiting to Exhale*, is a good example of this statement.

⁴³⁴ Guerrero, “‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White,” in *Chick Lit*, 89.

and social reality” that the emergence of the black chick lit and what it brings pose “a nearly herculean move toward naturalizing a distinctly different vision of black womanhood.”⁴³⁵

Playfulness, disillusionment, and (self-)irony tend to pervade (black) chick lit. While it is often concerned with finding a proper mate for the woman protagonist,⁴³⁶ great emphasis is placed on either the non-existence or unavailability of what Modleski understands as “Mr.Right.” Many chick lit novels may be called “novels of disillusionment,” especially in contrast with romances, “novels of illusion,” which “uphold belief in the perfect man, perfect sex, and a life lived happily ever after.”⁴³⁷ As Harzewski sums up, despite the generally upbeat endings of the novels, there is “a sobering darker element” which underlies the cheerful tone which has to do with the “dissolution of the heroine’s romantic aspirations and ideals.”⁴³⁸ Primarily, therefore, chick lit should be viewed as “a comedic genre deliberately written for women, whose light-heartedness and optimism upstage social criticism;”⁴³⁹ for “as the first novels, chick lit emerged as a subset of commercial print entertainments.”⁴⁴⁰ As Helen Fielding remarks, “the critics had missed the point,” for her creation of Bridget Jones was not meant to be taken seriously.⁴⁴¹

In Modleski’s opinion, it is the sense of disillusionment that makes many of the chick lit novels of interest to feminism, namely post-feminism. It is not that simple, though. On one hand, the protagonists often claim directly to be feminists, questioning the institution of marriage, devoting a large amount of energy and narrative space to describing bad sexual experiences, and deploring male behaviour (sometimes even to such a large extent that the authors are accused of writing male-bashing novels). On the other hand, the same amount of attention seems to be paid to finding the real mate within the male-dominated society, for which these novels are seen as reversing and therefore also harmful, for marriage is not more than an “institution that exists because of our collective inability to create more meaningful, more inclusive form of sociality.”⁴⁴² All in all, this is exactly what prevents women from aiming higher; and along the way, the protagonists’ attention is diverted by promoted consumerism and false freedom of choices. What makes the novels strike the readers as explicitly post-feminist is that “there is no longer a movement they can draw on to provide an understanding of the politics of women’s personal relationships and of women’s struggles in a misogynist world.”⁴⁴³

5.5.3 Chick and Sista Lit: Ambiguous Achievements

All things considered, chick lit has adapted several major literary traditions, including “traditional prose romance, popular romance, and the novel of manners.”⁴⁴⁴ The key difference between the romance fiction and chick lit lies in the latter one’s realistic depiction of the state of things. And because chick lit presets itself as “a literary form yet does not avoid alliances with popular entertainment, ... it calls attention to the tensions between high and popular culture.”⁴⁴⁵ What was originally meant to be accomplished by Mazza and DeShell in

⁴³⁵ The notions of double and triple jeopardy were discussed in the chapter on feminism. Guerrero, “‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White,” in *Chick Lit*, 89–90.

⁴³⁶ Harzewski terms this pursuit “dating panic.” *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 3.

⁴³⁷ Modleski, introduction to *Loving with a Vengeance*, xxiv.

⁴³⁸ Harzewski, “Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners,” in *Chick Lit*, 39.

⁴³⁹ Harzewski and McMillan qtd. in *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 147.

⁴⁴⁰ Harzewski, “Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners,” in *Chick Lit*, 33.

⁴⁴¹ Qtd. in John Ezard, “Bainbridge tilts at ‘chick lit’ cult.”

⁴⁴² Modleski, introduction to *Loving with a Vengeance*, xxv–xxvi.

⁴⁴³ Modleski, introduction to *Loving with a Vengeance*, xxvi.

⁴⁴⁴ This very fact leads Harzewski to contemplating whether to call chick lit a genre or just a trend. “Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners,” in *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, 31.

⁴⁴⁵ Harzewski, “Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners,” in *Chick Lit*, 33.

their two anthologies has been “slipping [gradually] away,”⁴⁴⁶ as they realise, being caught by its own traps. Curtis White puts it like this: “Chick lit has experienced that age old commodification shuffle. It was once strong and a force for something liberating. Now it’s been co-opted by people selling things. That’s okay. Let’s move on. Chick lit is dead. Long live chick lit.”⁴⁴⁷

Ferris and Young do not share Joyce’s opinion about African American popular literature’s attitude to racial tensions presented in black novels, as it was explained in the methodology and literary criticism chapter, stating that “[i]ndeed the novels studiously avoid references to racial inequality or specifically black problems and concerns.” To this, Tia Williams, one of the black chick lit authors, adds, “Recent black fiction has been full of whiny, suffering-from-hair-politics, my-man-done-me-wrong women. Sounds pat, but many people still think you need to be downtrodden to be truly black.”⁴⁴⁸ It is not the complexity or style of African American popular authors’ writing that most clearly distinguishes them from the canonical widely acclaimed writers, but this thematic and attitudinal difference is the most significant factor (if not the only one) that makes critics—especially the feminist ones—judge black chick lit as avoiding serious treatment of racial, cultural, political, and social concerns.⁴⁴⁹

“Mass” and “genre” literature⁴⁵⁰ can be considered as popular writing based on a successful formula that can be endlessly repeated. What mostly contributes to the recognizable patterns are the characters, themes, and forms used by the popular literature authors. When it comes to characters, almost exclusively, both major and minor characters of these novels are members of a suburban middle class with college education in various fields of study. As Dietzel adds, they “have overcome, or never even faced, racial discrimination and/or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. They have succeeded in a capitalist society; they may live in predominantly black worlds, but they are not very different from the world white characters inhabit in similar novels aimed at white readers.”⁴⁵¹ Meanwhile other African American women writers place emphasis upon historical reconstruction, using the motif of the journey both as a path from slavery to freedom, popular writers concentrate on themes such as family, finding a partner, and/or a meaningful job.

In the long run, “chick lit’s general status—or lack thereof—as entertainment reading” logically frustrates the feminist critics who hoped for more than a mere reflection but a tool for the transformation of the Western society. It can neither become “feminism’s ‘fourth wave’” nor provide prize fiction. As Harzewski sums up, it “has transitioned from an offshoot of the 1990s American literary avant-garde to entertainment reading characterized by a vigorous interchange with media and consumer forms. Its success affirms the permanence of light reading with vicarious wish fulfilment its modus operandi.”⁴⁵²

Despite the fact that current African American popular fiction can hardly be condensed into a simple formula—which does not concur with the dissertation’s aim anyway—

⁴⁴⁶ Mazza, “Who’s Laughing Now? A Short History of Chick Lit and the Perversion of a Genre,” in *Chick Lit*, 23.

⁴⁴⁷ Qtd. in Mazza, “Who’s Laughing Now? A Short History of Chick Lit and the Perversion of a Genre,” in *Chick Lit*, 23.

⁴⁴⁸ Qtd. in Lola Ogunnaiké. “Black Writers Seize Glamorous Ground around Chick Lit,” *New York Times*, May 31, 2004, accessed November 12, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/31/us/black-writers-seize-glamorous-ground-around-chick-lit.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

⁴⁴⁹ Ferris and Young, introduction to *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, 8.

⁴⁵⁰ “Genre literature” is a term used by Barbara Fuchs in order to refer to various types belonging under the umbrella term of the romance in her reading of romance and Harlequin novels. *Romance*, 124.

⁴⁵¹ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 168.

⁴⁵² Harzewski and McMillan qtd. in *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 147.

what its divergent genres have in common are plotlines that “revolve around the emergence and consolidation of a growing black middle class.”

On the whole, no matter that some of the authors of African American popular fiction have become “household names,”⁴⁵³ not enough is known about the “popular genres that make up the bulk of African American popular fiction. Stereotypes about this literature continue to persist, influence its study, or perpetuate its neglect. Books that sell by the millions and ensure their authors’ celebrity status are easily dismissed at potboilers, their subject matter considered trivial, and literary authors accused of ‘selling out.’”⁴⁵⁴ Still, there should be no doubt about these novels’ s importance, since they “mirror and validate many of their readers’ immediate circumstances and environment, but at the same time create a space where these circumstances can be evaluated, where resistance can be imagined, and where contradictions can be resolved.”⁴⁵⁵

Tracing some of the developments of African American popular fiction has a positive impact at least in two respects. It not only becomes a way of assessing the achievements of black literature, but it also may suggest significant directions for its future studies. Whether referring to novels by acclaimed authors or popular fiction of various kinds, the above raised questions—most often about aesthetics and ideology as conflicting and compatible tendencies in the novel—“have given African American authors a place of primary importance in contemporary critical discourse. As important as it is, therefore, to consider the novels written by people of African descent in America as thoroughly American, the cultural visibility and unique history of these novels demand they be read with closer scrutiny.”⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵³ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 168.

⁴⁵⁴ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 157.

⁴⁵⁵ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 162.

⁴⁵⁶ Graham, introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 1.

6 The Phenomenon of Terry McMillan

I write because the world is an imperfect place, and we behave in an imperfect manner. I want to understand why it's so hard to be good, honest, loving, caring, thoughtful and generous. Writing is about the only way (besides praying) that allows me to be compassionate toward folks who, in real life, I'm probably not that sympathetic toward. I want to understand myself and others better, so what better way than to pretend to be them? Terry McMillan⁴⁵⁷

The chapter offers the basic introductory knowledge about Terry McMillan, suggesting first with what is generally expected from African American woman writers at the turn of the 21st century, and how she in particular reacts to that. Then, her stance to chick lit is outlined, which is followed by a short discussion of Trey Ellis' concept of the New Black Aesthetic. McMillan's sources of inspiration as well as her unprecedented confidence in the black audience are also mentioned. The following subchapter deals with John Edgar Wideman's Preface and McMillan's Introduction to *Breaking Ice* (1990), an important anthology of contemporary African American fiction. Her initial experience with literature, reasons for writing, and overall attitude to literary activities are contemplated. The last two subchapters consider the issue of complexity and specificity of autobiography when it comes to African American women writers, and the key role the spoken word plays for Americans of African descent, providing the necessary pieces of information related to the following chapter about McMillan's life and works.

6.1 Introductory Notes

In 1994 Joyce, one of the few academics reacting to McMillan in a positive manner, writes that

[w]hile it is true that various means of racial oppression have become far more complex as we prepare to enter the twenty-first century, it is also true that the African-American community has undergone a profound transformation. ... Focusing on the interrelationship among Blacks within the community, the fiction Black women writers provide a kaleidoscopic picture of this transformation.⁴⁵⁸

And it has been McMillan's explicitly expressed aim to reflect how African American people's personal lives have changed.⁴⁵⁹ The major attention paid to the present in her case does not mean any diminution of the importance of the black past. At the first sight, it may seem so, though, if contrasted with authors such as Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, Alice and Margaret Walker, June Jordan, Sonia Sanchez, and others who mostly concentrate on identity rooted in African American history, and transform cultural and spiritual needs of the community into pieces of art (literature), following overtly the African-centred approach. Nevertheless, ignorance of the black heritage or a lack of pride are not what urges her to pay attention predominantly to "experiences that are indicative of the times we live in now."⁴⁶⁰

Most of critics who accentuate the importance of dealing with the racial tensions by depicting historical settings and lower-class characters are not in favour of McMillan's novels, condemning them as apolitical and even superficial. Joyce, on the other hand, appreciates her "captivating portrayal[s] of the daily interaction between a Black men and woman." (In *Disappearing Acts*, for instance, she "dramatizes the effect of hundreds of years of racial oppression on the relationship between Black man and women.") Although

⁴⁵⁷ Qtd. in *The Writer Magazine* July 10, 2001, "Her Work," Terry McMillan's official website, accessed January 15, 2013, available at <http://www.terrymcmillan.com/view/herwork>.

⁴⁵⁸ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 34.

⁴⁵⁹ This intention is clearly stated in the introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xix.

⁴⁶⁰ McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xx.

McMillan does not overtly focus on the issue of race, the ways which racism has shaped the characters' consciousness "serves as a background for their troubles throughout the novel."⁴⁶¹ Similarly, Joyce labels her *Disappearing Acts* as explicitly African-centred, suggesting that "true liberation will come only when we recognize that a breakdown in communication between African-American men and women destroys the African communal system"⁴⁶² in which "[n]othing is separate, isolated, detached."⁴⁶³

McMillan is far from being unaware of the importance of her African American literary predecessors and their achievements. Sharing the opinion of Trey Ellis expressed in his essay "The New Black Aesthetic" that African American writers are "free to write as [they] please,⁴⁶⁴ in part because of [their] predecessors, and because of the way life has changed," she insists on artistic freedom. In addition, she says, "I would be bored to death," if she were to spend time "writing ... only to please our readers and critics. ... As writers, we have a right to choose our own particular focus."⁴⁶⁵ Such freedom enables McMillan to comment on the lives of black Americans in countless ways. As a result, she feels free to poke fun, laugh at [as well as with], and pinpoint ourselves as we see fit," including depicting the interpersonal relationships within the black community, which was often criticised as "'air[ing] our dirty laundry' in front of the white world."⁴⁶⁶ Also, a detailed analysis of the male-female interaction among the characters as a part of her inclination to verisimilitude remains a creatively productive feature of her works.

Speaking about reception of McMillan, as she herself dislikes, some publishers "have used her phenomenal sales as a yardstick to judge emerging women writers, asking them to write novels like her megahit *Waiting to Exhale*," which prevents them from developing their own stories and writing skills. Further, "chick-lit's man-chasing focus does not reflect where they are in life," which makes McMillan loathe the genre, calling it a "cheap shot," for "because most women writers write about the heart and matters of the heart, and that can encompass a lot of things." Setting her above mentioned novel against traditional versions of chick lit formula, McMillan accentuates "a more universal significance" of her work.⁴⁶⁷ Still, many of the later chick lit novels bear a strong resemblance to hers, but—more important—not vice versa.

A paragraph or two should be dedicated to Trey Ellis' concept of the New Black Aesthetic⁴⁶⁸ due to their vivid exchange of opinion with McMillan and various mutual references. In his famous article, he depicts the alienation and estrangement felt by young black artists, often "feeling misunderstood by both the black worlds and the white." By means of culture and the new movement which "shamelessly borrows and reassembles across both

⁴⁶¹ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 36–37.

⁴⁶² Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 37.

⁴⁶³ Molefi Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1987), 78.

⁴⁶⁴ In particular, Ellis for instance elevates *Mama*, the first novel by McMillan, which "doesn't sidestep the periodic cruelty of the protagonist's mother just because many non-blacks already believe the black family doomed." Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo* No. 38 (Winter 1989): 238.

⁴⁶⁵ McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xxii.

⁴⁶⁶ McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xxi. Guy-Sheftall uses an identical expression with McMillan, speaking about violation of "a deeply held cultural taboo—that racial dirty linen shouldn't be aired in public." Guy-Sheftall, "Black Feminism in the United States," 307.

⁴⁶⁷ Harzewski and McMillan qtd. in *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 145.

⁴⁶⁸ Ellis' essay caused a prompt response by Eric Lott in the very same issue of the *Callaloo* journal. He ranks Ellis among the postmodernists, for he puts together numerous disparate works, namely jazz, rap, theatre and drama, popular fiction, pop singers, etc.; more precisely, "one of the "postmodernisms with conscience." He appreciates Ellis' claim on "non-regressive constituency," emphasis put on "the parodic impulses [which] both critique and keep alive the cultural nationalism they inherited," and being politically conscientious; yet accuses him of the lack of class critique and downplaying differences among "buppies, b-boys, and bohemians." Eric Lott, Response to Trey Ellis' "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo* No. 38 (Winter 1989): 244–246.

race and class lines,” however, he becomes reunited with other thirty-something black bourgeoisie intellectuals⁴⁶⁹ whose course “has frequently changed, crossed, and flouted existing genres according to their own eclectic inspirations.” He explains his and their ability to navigate similarly in the white world by being “a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of culture.” On one hand, “never before have individual, educated blacks had the ability to assimilate so painlessly” into the mainstream U.S. culture; on the other one, more and more of them choose blackness.⁴⁷⁰

More important, Ellis—similarly to McMillan—claims, “[w]e no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black.” The New Black Aesthetic dictates only one strategy: to be natural and not let other people define one’s identity. Present day’s cultural mulattoes echo those tragic ones only when “they forget they are wholly black” or if black people proclaiming “superblackness ... try to dream themselves back to the ghetto.”⁴⁷¹ Their reactionary nature does not imply these new black artists would not be aware of the fact that the works and protests of the black nationalists of the 1970s made their very existence possible;⁴⁷² on the contrary, members of the Black Arts Movement are their “constant icons.” To conclude, “[t]here is now such a strong and vast body of great black work that ... NBA artists aren’t afraid to flout publicly the official, positivist black party line.” The success of the NBA artists lies basically in three advantages: “a critical mass of college graduates who are children of college graduates themselves,” popular culture guided by “black people almost across the board,” and not caring “too much about what white people think.”⁴⁷³ What McMillan and Ellis have in common is their definition of black in black context, refusal of black propagandistic positivism, and fear of racism.⁴⁷⁴

To continue in the discussion of McMillan, as far as the tradition of bonding is concerned, it is mirrored basically in three ways in her works. First, she draws from her male and female literary predecessors;⁴⁷⁵ second, female friendship and sisterhood as one of the basic alignments of the African American community; third, her editing activities provide a tangible and practical evidence of this statement. In *Breaking Ice*, she expresses not only her wish there were more ways to encourage young people to engage in writing but also her pity that many students major in the “guaranteed professions” to ensure they can make a living at the expense of a genuine sense of excitement or satisfaction they might experience as writers.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁶⁹ In addition, the term “buppie” (or also “Buppie”) is referred to consistently in the essay which means a black urban professional, while “NBA” stands for New Black Aesthetic.

⁴⁷⁰ Ellis, “The New Black Aesthetic,” 234–236.

⁴⁷¹ Ellis, “The New Black Aesthetic,” 235–236.

⁴⁷² Ellis quotes Lisa Jones, one of Amiri Baraka and Hettie Cohen’s daughters. Ellis, “The New Black Aesthetic,” 236.

⁴⁷³ Ellis, “The New Black Aesthetic,” 237.

⁴⁷⁴ In particular, “[n]either are the new black artists shocked by the persistence of racism ..., nor are we preoccupied with it as were those of the Black Arts Movement. For us, racism is a hard and little-changing constant that neither surprises nor enrages.” He quotes Terry McMillan who thinks “life’s a bitch no matter what color you are. You can’t blame the world.” Racism does exist; it is not an excuse, though. Ellis, “The New Black Aesthetic,” 238–240.

⁴⁷⁵ On the other hand, Morris considers the potential harmful effects of overestimating female literary predecessors, using Gilbert and Gubar’s analysis of the affiliation complex as a “warning against any complacent or over-idealistic view of the likely relationship between women writers.” Likewise, she sees the danger of gynocriticism which puts emphasis on the pathology of women writers’ interaction with a patriarchal canon—and possibly a maternal one—in terms of self-division and madness becomes a poetics of suffering and victimization.” (And these are exactly what Terry McMillan aims to avoid throughout her literary career.) Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 73.

⁴⁷⁶ McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xxiii.

When it comes to McMillan's sources of inspiration, Tammy J. Bronson suggests, it is "her strong maternal ties that give her the insight and courage necessary to explore the female psyche the way she does." She has been quoted as stating "her mother is the strongest woman she has ever met in her life." From her early writings in *Black Thoughts*, a campus newspaper, it is easily seen how her strong mother-figure encouraged her to break out and find her voice. It is similarly important that it was Ishmael Reed that "gave her the courage to write." Other influences and/or influential impulses include the Harlem Writer's Guild, where people stimulated her to extend a short story into what became her first novel." From all these encouragements and support "an accomplished African-American female author who has published not only highly acclaimed fictional works but various critical essays as well" has grown.⁴⁷⁷

McMillan could be also understood as a healer of a kind. Charles Chesnutt's *Conjure Woman* (published at the turn of the 20th century) and Eleanor Traylor's criticism of the 1990s, as Joyce observes, exemplify the African American woman writer as a conjurer who mystically blends his/her identity with that of the other African Americans and who uses the magical power of the words to "soothe the spirit and challenge intellectual passivity."⁴⁷⁸ Although it cannot be said about McMillan that she remains unquestionably faithful to her people's traditions, as Richards sees it, she has the aspirations of a healer.⁴⁷⁹ The way she performs this differs from her contemporaries, such as Walker or Morrison, for she often dares subvert the texts and shows how the black people can contradict themselves, which is in concordance with the New Black Aesthetic she embraces. Still, her works are not rooted in African American myths, folklore, political, literary, or social histories; she does make use of the oral, namely it takes the form of the vernacular (combined with standard English), humour, blues, and improvisational jazz techniques, though. Last but not least, spirituality and healing play an enormous role in her works, as it will be proven in the analyses.

What also contributes to her success is her almost unprecedented (at least among the African American women writers) vigour and strong confidence in both her writing and the black audience. The following explanatory words are very important (hence the italics) and vital for any further discussion of Terry McMillan and her project. "*Times have changed. We do not feel the need to create and justify our existence anymore. We are here. We are proud. And most of us no longer feel the need to prove anything to white folks. If anything, we're trying to make sense of ourselves to ourselves.*"⁴⁸⁰ She balances the traditional African Americans' double burden of "having to prove their worth as human beings" and simultaneous "[t]rying to represent their own truths through art." Therefore, Richards sees McMillan as the first black writer "to manifest such complete confidence that a large reading audience will identify with her unadulterated African American truth."⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁷ Tammy J. Bronson, "Terry McMillan: Overview," in *Contemporary Popular Writers*, ed. David Monte (Detroit: St. James Press, 1997). Literature Resource Center, accessed May 13, 2013, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420005482&v=2.1&u=opave&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.

⁴⁷⁸ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurors and Priests*, 39–40.

⁴⁷⁹ Cf. Paulette Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 33.

⁴⁸⁰ McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xxi.

⁴⁸¹ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 30–31. Richards works on W. E. B. Du Bois' assumption that the Negro identity is based on a sort of "double-consciousness" defined by him as "the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." Black Americans' longing for acceptance goes hand-in-hand with their reluctance to give up their Africa-ness. *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. David Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Boston: Bedford Books, 1977), 38.

6. 2 *Breaking Ice: Look Ahead*

6. 2.1 John Edgar Wideman's Preface to *Breaking Ice*

Before proceeding to McMillan's stance in particular, as put in the Introduction to *Breaking Ice*, some remarks about John Edgar Wideman's Preface to the anthology should be made in order to better illustrate the book's message and circumstances of origin.⁴⁸² Wideman, "one of today's best-known and most compelling African-American writers,"⁴⁸³ makes use of the form of a letter to address McMillan (as the editor) in a personal and encouraging manner. His preface explains African American writers' "special, vexing stake in reforming, revitalizing the American imagination." In order to be able to break into print and make themselves independent from "history [which] is a cage, a conundrum," he says, "we must escape to resolve before our art can go freely about its business." Black Americans, one of whom he himself is, must be prepared "to deal with extra-literary forces that have conspired to keep us silent, or our stories, novels, and poems will continue to be treated as marginally as our lives, unhinged, unattached to the everyday reality of 'mainstream,' majority readers." He stresses that more and more of the contemporary U.S. best fiction gravitates toward the category of what is called "minority."⁴⁸⁴

Similarly to other African American writers before and in concordance with the representatives of reader-response theory, Wideman turns his attention to the reader, clarifying the ability of extraordinary stories to transport the readers to diverse regions where individual lives take place. Such stories enable him/her to "climb inside another's skin." The "mysterious dissolution of the ego also sharpens the sense of self, reinforces independence and relativity of point of view." Wideman sees narrative as a reciprocal (regressive and progressive) dynamic process for which curious readers "willing to be coconspirators" are a necessary prerequisite.⁴⁸⁵

Contemplating what lies in store for African American literature in the white world of white stories, Wideman comes to the conclusion that integration and use of vernacular language are simply not enough to break out of the circle of majority-controlled literary industry.⁴⁸⁶ If a black writer wants freedom of expression, "a larger goal must be addressed implicitly/explicitly" in his/her fiction. He continues, "[a] story should somehow contain clues that align it with tradition and critique tradition, establish the new space it requires, demands,

⁴⁸² Charles R. Larson in his review of the book praises that "it brilliantly (and almost single-handedly) dispels a number of myths about contemporary African-American literature and the culture that has nourished it. The scope of the stories repeatedly demonstrates the variety and the richness of African-American life-its tragedy and pathos, which we are accustomed to encountering in such literature, but also its humor and absurdity." He points out that many of the stories in this volume inform the audience that African American life is "not solely a response to racism. More importantly, they illustrate that 'protest' in black writing is on the wane and that black writers are no longer taking potshots at members of the opposite sex, as was commonly believed to be the case during much of the past decade." On the other hand, he considers the selections excerpted from novels "less satisfying than the self-contained stories," and states that "some of the older writers are represented by material that is inferior to that of their juniors." "No Time for Any Barriers," review of *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction*, *Chicago Tribune Books*, September 23, 1990, accessed February 21, 2013, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1990-09-23/entertainment/9003190617_1_contemporary-african-american-fiction-black-fiction-terry-mcmillan.

⁴⁸³ Charles R. Larson, "No Time for Any Barriers."

⁴⁸⁴ John Edgar Wideman, preface to *Breaking Ice*, v-vi.

⁴⁸⁵ Wideman, preface to *Breaking Ice*, vi-x.

⁴⁸⁶ Wideman AIDS that magazine editors know what their jobs depend on purveying images the public recognizes and approves, so they seldom include black American fictions, and almost never choose those which transcend stereotypes and threaten to expose the fantasies of superiority, the bedrock lies and brute force that sustain the majority's power over *the other*. Framed in foreign, inimical contexts, minority stories appear at best as exotic slices of life and local color, at worst as ghettoized irrelevancies. Wideman, Preface to *Breaking Ice*, vi.

appropriates, hint at how it may bring forth other things like itself, where these others will, have, and are coming from.” In other words, maximum of free, original artistic expression must be ensured and new stories must be invented.⁴⁸⁷

For African Americans were actually forced to enter the skin of others, Wideman sees the centuries of accumulated experience and the necessity to cultivate the double-consciousness as their peculiar advantage; these phenomena have resulted in their ability to offer alternative realities. Another advantage resulting from marginality is a refined awareness and proficiency in non-literary modes of storytelling. Black folk culture has preserved a sense of identity, history, and self-evaluation which exist apart from the destructive incarcerating images propagated by the mainstream U.S. culture. Whether consciously or not, in Wideman’s opinion, African American authors have integrated the folk culture resources into their writing. (Similar strategies are, for example, used in present day rap music.) Such literature which remembers its roots and the social conditions—when it does not let itself to be distracted—“keeps telling the truth which brought it into being, ... resisting those definitions” by means of “key postures that are subversive, disruptive, disjunctive,” which should be cherished in the African American fiction.⁴⁸⁸

Accordingly, the language itself must be questioned in order to understand how expressing of the dialectic, tension, conversation, etc. functions. Wideman asks “whose language is it anyway” and warns against the reinforcement of hierarchical concepts, for “black/white, either/or perceptions of the tensions within language are woefully inadequate.” Language, meaning, meaning above the language, development of language, and other issues, in his opinion, should be studied.⁴⁸⁹

6.2.2 Introduction to *Breaking Ice* and McMillan’s Overall Approach to Writing

After the initial success of her first two novels, McMillan became the editor of *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction* in 1990.⁴⁹⁰ In the Introduction, she provides the readers with a detailed personal account of her earliest experience with literature, reasons for taking part in editing of the anthology, and—most important for this dissertation—her overall attitude to writing.

As a child, McMillan totally unaware of the fact that African American people wrote books until she saw James Baldwin’s face looking at her from a book cover she was too put away at the local public library⁴⁹¹ where she worked from the age of sixteen for \$ 1.25 an hour.⁴⁹² First, she could not imagine “that he’d have anything better or different to say” than most of the classic predominantly white male writers introduced to her at high school; even if they did, neither had she trust in the idea that anybody would publish it. These speculations were based not only on lack of information about African American literary achievements and McMillan’s not yet having acquired “an ounce of black pride” but also her knowledge of hardly anyone who read books.⁴⁹³

The first time she developed passion for a book, however, came earlier. She explains, “I did not read for pleasure, and it wasn’t until I was sixteen when I got a job shelving books

⁴⁸⁷ Wideman, preface to *Breaking Ice*, viii–ix.

⁴⁸⁸ Wideman, preface to *Breaking Ice*, vi–viii.

⁴⁸⁹ Wideman, preface to *Breaking Ice*, ix–x.

⁴⁹⁰ The title of the collection stems from what, in her opinion, “African-Americans have been doing for some time,” that is, “how we have literally been breaking ice not only in getting published, but getting the respect and attention our work deserves.” McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xxiv.

⁴⁹¹ The book was *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. “About Her,” Terry McMillan’s official website, accessed March 10, 2012, <http://www.terrymcmillan.com/view/bio>.

⁴⁹² Wendy Smith, “Terry McMillan: The Novelist Explores African American Life From the Point of View of a New Generation,” *Publishers Weekly*, May 11, 1992, 50.

⁴⁹³ McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xv–xvi.

at the public library that I *got lost in a book*. It was a biography of Louisa May Alcott. I was excited because I had not really read about poor white folks before. ... I related to Louisa because she had to help support her family at a young age, which was what I was doing at the library."⁴⁹⁴ This experience turned out to be crucial to her in terms of inspiration.⁴⁹⁵

Only after the assassination of Malcolm X and reading Alex Haley's biography she "realized there was no reason to be ashamed of being black." McMillan, as she puts it, started thinking about her role in the world and not just on her street, which resulted in having more questions than answers. At college, she was amazed to see there were enough black writers to warrant an entire class; her world "opened up." She "accumulated and gained a totally new insight about, and perception of, our lives as 'black' people," as if she "had been an outsider and was finally let in." In other words, McMillan discovered African Americans had been living "diverse, interesting, provocative, and relentless lives," and "some folks had taken their time to write it down." She admired these people for having genuine knowledge and insight, for having learnt how to exploit the language.⁴⁹⁶

When she herself wrote her first poem, she could not comprehend what had happened, for she never considered herself to be gifted languagewise. It took years before McMillan called herself a poet; before, she said she only wrote poems. Disturbed by things that mattered to her and that she could not change, she turned writing into "an outlet for [her] dissatisfactions, distaste, and [her] way of trying to fix what [she] thought was broken. It later became the only way to explore personally what [she] didn't understand."⁴⁹⁷ She ended up asking herself what she really cared about: "it was people, and particularly African-American people."⁴⁹⁸

McMillan claims that initially she was terrified by the whole idea of taking herself seriously as a writer, doubting she would be good enough. After trying other professions, she majored in journalism and went to a film school eager to "figure out another way to make [a positive] impact on folks." McMillan's basic strategy of addressing large audiences becomes obvious at this point. She says, "what was inherent in my quest to find my 'spot' in the world was this whole notion of affecting people on some grand scale. Malcolm and Martin caused me to think like this." As she never could stop writing, despite her other activities, she

⁴⁹⁴ McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xv.

⁴⁹⁵ Broden gives a more accurate overview of her reading activities as it follows. When working at the library, she was "unable to comprehend the possibility that Baldwin's literary skills might equal, or even surpass, those of the major white writers she had studied; unable to confront this newfound fear, she shied away from reading Baldwin." Yet, having read Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Louisa May Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner, she "yielded to the pressure of her new intellectual appetite for black writers." Having enrolled in an introductory course on African American literature at Los Angeles Community College later, she became "passionate over the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Countée Cullen, Ann Petry, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright; finally, she read James Baldwin. The exposure to writers of her own cultural community opened the door to McMillan's own poetic instincts." B. J. Broden, "Terry McMillan: Overview," in *Reference Guide to American Literature*, ed. Jim Kamp (Detroit: St. James Press, 1994, 3rd ed). *Literature Resource Center*, accessed May 13, 2013, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420005483&v=2.1&u=opave&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.

⁴⁹⁶ McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xvi.

⁴⁹⁷ This reason for writing is a recurrent one—see the epigraph of this chapter.

⁴⁹⁸ McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xvi–xvii. This attitude is not very far from the one she has to her characters. She comments, "I'm not one of those writers who just edits, especially when I'm working on a first draft. Sometimes I actually delete an entire chapter from the memory so I have to type it all over, because that's the only way I can relive it. I have to stay close to these people, I have to have their experiences, too, and the only way to do that is to start all over—that stuff is cumulative. It can be very exciting, and it can be very painful, but I have to make the emotional investment." Smith, "Terry McMillan: The Novelist Explores African American Life From the Point of View of a New Generation," 51.

realized writing was something she aspired to at last and she did it because she literally had to.⁴⁹⁹

The previous lengthy paragraphs serve one purpose: to trace back how the whole idea for the anthology came about. In 1987, as a teacher at the University of Wyoming McMillan came to the conclusion that something must have been wrong, for besides those titles published prior to the 1960s, she “could not recall any recent anthologies in which contemporary African-American fiction—writers who’d been published from the early seventies to now—had been published.” Most of the books she encountered anyway concentrated on drama, poetry, essays, playwriting, and literary criticism, or were historical, segregated by gender or geography, and she learned there had not been an anthology comprised of fiction in over seventeen years. She felt an urge to “fill the void” and put together a collection of fifty-seven pieces of prose.⁵⁰⁰

Besides McMillan’s endeavour has become not only to reflect how the lives of black Americans had changed on the personal level since the 1960s, but also to capture the enormous diversity of their visions, outlooks, and experiences over the two decades. As a result, as she claims, “[m]uch of our work is more intimate, personal, reflects a diversity of styles and approaches to storytelling, and it was this new energy that I hoped to acquire for this anthology. This is exactly what I got.”⁵⁰¹ Accordingly, three categories of writers—“seasoned, emerging, and unpublished”—appear alphabetically listed; there are no stories grouped by themes and the pieces “stand on their own.”⁵⁰² In the new generation of African American writers emerging, these are “a fine group who have strong voices, who have seen the world from a different stair. Our experiences as African-American women and men are undoubtedly distinctive, and in some cases unconventional. And just like the color of our skin varies in shades of black, so does our vision.”⁵⁰³

On top of what has so far been said about McMillan and her vision of contemporary African American literature, in the introduction she also defines her own writing strategies in the form of advice to younger authors. She reminds them that writing, indeed, “is personal.” Therefore, they should not write to impress or to prove a reader how much they know; instead, they should “write *to know*.” Her advice continues: simultaneously, “you want to snatch readers’ attention, pull them away from what they’re doing and keep them right next to your characters. You want them to feel what your characters feel, experience it with them so the readers are just as concerned about their outcome as the character is.”⁵⁰⁴

6.3 Autobiography: a Tricky Matter

Before proceeding any further, several important observations which have to do with the autobiographical in McMillan’s works must be made. First, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese puts it, a literary tradition (even an autobiographical one) does not exist in a vacuum but is always anchored, for it “constitutes more than a running, unmediated account of the experiences of a particular group.” The coherence of such a tradition consists of both unfolding strategies of representation and the experience itself. As a result, black women’s autobiographical discourse is undoubtedly derived from black women’s experience but less than from condition in the narrow empirical sense. It is derived even more from “the tension between condition

⁴⁹⁹ McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xvii–xviii.

⁵⁰⁰ McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xviii–xix.

⁵⁰¹ McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xx. For the complete list of the include authors and their selected pieces of prose works, see xi–xiii.

⁵⁰² McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xxii. McMillan’s works are represented by a piece of prose Ma’Dear, published originally in *Callaloo* 30 (Winter 1987), available also in *Callaloo* 24.2 (2001): 562–568.

⁵⁰³ McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xxiv.

⁵⁰⁴ McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xxiii.

and discourse, from the changing ways in which black women writers have attempted to represent a personal experience of condition through available discourses and in interaction with imagined readers.”⁵⁰⁵ Therefore, Terry McMillan’s one derives not from the general categories of race or sex, but from her historical experience of being a black (later also middle-class) female in a specific (American) society at a particular moment. (Nikki Giovanni contributed to a large extent to the debate over the relation of black women’s autobiographies to changing political conditions and their inseparability. She disagrees with the assumption that “the self is not the part of the body politic,” insisting on literature’s need to reflect reality and seek change if needed.⁵⁰⁶)

Next, any black American woman author’s personal experience cannot be fully understood if taken out of the social context. That is due to what Elizabeth Fox-Genovese says about this culture where “a dominant gender system or model of gender relations wrestles with various subsystems of alternate systems.” In other words, the separate male and female spheres as a result of the male hegemony “has influenced ways in which most American [white] women have written about themselves and their lives, and it especially has influenced their sense of their readers.” The same cannot be applied at black American women, for their experience and subsequently also writing have departed significantly from this model: simultaneously, “they have been alienated from and bound to the dominant models” in ways that make their experience very different from that of white women.⁵⁰⁷

Moreover, the problem of African American women writer’s autobiographical writings is that they not always offer accurate and/or precise information. A notorious example is Zora Neale Hurston whose “troubling” autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*, a combination of Hurston’s imagination and creative intellect, kept many scholars rather busy,⁵⁰⁸ reflecting the dilemmas that confronted black women writers of her generation.⁵⁰⁹ And last, thirty years ago, in her discussion of the audience and target group Fox-Genovese claims that there is little evidence that African American women autobiographers “assumed that any significant number of other black women would read their work. To the extent that they have, until very recently, written for other black women, they seem to have written for younger women, for daughters, for those who would come after.” (It is important to point out that in this case Fox-Genovese refers both to autobiographical fiction and formal autobiographies, “both streams of which have sources in a rich oral Afro-American culture.”) Simultaneously, love felt from their female elders in folk communities is a present feature of such writings.⁵¹⁰

Apparently, much has changed since then. It is not daring to say that the availability of sources of autobiographical information, including countless interviews, McMillan’s participations in television talk shows, her web sites,⁵¹¹ and—above all—her willingness to

⁵⁰⁵ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of African American Women,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 178.

⁵⁰⁶ Nikki Giovanni, qtd. in Claudia Tate, ed., *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1983), 62.

⁵⁰⁷ By the very different experience Elizabeth Fox-Genovese refers both to the lack of satisfactory social definition of black American women and symbolic emasculation of black American men (which she calls the “social unmanning”) as long-lasting legacies of slavery. “My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of African American Women,” *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 187–188.

⁵⁰⁸ Cf. Robert E. Hemmenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1980) with a foreword by Alice Walker.

⁵⁰⁹ Fox-Genovese, “My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of African American Women,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 193.

⁵¹⁰ Fox-Genovese, “My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of African American Women,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 185.

⁵¹¹ Cf. Terry McMillan’s official website, accessed March 10, <http://www.terrymcmillan.com/>. For instance, the section called About Her contains Frequently Asked Questions. McMillan’s 2005 public confrontation of her gay

share rather personal pieces of information have become part of her strategy to attract the readers.⁵¹² (That is, however, not to say that figures of books sales are what predominantly affects her sense of how best to present her self to the readers or her sense of the relation between herself and the social conditions.) For example, McMillan insists that *Waiting to Exhale* “is not an autobiographical work, yet conceded in an *Essence* interview with Audrey Edwards that ‘there are bits and pieces’ of [her] in the novel. However, she readily admits that her second novel, *Disappearing Acts*, was created from the seeds of her own personal experiences.”⁵¹³

To summarise, McMillan often puts emphasis on her characters talking to her and wanting to be written about. When asked whether these characters might actually be speaking to her about her own life in an interview with Robert Siegel and Michelle Norris, she states her opinion as follows.

Yeah, I think I identified with a lot of the things that a lot of women had been doing for years in terms—in their hopes—in their quest to try to be good mothers, ‘cause I’ve taken motherhood very, very seriously. But there are things that can be somewhat autobiographical that don’t necessarily mean they happened to you. And sometimes the beauty of writing is that you don’t even know what you feel until you actually write it down.⁵¹⁴

6.4 Power of the Word of Mouth

In the chapter on African American literary criticism the scholarly emphasis put on African history and culture as well as the manifestations of African culture in black American society of the 1970s, and examination of the manifestations of African culture in African American folk traditions of the 1980s were outlined. These continue a decade later when Joyce examines E. Ethelbert Miller’s⁵¹⁵ use of jazz, blues, colloquial language, and sensual images in his poetry. A similar attempt is represented by Paulette Richards who approaches McMillan’s works as standing “at an important juncture in the evolution of the African American literature because they provide a body of popular fiction to nourish the creative imagination along with the oral traditions.”⁵¹⁶ She speaks “*en famille*” to a primary audience

ex-husband Jonathan Plummer came as a surprise even to the host of the show, Oprah Winfrey—see “Terry McMillan Confronts Her Gay Ex-Husband—Oprah’s Lifeclass—Oprah Winfrey Network,” YouTube, accessed March 15, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MseHFRzExxg>. Their reconciliation is commented on “Terry McMillan on Letting Go of Anger—Oprah’s Lifeclass—Oprah Winfrey Network,” YouTube, accessed March 15, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQo12y8G-sM&NR=1&feature=endscreen>. Winfrey uses this story as a powerful message to her audience of the necessity of letting go of whatever has happened to a person in order to be able to live in a present moment with what is happening at that moment instead of holding on to what has been done wrong. That, in her opinion, enables people to make decisions, move forward, and actually access power.

⁵¹² Paradoxically, McMillan’s message at her official website which says “This biography goes out to all you nosy folks ... if it was up to me you would still be guessing!,” which only goes to show that. “About Her,” accessed March 15, 2013, <http://www.terrymcmillan.com/view/bio>.

⁵¹³ McMillan qtd. in B. J. Broden, “Terry McMillan: Overview.” There were so many “coincidental” similarities that McMillan’s former partner and the father of her son, Solomon, Leonard Welch, sued her and Viking publishers for defamation of character, based on what he viewed as a nearly identical depiction of him in the book. Ultimately, his \$4.75 million libel suit was dismissed by the New York Supreme Court in a decision that protects the artist’s creative license. *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁴ “Interview: Terry McMillan discusses her new novel, *The Interruption of Everything*,” *All Things Considered*, July 26, 2005. *Literature Resource Center*, audio file, broadcast transcript, accessed May 14, 2013, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA161861247&v=2.1&u=opave&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>. The interview also contains more details about her unwanted publicity.

⁵¹⁵ E. Ethelbert Miller is the founder of Howard University’s Afro-American Resource Center who invited writers of colour from across the U.S. to read in Washington, D.C.; he is also a poet and scholar whose activities link him to feminism, for instance, by illuminating the political corruption that shapes the lives of oppressed people in the United States. Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 199.

⁵¹⁶ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 20. For more information about the theoretical explanation of the subject matter of African American enforced illiteracy due to slavery, and the subsequent importance of orally transmitted

of African American people. Richards identifies airing the family secrets, use of family jokes, and inclusion of political content as direct evidence for that.⁵¹⁷

McMillan is widely considered without equal as a capable reader and performer.⁵¹⁸ She mimicks her characters' voices and revels in their profanity. (Her audiences begin applauding and letting out cries of 'Say it, sister' almost with her first sentence."⁵¹⁹) The undeniable power of the mouth word becomes obvious when taking into account what Richards states. "Although African Americans live within a print culture, they still value 'the word' as an oral experience. Hence, book tours and public readings have become an important part of the connection between writers and readers in the imagined African American printed community." In addition, "[r]eceiving 'the word' in performance allows for a communal interpretation of the text."⁵²⁰ McMillan's ability to engage her audience in the traditional call-response exchange, her authority, and the credibility of her "womanist street theory" come, in Wilkerson's opinion, both from her art and her life.⁵²¹ Furthermore, her "energetic jaunts around the country illuminate the astounding diversity of audience for her realistic portrayal of the complexities in the romantic lives of contemporary black professional women."⁵²² It is estimated that African Americans make up 90 per cent of her audiences.⁵²³

The need to fill the demand created by McMillan's success has opened the doors for many other writers. She not only created a new cross-racial readership but also has inspired a whole generation of authors. These were identified as "Terry's Children" by the *Essence* magazine⁵²⁴ who "are younger writers deliberately extending the urban contemporary mode"⁵²⁵ she has developed. Richards names the following authors and titles: *Tryin' to Sleep in the Bed You Made* by Virginia DeBerry and Donna Grant; *Nothing but the Rent* by Sharon Mitchell; *Behind Closed Doors* by Kimberla Lawson Roby; *Caught It Up in the Rapture* and *Li'l Mama Rules* by Sheneska Jackson; *Good Hair*, and *The Itch* by Benilde Little. Interestingly enough, these were also joined by male writers, e.g., Eric Jerome Dickney and his *Sister, Sister* or *Friends and Lovers*; *Fed Up with the Family* by Franklin White, etc. Both these "sisters" and "brothers" depict "black middle-class communities with particular emphasis on interpersonal relationships."⁵²⁶

literature, as well as the explanation of why the expectations of black reading include the view of literature serving a functional purpose, see *ibid.*, 27–29.

⁵¹⁷ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 19.

⁵¹⁸ Not only she tours extensively reading her works, but she teaches writing workshops nationally. Bronson, "Terry McMillan: Overview."

⁵¹⁹ Daniel Max's impression of McMillan's reading which became part of teaching a single fiction class at an adult-education programme in East Harlem in August 1992. In a newspaper article he explains the ability of black audiences not to "leave the gulf between speaker and listener that is typical of white audiences." The author can be compared to a minister, and, therefore, repeated responses such as "You got that right" or "O, child" accompanied her performance. Her account of black life and McMillan's positive attitude to it "brought shouts of appreciation." Daniel Max, "McMillan's Millions," *The New York Times*, August 9, 1992, accessed March 7, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/08/09/magazine/mcmillan-s-millions.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

⁵²⁰ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 29. "Imagined community" is Benedict Anderson's term applied by Richards; his theory emphasises that "national or ethnic group identity is a collective fiction." *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵²¹ Isabel Wilkerson, "On Top of the World," *Essence*, June 1996, 51.

⁵²² As McMillan told Boudreau, "There is a real strong identity with some of the things these women are experiencing, and not just among black women. I'm hearing a lot from white women. There are millions of women out here now in America between the ages of 30 and 40 who are well-educated, attractive, self-sufficient and having a hell of a time finding Mr. Right." Qtd. in Broden, "Terry McMillan: Overview."

⁵²³ Max, "McMillan's Millions."

⁵²⁴ Qtd in Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 19.

⁵²⁵ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 19.

⁵²⁶ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 19.

7 Terry McMillan: Life and Works

...as a writer I understand or I'm trying to understand what makes people tick. I try to make the characters believable, realistic. ... All I thought about was my story, and telling it, and feeling it. And that's how I write. And that's why I write. Terry McMillan⁵²⁷

An explanation of Jauss' concept of horizon of expectations is taken in this chapter in order to be able to track the reasons for McMillan's success among the readers on one hand, and mixed reception by the critics as well as other black women authors on the other one. The contemporary African American criticism, fiction by women writers after 1970 in general, and the popular novel were elaborated in the third, fourth, and fifth chapters of the dissertation so as to provide a solid background for any discussion of the horizon of expectations of the actual readers at the beginning of the 1990s.

In this chapter McMillan's life⁵²⁸ is discussed as part of the overview of her works; the connection between them is motivated by the tight bond between the two. Having a look at the themes explored in particular novels, it becomes more than obvious how her books heavily depend on her own experience. For example, Richards sees McMillan's "ability to draw on her own life experiences and evoke her own emotional truth in her novels" as "a record of her own spiritual growth." As a result, the formal structure "changes with each work. Indeed, while the literary establishment has dismissed Terry McMillan as a popular fiction writer, her continual manipulation of popular women's fiction genre conventions to suit her own artistic ends is a measure of her talent and skill."⁵²⁹ The purpose of stating what the reviewers say about the novels shall not compensate for not being familiar with them, but the chapter attempts to shed some light at their author's perception of Terry McMillan's works before and after her great success.

The degree of authenticity offered by McMillan and the fact that she writes pieces of her into her characters may even result in the perception that her works are far from being fiction. The readers, critics, journalist, and TV hosts have identified McMillan with the protagonists of her books so often that she has the impression that more has been written about her than about her work.⁵³⁰ She says, "There are going to be people out there that are going to review the book for what it is. And of course, there are people who are going to review me. There's a backlash to success, especially if you're black and female—black and/or female."⁵³¹ In addition, such identification seems to be augmented by her narrative style: with the novels' spontaneity and personal details offered to the reader, the books bear a strong resemblance with confessional genres. One of McMillan's basic strategies is the employment of the showing style⁵³² which goes hand-in-hand with the first-person point of view, speaking directly and in an intimate way to the reader.

⁵²⁷ Terry McMillan and Evette Porter, "My Novel, Myself," *Village Voice*, May 21, 1996, 41–42. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter and Deborah A. Schmitt. Vol. 112. *Literature Resource Center*, accessed May 13, 2013, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1100003992&v=2.1&u=opave&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.

⁵²⁸ For far more detailed information, see Diane Patrick, *Terry McMillan: The Unauthorized Biography* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2000).

⁵²⁹ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 1.

⁵³⁰ McMillan and Porter, "My Novel, Myself."

⁵³¹ McMillan and Porter, "My Novel, Myself."

⁵³² For more details about the narrative strategies she uses as well as the explanation of the theoretical concepts applied, see the analyses of *Waiting to Exhale* and its sequel.

7.1 Horizon of Expectations and Its Shift

In contemporary popular fiction a general formula exists which could be applicable at its various kinds. According to Dietzel,

the antebellum South as a setting has given way to contemporary urban America, and white characters have been replaced with black ones, plotlines remained basically the same. Picaresque protagonists still roam the pages of black popular fiction, although their roguishness has been tempered by thirty years of feminism and the emergence of women writers; heroines are still sexy and beautiful, but for many of them the pursuit of a handsome hero and their eventual submission to his desires may no longer be at the top of their agenda.⁵³³

Pulp fiction novels in particular, printed on a cheap wood-pulp paper, can be characterized by sensational plots in which much of the action revolves around violence and sex; the books have catchy titles, illustrated covers, and brief summaries of the book's content on the back. The books are sold for low prices, are written in easy, comprehensible language, following a simple formula, and a linear and chronological pattern. The characters tend to be simple and one-dimensional, while the plots are "varied and manifold, ranging from hustler cautionary tales to threats to the African American nation, mistreatments by the justice and legal system, and historical injustices against African American individuals and communities."⁵³⁴ As it will become more than obvious from the detailed discussion of the two particular novels by McMillan, this description is hardly applicable on this author; still, this was what the readers and critics could expect when her first works were created.

Before examining the novelties presented in McMillan's novels as well as the reviewers' reactions to them, Jauss and his concept of horizon of expectation shall be explained. "The way in which a literary work satisfies, surpasses, disappoints, or disproves the expectations of its readers in the historical moment of its appearance obviously gives a criterion for the determination of its aesthetic value," suggests Jauss. The possible reactions of the audience and the judgement of criticism to a new literary work may range from "spontaneous success, rejection or shock, scattered approval, gradual or later understanding," etc.⁵³⁵ The smaller the distance between the horizon of expectations and the work, the closer it comes to the "realm of 'culinary' or light reading," meeting a priori the needs of the audience. Then it

demands no horizon change but actually fulfils expectations, which are prescribed by a predominant taste, by satisfying the demand for the reproduction of familiar beauty, confirming familiar sentiments, encouraging dreams, making unusual experiences palatable as "sensations" or even raising moral problems, but only to be able to "solve" them in an edifying manner when the solution is already obvious.⁵³⁶

At the same time,

[i]f the artistic character of a work is to be measured by the aesthetic distance with which it confronts the expectations of its first readers, it follows that this distance, which at first is experienced as a happy or distasteful new perspective, can disappear for later readers to the same degree as to which the original negativity of the work has become self-evident, and as henceforth familiar expectation, has ever become part of the horizon for future aesthetic experience.⁵³⁷

Also,

[t]he determination [of a work] is reversible: there are works which at the moment of their publication are not directed at any specific audience, but which break through the familiar horizon of literary expectations so completely that an audience can gradually develop for them. Then when the new horizon of expectations has achieved more general acceptance, the authority of the changed aesthetic norm can become apparent from the fact that readers will consider previously successful works obsolete and reject them.⁵³⁸

⁵³³ Dietzel, "The African American novel and popular culture," 161.

⁵³⁴ Dietzel, "The African American novel and popular culture," 162.

⁵³⁵ Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," 14.

⁵³⁶ Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," 15.

⁵³⁷ Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," 15.

⁵³⁸ Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," 16–17.

Last but not least, the movable horizon of expectations has the ability to modernise values.⁵³⁹ Jauss draws attention to several cardinal but frequently neglected points: what is now a part of the literary canon (or “classical” as termed by him) was not seen so at the time of the creation of these pieces of art. More probably, it “may have formed new experiences, which only in historical perspective—in recognition of what is now familiar—give the appearance the work contains a timeless truth.”⁵⁴⁰ And vice versa, it can happen that the “potential significance of a work may remain unrecognized until the evolution of a newer form widens the horizon” and only then opens up the understanding of the earlier misunderstood or underestimated form.⁵⁴¹

As explained above, the horizon of expectations has to do with the reader’s previous (background) knowledge of other literary works. In Jauss’ opinion, the experience of reading has the ability to “free him[her] from adaptations, prejudice, and predicaments in his[her] by forcing him[her] to a new perception of things. ... It not only preserves real experiences but also anticipates unrealized possibilities, widens the limited range of social behaviour by new wishes, demands, and goals, and thereby opens avenues for future experiences.”⁵⁴² It results from what has been said that new forms of art (that is, new works of popular fiction, too) are perceived through the background of other works of art and association or contrast with them, as Viktor Sklovskij states.⁵⁴³ Jauss adds—which is very important for the reading of the selected novels—that the relationship between literature and reader “can be realized in the sensuous realm as stimulus to aesthetic perception as well as in the ethical realm as a stimulation to moral reflection. The new literary work is received and judged against the background of other art forms as well as the background of everyday life.” The permanency of the aesthetic and moral perception and reflection on values of the reader give literature its “socially formative function.”⁵⁴⁴

7.2 There’s a Void

For several African American women HBO’s series “Sex and the City” had a more profound and wholly unexpected effect than to go and buy a pair of the Manolo Blahnik shoes: it motivated them to write fiction. As Lyah Beth LeFlore (a co-author of *Cosmopolitan Girls*, written together with Charlotte Burley) comments on the series, “I loved that show, but when you watched, it was as if the only people in New York living fabulous lives were 30-something-year-old white women, and that’s a complete fallacy;” adding there are “a lot of amazing black women living interesting, glamorous lives, and it was time our stories be told.”⁵⁴⁵ Apparently McMillan was not the only African American women writer who responded to this void with books focused on college-educated, professional, “decidedly middle to upper class” black women negotiating their exciting urban careers and love life.⁵⁴⁶

⁵³⁹ In this respect, however, Jauss warns against two potential dangers which are worth mentioning in relation to African American scholar’s reconstructionist activities, taking into account Hans Georg Gadamer’s critique of historical objectivism. First, a critic or philologist is only supposedly capable of eliminating his/her subjective evaluation, which can cause that he/she raises “preconceived aesthetic sense to an “to a unacknowledged standard and unwittingly modernizes the meaning of a text from the past.” Second, the existence of “universal truths” or “points of view outside history” is hardly possible, for it leads to concealing all-inclusive unintentional preconditions governing his/her understanding. Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 20.

⁵⁴⁰ Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 20.

⁵⁴¹ Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 26.

⁵⁴² Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 33.

⁵⁴³ Sklovskij qtd. in Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 33.

⁵⁴⁴ Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 34.

⁵⁴⁵ Qtd. in Lola Ogunnaike. “Black Writers Seize Glamorous Ground around Chick Lit.”

⁵⁴⁶ Qtd. in Lola Ogunnaike. “Black Writers Seize Glamorous Ground around Chick Lit.”

When compiling their 1995 famous anthology, Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell were determined to find out whether and how women's experiments with form and language might be distinct from men's. But, as Mazza states, "that line of inquiry was overshadowed by the emergence of something larger, more exciting than a mere study of form." In a step-by-step manner, they discovered the fictions they had compiled were "simultaneously courageous and playful; frank and wry; honest, intelligent, sophisticated, libidinous, unapologetic, and overwhelmingly emancipated."⁵⁴⁷ Whether these features characterise also the selected novels is one of the basic questions raised in the subsequent chapters which provide analyses of them.

7.3 Terry McMillan: Life, Works, and Their Reception

She was born on October 18, 1951 in Port Huron, Michigan to Madeline Washington Tilman and Edward McMillan as the first of five children. The parents divorced when she was thirteen; Edward's death followed three years later. There were few black male role models she could admire, and her mother worked a variety of jobs. According to McMillan, her mother—though uneducated but "strong willed" and "one of the smartest" women in her life—has taught her responsibility, "how to think," and cope with life.⁵⁴⁸ McMillan attended public schools in Port Huron, and as stated previously in chapter six, she had little interest in books but The Bible until she became familiar with other ones. Her dream of a better life gave the teenaged McMillan "the discipline and ambition to make something of herself." Having completed high school, she left Port Huron and worked but at night she took night classes at Los Angeles City College. Doing rather well, she was able to transfer to the University of California at Berkeley where she studied between 1973 and 1979, from which she graduated with a Bachelor's degree in journalism. She frequently contributed to the *Daily Californian* and *Black Thoughts*.⁵⁴⁹

Her route to novel writing was a circuitous one. In 1976 McMillan published her first short story at the age of twenty-five titled "The End."⁵⁵⁰ After graduating, she moved to New York in pursuit of a master's degree in the Fine Arts to earn a graduate degree in film studies to study film at the Columbia University (screenwriting in particular). In Richards' opinion, this decision confirmed her "maturing sense of purpose and her growing desire to communicate with a mass audience."⁵⁵¹ McMillan's "intense love affair with writing" continued, but her "lingering dissatisfaction over the rigid discipline of the Berkeley program and the tense racist atmosphere at Columbia" finally caused McMillan to drop out of the screenwriting programme and take a job with a New York law firm where she made her living by word processing and at that time also enrolled in a writing workshop at the Harlem Writers Guild.⁵⁵²

About the same time, McMillan was trying to free herself from a devastating relationship with Leonard Welch, a man who began dealing drugs. (Her mother had suffered poverty and abuse at the hands of her alcoholic husband, which were the reasons for divorcing him.) McMillan abruptly stopped using drugs just after her thirtieth birthday in October 1981 and opted for a ninety-day Alcoholic's Anonymous program that has left her sober since

⁵⁴⁷ Mazza, "Who's Laughing Now? A Short History of Chick Lit and the Perversion of a Genre," in *Chick Lit*, 17–18.

⁵⁴⁸ Qtd. in Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 2.

⁵⁴⁹ Cf. Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 1–4.

⁵⁵⁰ Smith, "Terry McMillan: The Novelist Explores African American Life From the Point of View of a New Generation," 50.

⁵⁵¹ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 4.

⁵⁵² Broden, "Terry McMillan: Overview."

February 22, 1983.⁵⁵³ In an *Ebony* magazine interview with Laura B. Randolph, McMillan revealed the “life-changing” decisions that led to the ability to finally “own” herself: “I mean feeling good about what I’m doing, how I’ve done it, the changes and struggles I’ve been through. That’s what I mean when I say there are certain things I own. Now, I own me.”⁵⁵⁴ When she quit drinking and using cocaine in the early 1980s, she “stated writing seriously.”⁵⁵⁵

Her son Solomon was born in 1984. Four years later, she became associate professor at the University of Arizona. Her first novel, *Mama*, was published in hardcover by Houghton Mifflin in 1987. The work started out as a short story of a female factory worker who tosses her drunken husband out and decides to raise her children alone developed into a novel when McMillan “spent brief writing stints under the auspices of the Harlem Writer’s Guild whose member she became and the MacDowell Colony in 1983.”⁵⁵⁶ *Mama* is the story of a strong black woman named Mildred who very much resembles McMillan’s own mother. As Daniel Max illustrates, “[e]ven without strong reviews *Mama* sold out its first hardcover printing of 5,000 copies, a mystery until McMillan explained what she had done.” Essentially, she “had marketed her own book.” McMillan used the word processor at the law firm where she was working as night typist, and sent out approximately 3,000 letters to bookstores, college organizations, and news media—with a strong emphasis on black groups—“urging them to stock and promote her book and invite her to read from” the book.⁵⁵⁷ She commented on her activities as follows: “I had seen it happen before to friends of mine, really fine writers, whose publishers did nothing except send out a little press release and the galleys. My publisher had come right out and told me what they couldn’t do, and I said, ‘... I’m not just going to sit back; I’ve never been passive, and I’m not going to start now.’”⁵⁵⁸

A third-person authorial narrator tells the story of *Mama*. The novel is considered “original in concept and style, a runaway narrative pulling a crowded cast of funny, earthy characters.”⁵⁵⁹ Languagewise, Will Blythe notices that “in the vernacular of this fine novel, Mildred Peacock slaps the forces of economic determinism.”⁵⁶⁰ There were negative critiques, too: Janet Boyarin Blundell suggests that the “book’s main weakness is that the author apparently could not decide what to leave out. She also has not decided who her audience is: at times she seems to be writing to blacks, at other times to be explaining things to naive white readers. Although the story has power, it lacks focus and a clear point of view.”⁵⁶¹ Most critics, however, thought that McMillan had the chance to become a promising writer.

Numerous autobiographical features can be found in the novel: Mildred, a “hard talker, drinker, and fighter,”⁵⁶² Freda (her oldest daughter), a conscientious young woman responsible for her younger siblings, the industrial urban setting Point Haven (which is

⁵⁵³ Broden, “Terry McMillan: Overview.”

⁵⁵⁴ McMillan qtd. in Broden, “Terry McMillan: Overview.”

⁵⁵⁵ Qtd. in Kim Hubbard, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” *People Weekly*, July 20, 1992, 94.

⁵⁵⁶ Broden, “Terry McMillan: Overview.”

⁵⁵⁷ Max, “McMillan’s Millions.”

⁵⁵⁸ Smith, “Terry McMillan: The Novelist Explores African American Life From the Point of View of a New Generation,” 50. For more details about McMillan’s inspiration by the self-help book titled *How to Get Happily Published* by Judith Appelbaum and her discontent with the publisher’s passivity, see *ibid.*

⁵⁵⁹ Valerie Sayers, “Someone to Walk Over Me,” review of *Disappearing Acts*, by Terry McMillan, *The New York Times Books Review*, August 6, 1989, 8.

⁵⁶⁰ Will Blythe, “Hustling for Dignity,” review of *Mama*, by Terry McMillan, *The New York Times Book Review*, February 22, 1987, 11.

⁵⁶¹ Qtd. in “Voices form the Gaps,” University of Minnesota website, accessed March 5, 2013, http://voices.cla.umn.edu/artistpages/mcmillan_terry.php.

⁵⁶² Mary D. Esselman, “Terry McMillan: Overview,” in *Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers (Twentieth-Century Writers Series)*, ed. Laura Standley Berger (Detroit: St. James Press, 1994). From *Literature Resource Center*, accessed May 14, 2013, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420005484&v=2.1&u=opave&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.

actually very similar to Port Huron), Mildred's conflicts with her partner and the break-up with him, changing jobs, struggling to support and help her children as they face their own problems, reconciliation with Freda after she finds her way through from cocaine and alcohol addiction, etc.

From the viewpoint of horizon of expectations it is important to mention what Michael Awkward states in his review of the book, since he identifies the novel as a moment of discontinuity in the tradition of the black women's fiction. While her immediate precursor such as Marshall, Morrison, and Walker embrace a more lyrical mode that is not in favour of the traditional social realism favoured by the classic black American male writers, she reaches back to "the clearly realistic models of black female precursors such as Ann Petry."⁵⁶³

McMillan displayed a rather strong-minded attitude during debates with Houghton Mifflin over her second "pleasurable and often moving" novel,⁵⁶⁴ *Disappearing Acts* (1989), which was structured as a series of alternating first-person monologues by the book's protagonists, Franklin and Zora. She explains,

"They were so impressed with Franklin's voice and the fact that I was pulling it off that they wanted me to write the whole book from his point of view. It was going to be this coup: black woman writes story from black man's point of view, it's never been done, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Well, I didn't write *Disappearing Acts* to prove anything; that was the way the story, had to be told. When my editor told me Zora sounded kind of preppy, I said. 'Look, she's not barefoot and pregnant, living in the projects and getting her ass kicked. I cannot apologize because some of us have been to college, okay?'"⁵⁶⁵

Such discrepancies reached a breaking point when Mifflin demanded McMillan to see a completed manuscript of the novel before making an offer. As a result, Molly Friedrich, McMillan's agent, sent the existing chapters to Dawn Seferian working for Viking's. The book was published in 1989, and received generally excellent reviews; it went on to sell more than 100,000 copies in paperback for Washington Square Press.⁵⁶⁶ The book's further existence was not without problems, as it provoked a lawsuit from Leonard Welch, her former partner and Solomon's father. McMillan was "more embarrassed than anything else," because she "was concerned that people would think [she] really didn't write fiction, which *Disappearing Acts* was." She says she worried about the effect on other writers, for they also rely on their own experiences, even though—in their opinion—they produce fiction.⁵⁶⁷

It is of some importance that McMillan identifies Zora Neale Hurston as her literary foremother.⁵⁶⁸ Valerie Sayers comments, Zora's shallow voice seems incongruous when you consider that Ms. McMillan's heroine is named for Zora Neale Hurston, who knew how to make imagery streak and crackle across a hot dark sky. Zora puts Hurston's great novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* on the bookshelf next to a picture of her dead mother, ... but despite her admiration (and some intriguing parallels between Zora's love affair and the affair Hurston describes in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*), this Zora's voice is way too flat. Even her profanity gets boring.⁵⁶⁹ By contrast, in Sayer's opinion,

⁵⁶³ Michael Awkward, review of *Mama*, by Terry McMillan, *Callaloo* 11, no. 3 (Summer 1998), 649–650.

⁵⁶⁴ Sayers, "Someone to Walk Over Me," 8.

⁵⁶⁵ Qtd. in Smith, "Terry McMillan: The Novelist Explores African American Life From the Point of View of a New Generation," 50.

⁵⁶⁶ Smith, "Terry McMillan: The Novelist Explores African American Life From the Point of View of a New Generation," 50.

⁵⁶⁷ Smith, "Terry McMillan: The Novelist Explores African American Life From the Point of View of a New Generation," 50.

⁵⁶⁸ Richards makes connection between Hurston and McMillan in terms of relocating the black dialect voice within an African American narrative frame and therefore being able "to imagine a black audience" for their stories. As the formal innovations enabled Hurston to address themes her predecessors as well as contemporaries could not, McMillan's use of the standard English in combination with the principles of the black dialect strengthens her relationship with the core African American audience. *Terry McMillan*, 33–34.

⁵⁶⁹ Sayers, "Someone to Walk Over Me," 8.

Franklin's profanity also gets old, but his voice is hot and electric; when he's talking, the narrative sparks. Franklin Swift is smart, bigoted, passionate, loving, generous, mean-spirited, ignorant, intractable, forgiving, resentful. His voice is far grittier than Zora's and it's genuine.

When contrasted with, e.g., *Waiting to Exhale* (where—according to the critics—male-bashing tendencies are expressed), “Ms. McMillan takes some real chances not only with Franklin's voice but with his life.”⁵⁷⁰

In comparison with *Waiting to Exhale*, the next novel, there is a basic difference. Meanwhile in this book McMillan uses two alternating voices that speak directly to the reader, and “because there's no one obvious for Zora Banks or Franklin Swift to tell it to—they are loners in every way—the question is whether these folks are for real. In many ways they are quite ordinary, in other ways they are hardly tangible.”⁵⁷¹ In addition, not unlike the protagonists of her third novel, Zora is drawn as “the wily black woman of yore, smart-talking Eve who's always got a little something on the rail for the lizard, as we used to say. She's also a sophisticated shopper who likes fancy cheeses and bottled water. She's not unlike Zora Neale Hurston's sassy folk women—characters *Cosmo* would never dare to psychoanalyze.”⁵⁷²

Sayers sees the novel as “a love story waiting to explode.” Both protagonists of *Disappearing Acts* are “intelligent and good-looking, both possessed of dreams—but Zora Banks is an educated black woman and Franklin Swift is an unschooled black man. It's Brooklyn, it's 1982, and it's clear from page 1 that the two of them are sitting in a mine field and something's going to blow.”⁵⁷³ Due to such intricate thematic and narrative look at a love affair, she “strikes out in a whole new direction and changes her narrative footing with ease.” The same theme of love with its ups and downs which complicate a black woman's life and ambitions recurs later in the following novel(s). Themes such as courtship, moving in together, sex, pregnancy and abortion, childbirth, etc. are explored. Esselman appreciates that “in dealing so explicitly with sexual issues, McMillan realistically addresses the challenges of contemporary relationships.”⁵⁷⁴ On the other hand, Sayers supposes the novel to be also a far more conventional popular novel than *Mama* was. Despite its raunchy language and its narrative construction ..., its descriptions, its situations, even its generic minor characters are often predictable. Zora's narrative is sometimes written in a pop-magazine style. I say this with some surprise, because it seems to me that Terry McMillan has the power to be an important contemporary novelist.⁵⁷⁵

Thulani Davis writes about their relationship as “doomed by mutual expectations and ended by an [unnecessary] outburst of gratuitous male violence,” taking a male-bashing stance, for she underestimates the reasons for his behaviour, the months of frustration.⁵⁷⁶ On the other hand—and more important for the reading the dissertation offers—Robert G. O'Meally speaks of McMillan as a writer “with eloquence and style, McMillan gives her work a voice that is her own, one tough enough to break across color and class lines, daring enough to make a statement about our country and our times.”⁵⁷⁷ All in all, the noticeable praise she received for her compelling rendition of the male voice in *Disappearing Acts* in Franklin's characterisation seems to be of more importance.

⁵⁷⁰ Sayers, “Someone to Walk Over Me,” 8.

⁵⁷¹ Davis, “Don't Worry, Be Buppie: Black Novelists Head for the Mainstream.”

⁵⁷² Davis, “Don't Worry, Be Buppie: Black Novelists Head for the Mainstream.”

⁵⁷³ Sayers, “Someone to Walk Over Me,” 8.

⁵⁷⁴ Esselman, “Terry McMillan: Overview.”

⁵⁷⁵ Sayers, “Someone to Walk Over Me,” 8.

⁵⁷⁶ Davis, “Don't Worry, Be Buppie: Black Novelists Head for the Mainstream.” A similarly unsympathetic reading of the character of Franklin is provided by Jacqueline Trescott—cf. “The Urban Author, Straight to the Point: Terry McMillan, Pulling Together the Urgent Fiction of Black Life,” *The Washington Post*, February 17, 1989, D1+.

⁵⁷⁷ Qtd. in “Voices form the Gaps.”

The above mentioned ongoing process with Welch actually slowed down the process of writing her third novel, *Waiting to Exhale*. The pressure she was under resulted in her contemplation about the quality of the book to come to such extent that, eventually, she just had to say, “I cannot think about my audience; I can’t guess what people are going to like.”⁵⁷⁸ At the same time, she moved from Tucson to San Francisco, which was another obstacle in finishing the first draft. When working on the novel, McMillan (a single mother of a five-year old son then) was teaching at the University of Arizona in Tucson and was herself having “a difficult time finding a spouse—even a consistent date.” The problem lying behind was, in her opinion, “men’s fear of intimacy” and the small amount of black educated men in particular who “think they’re the crème de la crème, so they’re taking their time.”⁵⁷⁹ The release of the novel by Viking was followed by sending McMillan on a twenty-city, six-week tour which included nearly thirty bookstore appearances.⁵⁸⁰

Her success caused that McMillan spent “far more time away from her family than she would have liked.” When she was in London promoting her third novel, her mother had suffered a fatal asthma attack, and a year after that her good friend Doris Jean Austin died of liver cancer. Having drafted more than a hundred pages of her new novel, titled *A Day Late and a Dollar Short*, she found herself unable to finish the manuscript. In addition, Richards points out that McMillan was also trying to cope with the problem of finding a life partner then. All this resulted in her artistic as well as psychological exhaustion, and inability to write. The vacation in a Jamaican resort not only meant an epiphany⁵⁸¹ and reconciliation with her mother’s spirit she spoke about in numerous interviews, but Richards sees her relationship with Jonathan Plummer as “perhaps the most important factor in her regeneration.”⁵⁸² Her attention was subsequently drawn to working on a rather different book.

In her fourth novel, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1996), McMillan shifts from the earlier realism to “romantic fantasy.”⁵⁸³ The title of the book reflects McMillan’s own trying to get “back in the groove” after she experienced a number of personal tragedies. The book depicts Stella Payne, an affluent divorced 42-year-old investment analyst who is trying to put excitement back into her life and goes on vacation to Jamaica. There she meets a handsome, gentle, and very charming Jamaican man (Winston Shakespeare) who is half her age, and falls in love with him.⁵⁸⁴ Richard Bernstein offers a generally positive assessment of the novel, and compares the novel to a sitcom “in which a somewhat unconventional family faces the somewhat unconventional plight of one of its members.” In addition, [l]ike the better sitcoms, it has a cast of likable, truculent characters, funny lines, smart repartee and a warm and fuzzy ending. It is a good deal more raunchy than anything that would be allowed on television. It is not deeper or more searching than the average sitcom, no more dramatically powerful than a backyard barbecue, but it is an irreverent, mischievous, diverting novel that at times will make you laugh out loud.⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁷⁸ Smith, “Terry McMillan: The Novelist Explores African American Life From the Point of View of a New Generation,” 51.

⁵⁷⁹ Qtd. in Hubbard, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” 94.

⁵⁸⁰ Smith, “Terry McMillan: The Novelist Explores African American Life From the Point of View of a New Generation,” 51.

⁵⁸¹ “Life is really short, too short. My girlfriend wasn’t even 50 and my mother was 59 when she died. I was thinking, shit, if I blink, I’ll be 59. And I don’t want to be one of these ‘wish I coulda, woulda, shoulda.’” McMillan and Porter, “My Novel, Myself.”

⁵⁸² McMillan herself admits Stella “is the most autobiographical thing” she has written “in a long time;” yet, she warns those who would think she offers a “factual account of her relationship” with Plummer they “are fooling themselves.” Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 10–11.

⁵⁸³ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 9.

⁵⁸⁴ McMillan met Jonathan Plummer in her early 50s in Jamaica, too—apparently their romance inspired the plot of her novel.

⁵⁸⁵ Richard Bernstein, “Black, Affluent and Looking For More,” review of *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, by Terry McMillan, *The New York Times*, May 15, 1996, C17.

The message McMillan hoped the book would bring was “[t]hat menopause is not an all downhill spiral for women, that, in fact, it’s almost rejuvenating. It’s sort of like a renaissance, in a way. You just have this—it’s a different kind of energy, and being 60 or 65 or 50 or 55 is not the end of the world. I think that the public, the media, men have made women so self-conscious about our age.” As a matter of fact, the author generally strongly disagrees with “the whole double standard. You know, you get men who are 60, 70 years old playing love interests and sex symbols in film. And a woman who’s 35, already she needs a face-lift to be attractive and to consider herself sexy. I just don’t buy it, and I don’t want women to feel that way.”⁵⁸⁶

When it comes to race and racial issues in the novel, the protagonist’s concerns and her consciousness are “standard American-suburban, overlaid by the cultural and psychological cues emanating from the experience of being black in America. Her racial awareness is keen and casual at the same time, her reflections often cursory and soon forgotten.” Similarly to *Waiting to Exhale*, her “main concerns are the stuff of what the movie people call crossover, the trans-racial interest Ms. McMillan’s books inspire. They stem not from being black but from being a woman and from dealing with and needing men.”⁵⁸⁷

Even though her “spiky interior thoughts and the spirited, affectionately caustic dialogue she maintains with the rest of the world save her story from triteness, the “issues for Stella are luxuriously banal,” as neither of the characters seems to be worried about many things to such extent that “[n]obody in this book is much interested in anything except sex, love and new acquisitions. It’s the American dream realized, Ms. McMillan demonstrating that the black realization of it can be just as slick and anemic as the white.”⁵⁸⁸ The author attempts to use a style close to stream-of-consciousness technique; “to convey the anxious rush of its heroine’s acceleration through life. Lots of ‘You go, girl!’ backslap, too.”⁵⁸⁹ While some reviewers find the style “a problem,”⁵⁹⁰ readers identified with her voice.⁵⁹¹

Influence of popular women’s fiction is visible in McMillan’s novels *Disappearing Acts*, and of course in *Stella*, in the form of an idealised happy-ending borrowed from the romance novel. On one hand, McMillan’s departure from her earlier social realism and her creation of a “happily-ever-after romance” with a younger Jamaican man resulted in a harsh critique; on the other one, as Richards points out, the novel together with its film adaptation “have sparked a new trend in Caribbean tourism as sisters flock to the tropics ‘to get their groove back.’”⁵⁹² McMillan wrote the screenplay for the 1998 movie of the same title.⁵⁹³

McMillan comments on the relation between her and Stella: “Stella isn’t a reinvention of myself. She’s only part of my persona. I can’t believe people actually think my life is like that. What I give [my characters] are my concerns, which for the most part are grounded in reality.”⁵⁹⁴ Much is known about the circumstances of the process of writing the novel: “*Stella* was different. I embraced that. I hadn’t intended to write it. It dictated to me that it wanted to be written and I just sort of paid attention. I hadn’t written in almost two years,” the author explains. “So when it started coming out, I just gave in to it. I just sort of succumbed,

⁵⁸⁶ “Interview: Terry McMillan discusses her new novel, *The Interruption of Everything*.”

⁵⁸⁷ Bernstein, “Black, Affluent and Looking For More,” C17.

⁵⁸⁸ Bernstein, “Black, Affluent and Looking For More,” C17.

⁵⁸⁹ James Wolcott, “Terry McMillan,” *The New Yorker* 72.10, April 29, 1996, 102.

⁵⁹⁰ Cf. Lillian Lewis’ review, qtd. in “Voices from the Gaps.”

⁵⁹¹ “McMillan, Terry,” in *Literature Online Biography* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 2005). Accessed May 13, 2013.

http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=BIO005672&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1385709548_17593&trailId=142083AE9DB&area=ref&forward=critref_ft.

⁵⁹² Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 121.

⁵⁹³ “McMillan, Terry,” in *Literature Online Biography*.

⁵⁹⁴ McMillan and Porter, “My Novel, Myself.”

surrendered. And I was not going to stop. I didn't really think it was a novel I was writing. At first it was a poem. Then a little short story. Jonathan was the one who encouraged me," McMillan says.⁵⁹⁵

The finished novel *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* (2001) is described as about "missed opportunities, sibling rivalry, misconceptions parents and children have about each other but perceive them as truths, as well as the whole notion and role that birth order plays in a family."⁵⁹⁶ The book features similar themes and narrative techniques as in her previous works. As for the point of view, it shifts between the perspectives of each of the six members of the Price family; the central narrative voice, however, belongs to Viola Price, the mother of the four adult children she has with Cecil, her husband. *Publishers' Weekly* called the novel "a moving and true depiction of an American family, driven apart and bound together by the real stuff of life: love, loss, grief, infidelity, addiction, pregnancy, forgiveness, and the IRS."⁵⁹⁷

McMillan herself explains the novel is "about a woman who's in her fifties who in some ways has a part of my mother's persona, but she's not my mother. I had my mother in mind." She just wanted to "explore that and I thought about some of the things my mother had said to me and my sisters over the years and that's how it started. But once I lost my mother, it was too close—the idea of writing about a mother who is a little bit too intrusive and invasive in her adult children's lives, I couldn't go there emotionally. I didn't want to."⁵⁹⁸

As previously stated in the sixth chapter, McMillan filed for divorce after Plummer declared he was gay in 2005, while "McMillan claimed in her court declaration that the marriage has been based on a fraud," because he "had lied about his sexual orientation—and married her only to gain US citizenship."⁵⁹⁹ McMillan herself stated, it was "devastating to discover that a relationship I had publicized to the world as life-affirming and built on mutual love was actually based on deceit."⁶⁰⁰ Sadly enough, after *The Interruption of Everything* (2005) was released, interviewers rather ignored the book McMillan had written, and preferred "to press her on the oddball details of her divorce proceedings." After six years of marriage with Jonathan Plummer the end came⁶⁰¹ when Plummer told her he was gay. To McMillan's surprise (actually having many LGBT friends herself), she was accused of being homophobic because of her harsh reaction to his coming out.⁶⁰²

The novel is about forty-four-year-old Marilyn Grimes, a homemaker entering menopause who discovers that she is pregnant, and struggles to put her own needs above other people's. She finds herself juggling three children in college, a husband in a mid-life crisis, a drug-addicted sister, and a mother who might be developing the Alzheimer's disease. In an interview with Robert Siegel and Michelle Norris, McMillan explained that the character Marilyn had interrupted her while she had been sleeping:

It woke me up one night about three years ago. I just heard this voice and I jumped up and I walked into my office and wrote the words "Sometimes I wish my husband would cheat on me so I would finally have a legitimate reason to divorce him." And I just started thinking about a woman who was sort of in that position and now here she was with space available to her to reclaim some things that she thought she may have lost.⁶⁰³

⁵⁹⁵ McMillan and Porter, "My Novel, Myself."

⁵⁹⁶ "McMillan, Terry," in *Literature Online Biography*.

⁵⁹⁷ "McMillan, Terry," in *Literature Online Biography*.

⁵⁹⁸ McMillan and Porter, "My Novel, Myself."

⁵⁹⁹ "McMillan, Terry," in *Literature Online Biography*.

⁶⁰⁰ McMillan qtd. in "McMillan, Terry," in *Literature Online Biography*.

⁶⁰¹ Dwight Garner gives an amusing example: "On the Today's show, Katie Couric seemed to find it incredible that McMillan had had no earlier inkling of this fact. 'No gaydar at all?' she asked. ('Nope,' McMillan replied.)" "TBR: Inside the List," *The New York Times Book Review*, August 7, 2005, Arts and Entertainment, 22L.

⁶⁰² Garner, "TBR: Inside the List," 22L.

⁶⁰³ "Interview: Terry McMillan discusses her new novel, *The Interruption of Everything*."

It is also a novel of friendship; her two “sassy girlfriends”⁶⁰⁴ help her to find solace in their regular meetings. More unexpectedly, she receives support from her live-in mother-in-law. Some reviewers expressed “doubt about the quality of the writing and the profundity of the characterisation,” but most find the novel “highly entertaining and deeply human.”⁶⁰⁵ The *Washington Post Book World* reviewer attributed her numerous audience to her qualities such as “a cutting wit, a knack for capturing the way real people think and speak, a fearless willingness to engage complex, painful issues, and an unerring instinct for fashioning characters that enchant readers’ imaginations.”⁶⁰⁶

Chelsea Cain trivialises the subject matter, writing “You know the story: A woman is shocked to find that her life is not as she had imagined it would be. A hundred years ago, such women wallowed a bit and then walked into the sea. Now they get vibrators and personal trainers.” Still, “[n]aturally, we women readers love this sort of stuff.” Moreover, the “characters’ motivations and relationships are spelled out and writ large.” On the other hand, the novel’s plot is criticised for being too predictable: “Confused about someone’s behavior? Just wait half a page and a character will explain it to you.”⁶⁰⁷

When her son Solomon graduated from high school, Terry McMillan was asked to be the guest speaker at the commencement ceremony. Determined to perform her best, she thought back to when she was stepping out into the world for the first time and the things she wished people had told her.⁶⁰⁸ Printing up what she thought were the most important tips for these new graduates, McMillan was surprised to find that “not only were these homemade pamphlets a hit with the students, but their parents clamored for copies too.”⁶⁰⁹ The result was her book *It’s Ok If You’re Clueless* (2006) offering common sense advice to those young people who are about to take their first tentative steps into adulthood in her usual conversational tone that has made her novels classic bestsellers.

Four years later, the sequel to *Waiting to Exhale* was published, titled *Getting to Happy* (2010). A more detailed account of the novel as well as the circumstances of its origin are dealt with in the analysis of the book. It is possible to agree with the idea that “McMillan hit it big two decades ago by producing black chick-lit peopled by characters that middle-class black women could easily recognize. This sequel upholds that tradition.”⁶¹⁰

McMillan’s latest book is *Who Asked You?* So far, the novel has been available for pre-order only, since it was released in September 2013.⁶¹¹ McMillan plans a two-month tour

⁶⁰⁴ Chelsea Cain, “You Go on a Diet, Girl!,” review of *The Interruption of Everything*, by Terry McMillan, *The New York Times Book Review*, July 24, 2005, Arts and Entertainment, 13L.

⁶⁰⁵ “McMillan, Terry,” in *Literature Online Biography*.

⁶⁰⁶ Qtd. in “McMillan, Terry,” in *Literature Online Biography*.

⁶⁰⁷ Cain, “You Go on a Diet, Girl!,” 13L.

⁶⁰⁸ “Her Work,” Terry McMillan’s official website, accessed February 18, 2013, <http://www.terrymcmillan.com/view/herwork>. McMillan adds, “my incredible child convinced me it wasn’t a bad idea, and that he wouldn’t mind as long as I didn’t embarrass him. To avoid being redundant and typical, I took myself back to my first steps into the world; trying to remember the things I wished people had told me. I printed up a few tips and when the time came I did what every parent should do, I talked to them.” “Her Work/It’s Okay If You’re Clueless,” McMillan’s official website, accessed February 18, 2013, <http://www.terrymcmillan.com/view/itsokifyourclueless>.

⁶⁰⁹ “It’s OK if You’re Clueless: and 23 More Tips for the College Bound,” Amazon.com, accessed March 5, 2013, http://www.amazon.com/Its-OK-Youre-Clueless-College/dp/0670032980/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1374064273&sr=8-1&keywords=It%27s+Okay+If+You%27re+Clueless.

⁶¹⁰ Karen M. Thomas, “Fiction Review: ‘Getting to Happy’ by Terry McMillan,” Dallasnews.com, accessed March 5, 2013, <http://www.dallasnews.com/entertainment/headlines/20100912-Fiction-review-Getting-to-4112.ece>.

⁶¹¹ “Who Asked You?,” Amazon.com, accessed June 15, 2013, http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_ss_i_1_13?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-

to promote her eighth novel.⁶¹² Some pieces of information are offered at her official web site, for instance that the book is another humorous novel of friendship, and praises it, for it “casts an intimate look at the burdens and blessings of family and speaks to trusting your own judgment even when others don’t agree. McMillan’s signature voice and unforgettable characters bring universal issues to brilliant, vivid life.” The fans can also read a very concise synopsis of the plot as well as that “McMillan gives exuberant voice to characters who reveal how we live known—at least as lived in a racially diverse Los Angeles neighborhood.”⁶¹³

It unequivocally results from what was stated in this chapter that a success of one book by an author and its popularity among the readers (which can, indeed, be in a result of what Jauss terms as the shift of horizon of expectations) makes the audience anticipate similar features in the books to come. Though some critics appreciate the humour and acerbic honesty of her books, others disapprove of McMillan’s interest in material wealth and conspicuous consumption over what they perceive as unresolved issues of racial discrimination and African American women’s rights. Nevertheless, her engaging stories, appealing characters, and insightful commentary on recent black American experience are considered a vital contribution to contemporary popular literature. The chapter is to be closed with an important point, and that is McMillan’s realistic attitude to success: she seems to be aware of the fact that the success is a rather ephemeral matter, and it can therefore easily shift to someone else.

keywords=who+asked+you+terry+mcmillan&sprefix=who+asked+you%2Caps%2C225&rh=i%3Aaps%2Ck%3Awho+asked+you+terry+mcmillan.

⁶¹² Cf. “Events,” Terry McMillan’s official website, accessed July 10, 2013, <http://www.terrymcmillan.com/view/tourdates>.

⁶¹³ “Her Work/Who Asked You,” Terry McMillan’s official website, accessed July 10, 2013, http://www.terrymcmillan.com/view/who_asked_you.

8 *Waiting to Exhale*

“This is 1992. I appreciate and value all the protest literature of the ’60s, but I am tired of carrying this plantation on my shoulders. I know that if it wasn’t for Martin Luther King and Malcolm X we wouldn’t be able to do some of the things we do now, but I don’t need to constantly remind you of that. I’m not trying to prove anything to white folks, and I’m not trying to make them feel guilty—my editor didn’t enslave my ancestors. So why do I have to keep belaboring the point?”
Terry McMillan⁶¹⁴

In this chapter some introductory pieces of information are followed by a brief synopsis of the plot as well as a detailed analysis of the novel’s characters, themes, narrative strategies used for storytelling such as dialogues showing versus telling style; together with the humour, language of the novel, and values which is provided, too. The analysis will continuously bear in mind the question whether—and if so, to what extent—McMillan relies on particular formula that makes the text of her novel exceptionally processable to the readers. The inclusion of various theoretical passages which prolong the chapter has turned out to be unavoidable, for these have proven to be necessary for the analysis. The aim of the analysis is to show what literary devices in particular make McMillan shift the horizon of expectations. The reasons for not contrasting *Waiting to Exhale* solely with black chick lit in this chapter, but rather with the romance novel as well as other contemporaneous literary pieces by African American women writers are obvious, since the boom of the chick lit phenomenon dates back to the second half of the 1990s and the first decade of the new century, which makes McMillan the one who lay the genre’s cornerstone whether she likes this label or not.

One of the basic dilemmas of feminism versus femininity echoes in McMillan’s fiction too, as it was implied in the previous chapter. Does her work advance the causes of feminism by appealing to cross-race audience, depicting empowered, independent, and professional women? Or does she, in fact, tend to continue to apply the same patriarchal narrative patterns which result from the legacy of the romance novel in her works, promoting behaviour once and for good rejected by feminism? And is the seeming implicitness of racial issues in her works a clear sign of McMillan’s indifference toward them and their effect on the black community? Answers to these questions are to be provided, having a closer look at the two novels, *Waiting to Exhale* in this chapter, and *Getting to Happy* in the next one, from various angles.

8.1 Introductory Information

Before providing the publisher with the final draft of the book, McMillan asked two of her girlfriends to read it in order to make sure they did not think “any of the characters sounded like them.”⁶¹⁵ Published by Viking, the novel remained on the New York Times best-seller list for eleven weeks. What is more, the paperback rights were sold for astonishing \$ 2.64 million, one of the highest prices ever paid for a reprint;⁶¹⁶ which was preceded by the eight hundred thousand sales of hardback copies.⁶¹⁷ When she published her third novel, as B. J. Bolden states, “McMillan ignited the fires of literary curiosity that caused a multi-ethnic mix of readers to storm local bookstores and gain an insight into what she had to say about

⁶¹⁴ Qtd. in Smith, “Terry McMillan: The Novelist Explores African American Life From the Point of View of a New Generation,” 51.

⁶¹⁵ Qtd. in Hubbard, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” 93.

⁶¹⁶ Max, “McMillan’s Millions.”

⁶¹⁷ Broden, “Terry McMillan: Overview.”

relationships between black men and women.” In an interview with Audrey Edwards of *Essence* magazine, McMillan herself stated: “Seriously, I just don’t get it; I really don’t.”⁶¹⁸

The way McMillan identified with Louisa May Alcott was mentioned in chapter six. This event has a more important, yet so far rather neglected impact on her writing. Paulette Richards is the only scholar who recognises the importance of McMillan’s first passionate personal experience with a book. When working at the library, what else could possibly appeal more to her among other books by the Brontë sisters and others than the *Little Women* (1868) in which the solidarity of a white man fighting for the black freedom is implicitly expressed. The idea of female bonding, which is used throughout her books, was apparently nothing new to McMillan when working on her third novel; the amount of similarities between *Little Women* and *Waiting to Exhale* is, however, striking.⁶¹⁹ Something even Richards ignores, however, is stating why in particular *Little Women*’s thematic and formal influence came up to the surface as late as when writing her third novel and not earlier. Taking into consideration how much McMillan draws from her life as well as what she went through at that time (cf. the previous chapter), it is possible to say that it was precisely when she was working on her third novel that her girlfriends’ influence and presence became important like never before due to the absence of other kind of support in her life.

The stories of both books are told in past tense; Alcott blends a children’s moral tale of her day with the domestic novel, a popular form of the 19th-century women’s fiction. The narrative structure is episodic, with alternating chapters focused on either each of the four girl protagonists in turn, or on the group as a whole; individual episodes are often festive, constructed around reunions, reconciliations, or events when family life is celebrated. The moralistic tone is softened by emphasis put on family approval, and the novel also is lighter on sentimentality than other tales; moments of moral realization often revolve around conversations, which demonstrates Alcott’s capacity for artfully crafted dialogue. An important aspect of Alcott’s technique is realism: she draws heavily upon her own life experiences. Jo,⁶²⁰ Meg, Beth, and Amy—these are four different young women with distinct personal traits and preferences, but connected in friendship and hardship of their coexistence.

8.2 Synopsis of the Novel

Savannah Jackson moves to Phoenix shortly after the New Year, hoping to find greater fulfilment in her career in a less-paid but perhaps meaningful job which should allow her to express her creative talents. She would also like to make some changes to her personal life outside her apathetic family in Pittsburgh which consists of her aging mother and sister Sheila whose marriage is not unproblematic either. Savannah joins her former college roommate Bernadine Harris, a woman who seems to be living the American dream, before it is destroyed by her husband’s announcement he is to leave her for his white bookkeeper Kathleen. Bernadine is forced to deal with the new situation, fighting a divorce battle with her husband John who, as she finds out, has been trying to hide his considerable financial assets from her

⁶¹⁸ Broden, “Terry McMillan: Overview.”

⁶¹⁹ Cf. Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 122–127. Richards makes an important statement which makes the connection between the two books even more obvious: “Unfortunately, the tendency to make rigid distinctions between high culture and popular culture is one factor that has prejudiced critics against *Little Women* and other forms of popular fiction written by and for women. ... Even when a book is well crafted, commercial success can make the literary establishment question its artistic value. There is a lingering bias that real art cannot be accessible to the mass audience.” *Ibid.*, 123.

⁶²⁰ Jo (Josephine March), the second-oldest March sister, shares much with Savannah Jackson, one of the protagonists of McMillan’s third novel. The readers are likely to identify with her due her temper and a quick tongue, although she works hard to control both; other reason might be her tendency to react with impatience to the many limitations placed on women and girls. Cf. Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989).

and their two children, John Junior and Onika. Robin Stokes, Bernadine's friend, is a rather successful insurance company executive who continuously tries to overcome the consequences of her love affairs which leave her distraught and lonely. The worsening Alzheimer's disease her father has been suffering from is not easy neither for her nor her mother, for they cannot afford a full-time care a nurse might give him. Towards the end of the novel, the father dies, and Robin decides to have a child with or without a husband. Gloria Matthews is a single mother of a teenage son, Tarik, and the owner of a hair and beauty salon called Oasis. A great contrast is created by her strong position in the "gossip network" of the salon⁶²¹ and her trying hard to cope with being alone, and playing the mother/father figure in her son's life. Having had children, Gloria and Bernadine are more experienced and mature.

8.3 Form

As implied above, *Waiting to Exhale* is what Susanne B. Dietzel terms a "girlfriend novel." Malcolm Jones Jr. implies McMillan has "created a new literary genre with her upbeat novels about contemporary black women." Then she went even further: "she created an entirely new audience to go with her genre."⁶²² Richards, by contrast, relates the novel together with her other ones partly to the blues romance and partly to the romance novel and its development.⁶²³ Also, Richards juxtaposes *Waiting to Exhale* with *Four Girls at Cottage City* by Emma Kelley-Hawkins thanks to a similar combination of "spiritual autobiography" and popular women's fiction that make the novel unique among McMillan's female contemporaries.⁶²⁴ In addition, it could be regarded as a continuation of a Bildungsroman⁶²⁵ in which a young protagonist typically makes a transition to adulthood. In this case, however, the four protagonists' attempts to comprehend themselves as well as negotiating their position within the society are not limited to the process of maturation, but their voyage is a long-term and continuous one. Last but not least, Lisa A. Guerrero examines the novel solely as a representative of sistah lit.⁶²⁶

8.4 Setting in Time and Place

Unlike in other novels by McMillan's contemporaries, in *Waiting to Exhale*, understanding the past is not a necessary condition for dealing with the rather satisfactory present and grappling with the future. Contemporaneous events, people, and issues are examined, grounded in the "real" and "immediate" issues of concern to the black community,⁶²⁷ as it was explained in the chapter on African American popular novel. There are numerous hints which help the reader assume that the story is set in the year 1990. These mainly include reference to popular songs, television programmes (such as Oprah Winfrey's show), magazines, current

⁶²¹ Donella Canty, "McMillan Arrives," review of *Waiting to Exhale*, by Terry McMillan, *The English Journal*, vol. 85, no. 4, Literary Festival (April 1996): 86.

⁶²² However, he does so without further specifying what kind of genre that is. Malcolm Jones Jr., "Successful Sisters: Faux Terry Is Better than No Terry," *Newsweek* 127.18, April 29, 1996: 79. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter and Deborah A. Schmitt (Detroit: Gale Group, 1999, Vol. 112). *Literature Resource Center*, accessed May 14, 2013, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1100003987&v=2.1&u=opave&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.

⁶²³ Interestingly enough, Richards sees the romance novel passionate readers as "voracious and omnivorous" in supporting also a wide variety of other writers and genres. *Terry McMillan: A Critical Companion*, 22.

⁶²⁴ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 51.

⁶²⁵ Maryemma Graham sees the Bildungsroman as "another form that suggests the generic continuity within African American fiction as well as its symbolic relationship to world literature." In her opinion, the novelists use the coming of age trope to depict the discourses on racism, maturation, and manhood/womanhood. Introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 9.

⁶²⁶ Guerrero, "'Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves': Chick Lit in Black and White," in *Chick Lit*, 87–102.

⁶²⁷ Susanne B. Dietzel, "The African American novel and popular culture," 159.

events such the war in the Persian Gulf, or Nelson Mandela's release from prison. In Richard's opinion, these references to popular culture serve as one of McMillan's "trademark techniques for evoking character and setting." In particular, the thirty-something-year-old protagonists⁶²⁸ are part of the baby-boom, which is a generation that "has grown up with a shared sense of identity defined by mass media and popular culture." When the four women gather to celebrate Gloria's birthday, her album collections take them back to the earlier periods of their lives. These "musical signifiers should trigger the same memories" for the readers who have been part of the baby-boom themselves, and therefore they can "identify more closely with the characters."⁶²⁹

The setting in place, namely the black community in Phoenix, is a blow of fresh air into the typical settings of African American novels, too: "set in Phoenix, *Waiting to Exhale* exulted in light, open, possibility-filled space,"⁶³⁰ as Guerrero points out. In addition, each particular woman's home reveals a lot about her personality: Savannah's flat is decorated with numerous prints and sculptures by African American artists; Bernadine's costly Southwestern-style house in the suburbs is full of exquisite artwork, but clearly mirrors John's willingness to measure himself and his family to the white standards, which makes Bernadine loathe the place, when it comes home to her how self-alienated she has been. Gloria's house only shows how seriously she takes the role of a mother; Oasis, however, is the place which expresses her dramatic inclinations, being decorated in a "sort of funky chic."⁶³¹ The collection of black dolls in Robin's possession reveals her naïveté and vulnerability, despite her sexual experience.

8.5 Characters in *Waiting to Exhale*: No Victims

McMillan—in contrast to her acclaimed peers such as Alice Walker—avoids "the attendant danger of presenting [the characters] as stereotyped victims, drawing on the easy pathos of helpless suffering."⁶³² Her language communicates their resilient and humorous energy; they are determined to prevail against obstacles by means of their own wits, work, and female bonding. Simply they are mostly depicted as rejecting to passively accept an imposition of any kind of suffering as destiny, but they keep on shaping their lives in order to be able to exhale. Mary D. Esselman praises the fact that "[i]n *Waiting to Exhale* [the young women readers] may find, at last, a novel about black women who are not stereotypes. These women pursue careers and relationships because they are educated, independent, and full of humor, self-awareness, and the desire to live fully."⁶³³

Guerrero juxtaposes *Waiting to Exhale* and *Bridget Jones' Diary* as the works which marked a major shift in the ways in which the lives of women were portrayed in popular culture, since women had become "agents, albeit oftentimes fumbling and awkward ones, in their own lives; now they were the rule." Their position in the society has also led to their

⁶²⁸ Robin, the youngest of them, is thirty-five; at the beginning of the novel, Savannah and Bernadine are both thirty-six, and Gloria, the eldest of the four women, turns thirty-eight throughout the novel.

⁶²⁹ Richards, *Terry McMillan: A Critical Companion*, 107.

⁶³⁰ Wolcott, "Terry McMillan," 102. Cf. also Nancy D. Tolson, "Regional Outreach and an Evolving Black Aesthetic," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 183–185.

⁶³¹ Terry McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale* (New York: Viking Press, 1992), 71.

⁶³² Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 61.

⁶³³ Esselman, "Terry McMillan: Overview." The same enthusiasm is not shared by Tina M. Harris who states in her article that besides presenting the four protagonists "as successful women of the 1990s; unfortunately, their relationship choices further preserve the very controlling images the African American community aims to dismantle." "Interrogating the Representations of African American Female Identity in the Films *Waiting to Exhale* and *Set It Off*," *Popular Culture Review* 10.2 (1999): 47. (As a matter of fact, Harris herself gives evidence of how dangerous stereotypes of any kind are, for the affinity displayed by the protagonists to certain behavioural patterns is automatically labelled.)

change. She compares them to the earlier literary heroines of strength and struggle such as Iola Leroy, Helga Crane, or Janie Mae Crawford, and comes to an important conclusion that as strong and independent women became the commonplace protagonists in women's popular fiction, "their trials and struggles also became less epic than the situations of their forebears; but with the pursuit of their conventional aspirations they succeeded in infusing the figure of the modern woman with a relevance and humanity that reimagined assumptions about female identity."⁶³⁴

McMillan equips her buppie characters with the confidence that both earlier and most contemporaneous black women characters portrayed by other often more respected African American writers⁶³⁵ struggled to reach by the final pages of their books. It is vital that they are able to earn the living, and their possession of a relative self-assurance is time to time debased by the lack of a reliable partner and/or a soul mate, but the fact that they remain single does not diminish their claim to true womanhood.⁶³⁶ Susan Dodd states that the book "makes it all a little more fun, a little more cathartic, a little less—as Savannah says—'pathetic.' Because these four protagonists, sisters in protest and antagonism, don't turn the other cheek to life's slaps. No way. They are bright and aggressive, resilient and sassy. They don't mind using a man for what he's good for, even when he's not good for much."⁶³⁷ And, importantly enough, some critics ascribe McMillan's popularity exactly to this phenomenon.

The book conveys a message of warning against generalization and perceiving black characters as universal. The author herself comments that

[w]hen a writer sits down to tell a story, staring at a black page, it amazes me how some people are so naïve as to believe that when we invent a character, that we've got the entire race of African-Americans in mind; that these characters are supposed to be representative of the whole instead of the character we originally had in mind. Let's face it, there are some trifling men and women that some of us have come across. So much that we *have* to write down the effect they had on us. On the other hand, there are also some kind, loving, tender, gentle, successful, and supportive folks in our lives, who also find their way into our work.⁶³⁸

It is essential to emphasise that the same applies to male characters. Speculating about why she might be criticised for the way she portrays the black male characters, she reveals, "I say, it's only two of 'em in here, not two million. I want to tell my stories on a much more personal level, more intimate. It's not just the black man pitted against white society; it's deeper than that."⁶³⁹

⁶³⁴ Guerrero, "'Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves': Chick Lit in Black and White," in *Chick Lit*, 90. Another—and perhaps even more relevant examples for this period—are Lucy Josephine Potter from the largely autobiographical novel *Lucy* (1991) by Jamaica Kincaid, or Ursa Mackenzie, the protagonist of *Daughters* (published in the same year) by Paule Marshall. Still, both immigrant heroines articulate the circumstances of their U.S. existence in rather strong voices.

⁶³⁵ Cf. E. Shelley Reid, "Beyond Morrison and Walker: Looking Good and Looking Forward in Contemporary Black Women's Stories," *African American Review* 34, Number 2 (2000): 313–328.

⁶³⁶ Daniel Max makes an observation worth considering: "Except for Bernadine, who is truly affluent, these women are only solidly middle class—it is their delight in their success that makes them seem richer." "McMillan's Millions." Other sources of her characters' self-confidence are clearly stated in McMillan's introduction to *Breaking Ice*.

⁶³⁷ Susan Dodd, "Women, Sisters and Friends," review of *Waiting to Exhale*, by Terry McMillan, *Nashville Post Book World*, May 24, 1992, 11.

⁶³⁸ McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xxi–xxii.

⁶³⁹ Qtd. in Smith, "Terry McMillan: The Novelist Explores African American Life From the Point of View of a New Generation," 51. The portrayal of black women in popular culture still tends to be attributed to their racial or ethnic background. Kimberly Springer (similarly to her predecessors such as Christian or Collins) notes that African American women have been typecast as either "the mammy, jezebel, the sapphire, the matriarch, the welfare queen, and the crack-addicted mother." To add to this list of dominant representations of black women, today there is also the "angry black woman" full of attitude and a "no-nonsense" attitude. "Divas, Evil Black Bitches, and Bitter Black Women: African-American Women in Postfeminist and Post-civil Rights Popular

8.5.1 Women Characters in the Novel

McMillan demonstrates in her book how “the experience of women born in the early years of the baby boom has redefined the role of women in American society.” Able to participate actively in almost all sectors of American economy and institutions due to the previous achievements of their female predecessors, the four protagonists are not prevented from being haunted by what Richards describes as “traditional expectations that they should be at home raising children full-time.”⁶⁴⁰ Namely, Savannah’s independence and ability to support her mother are paradoxically continuously depreciated both by her mother and Sheila just because she has not managed to find a husband and start a family; what is more, she herself feels there must be something wrong, being under her surroundings’ pressure.

The author shows a continuous artistic concern with her protagonists’ inner consciousness. The plot traces protagonists’ gradual development of self-awareness and their learning of errors of their earlier vanity and foolishness; this is by no means of earnest moral guidance of their partners—or future husbands if you like—but through interaction with the other people, family members, and sistas. In comparison with other authors of the respective periods, therefore, McMillan does not enact a message of submissive conformity; what is more, the characters are by no means static. At the same time, the four black women are divergent in appearance, values, and family backgrounds; still, they have enough in common to share such an enriching friendship.

The following paragraphs outline the special position each of the women protagonists occupies and illustrates her personal growth in short. What the protagonists share as a starting point are their singularly unsatisfying relationships with men contrasted with their professional competence. Savannah is capable and probably also the strongest of the group: a successful media relations executive with a solid savings account, a car, and a condo. Still, she is not yet satisfied with her life, but not desperate. Her professional goal is to become a television producer, and she would like to find a man who would value her. Whereas she would like her partner to be mature, tender, and self-assured, but not arrogant, the men she meets mostly turn out to be irresponsible, selfish, married, unattractive, or otherwise flawed. As *Waiting to Exhale* draws to a close, Savannah has managed to realise one of her aspirations by landing the production job, and she also breaks off definitively with her former boyfriend, married Kenneth. She concludes,

“I might have to get used to the idea of being by myself. ... I’m not being pessimistic; I’m being realistic. I have to accept the fact that there’s a chance I may not ever get married or have a baby. If I do, cool. But I can’t spend the rest of my life worrying about the shit or waiting for it to happen. ... I feel pretty damn good. ... To be honest with you, I do believe in my heart that I will meet *him*. I jut don’t know when. I know it won’t be until I honestly accept the fact that I’m okay by myself that I can survive, I can feel good being Savannah Jackson, without a man.”⁶⁴¹

Robin is willing to admit she is rather keen on men who are handsome and sexually well-endowed; unfortunately, these qualities rarely seem to ensure a satisfying relationship. To start with, she is completely dependent on men for her sense of self-esteem, which is something unacceptable for her girlfriends. Despite her beloved father’s worsening Alzheimer’s disease, which makes him an increasingly heavy burden for her mother, she remains eternally optimistic (or perhaps perpetually blind), returning again and again to the irresponsible Russell and rejecting considerate, devoted Michael, an upper-level executive with her insurance company, because he does not excite her. By the end of the novel, her

Culture,” in *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, ed. Charlotte Brundson and Lynn Spigel (Maidenhead, England; New York: Open University Press, 2008), 75.

⁶⁴⁰ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 117.

⁶⁴¹ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 347–348.

father dies in a nursing home and she is pregnant and determined to raise her child alone—with or without Russell’s help; this time, however, she becomes aware of her value.

Baby or no baby. I don’t want him. He’s no good. Rotten to the core. That I’ve finally realized. ... I’ve left him hurt me too many times. And I’m tired of being a fool. Tired of giving him so much power. Over me. Over *my* life.... I’m going to have to learn how to stand on my own two feet. Learn how to rely on Robin. The answers aren’t in any astrology book. ... The answer to everything is inside me. ... If I don’t do anything else right, I’m going to do this right. I’ll finally have somebody I can love as hard as I want to. Somebody who needs *me*. ... And whenever I have any questions or any doubts, I can always ask Gloria or Bernadine. They always know what to do.⁶⁴²

Left by John, Bernadine finds herself in a particularly precarious position. Her seemingly ideal black urban professional life with the children in a custom-built house, pastel-perfect interior décor, expensive clothing, and a BMW is replaced by feelings of being worthless. The book chronicles not only the way she handles the practical concerns of the newly single mother—especially how to support herself while waiting for the divorce settlement to come through, but mainly her struggle to recover her self esteem. As a perfect housewife who put aside her interests for years, when she soon “started feeling restless and bored and got tired of staying at home with the kids all day long,” she embodies what Stephanie Coontz terms “a strange stirring.”⁶⁴³ She hates the empty house and what it epitomises when the kids are spending the weekends with John. At the end of the book, Bernadine learns that she will receive nearly a million dollars from her husband, allowing her to realize her long-harboured dream of opening a catering business, Bernadine’s Sweet Tooth. In addition, after a period when she showed little interest in men, and then only used them sexually, Bernadine starts dating a socially conscious lawyer, James Wheeler.

Gloria Matthews, the salon owner and hair stylist who takes good care of her son and friends, but simultaneously neglects her own health, responds to the abundant stress in her life by overeating. As a disappointed comfort eater who is hiding behind her barrier of fat, she protects herself from men and love in general, “not interested in going through any heartache.”⁶⁴⁴ Gloria’s story differs from her girlfriends’ ones in many respects: despite her career, her lack of self-confidence is fuelled by overweight and the treatment by Tarik’s father, David, who finds out he is a homosexual.⁶⁴⁵ The belief that she might as well deserve more than taking care of others comes after a heart attack, only after which she starts confronting her weight problem, realising how successful her son is, and that she might fall in love with her neighbour Marvin. Gloria “knew she’d locked herself inside an emotional prison, had done a fine job building a wall round herself. And although she didn’t know how to, Gloria wanted to get out of it,”⁶⁴⁶ realising her son would soon leave the house.

Waiting to Exhale pays attention to the reasons why alliances and subgroups within the circle of the four friends are formed. Savannah and Robin may have much in common; still, they stand as two sides of the same coin, which is revealed mostly by means of providing insight into their characters with respect to relationships with men and their attitude to marriage. Both are single, childless, recognized in their professions, and financially independent. What is more, they function as caretakers of their aging and ailing parents. In

⁶⁴² McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 400–401.

⁶⁴³ The phrase serves as a title for Coontz’s book where she practically re-examines what Betty Friedan suggested in her 1963 famous book *The Feminine Mystique* with respect to housewives. Cf. *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011). McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 30–33.

⁶⁴⁴ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 382

⁶⁴⁵ Learning that “food was good company,” she “lost her social skills.” For a long time, she “waited for her toes to curl. But they never did. It finally got to the point where she got tired of waiting for love and divided all of her attention among God, hair, and her son.” (Toes curling refers to a great bodily pleasure.) McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 69.

⁶⁴⁶ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 385.

terms of appearances, they are both attractive and aware of how to use their sex appeal as a strategic tool in their hands. The gap between them lies in the way they initially deal with “frustrating chasms between fairy tales and real life.”⁶⁴⁷ Savannah is depicted as wary and expecting little:

The truth of the matter is, I’ve spent nine years of my adult life living with three different men that I’m glad I didn’t marry because all three of them were mistakes. Back then, I felt like I had to live with them in order to find out that I *couldn’t* live with them. ... I’m also willing to spend the rest of my life alone if I have to, until I find someone that makes me feel like I was born with a tiara on my head.⁶⁴⁸

Robin, by contrast, is shown as having resigned to the state of romance on various occasions, which results in making poor choices when it comes to men, forgiving them, and carrying much of the responsibility for their mutual relationships herself, including becoming a single mother. Although she seems to be aware of her mistakes, she keeps on repeating them, convincing herself that she must be wrong.

I have always fantasized about what life would be like when I got married and have kids. I imagined it would be beautiful. I imagined it would just be like it was in the movies. We would fall hopelessly in love, and our wedding picture would get in *Jet* magazine. We would have a houseful of kids, because I hated being an only child. I would be a model mother. We would have an occasional fight, but we would always make up. And instead of drying up, our love would grow. We would be one hundred percent faithful to each other. People would envy us, wish they had what we had, and they’d ask us forty years later how we managed to beat the odds and still be so happy.⁶⁴⁹

I was this stupid for along time.

“Submissive stoicism”⁶⁵⁰ and believing that it is her responsibility to make things right is something Robin has taken after her mother who copes with her husband’s deteriorating Alzheimer’s disease. Robin continuously attempts to navigate between reality and fantasy, the respectable and the illicit throughout the whole novel.

Both Savannah and Robin ultimately find out their choices and ways of living has been what has led to their current lives, and make a decision to change themselves. As Guerrero states, by their rejection of the social expectations and “creating their own sense of real womanhood, they are able to remain self-possessed,” even if (or rather especially if) that implies remaining single. Also, they are able to recognise “what really defines family and values.”⁶⁵¹ In Robin’s case, it signifies having a child alone rather than remaining in a dysfunctional relationship just to fit the traditional role of motherhood. As Janet Mason Ellerby claims, McMillan “resists following the script written by mainstream American discourse that imposes the cultural ideals of White patriarchal domesticity across the borders of race, class, ethnicity, and sexual preference.”⁶⁵²

What contributes to the authenticity of the characters most is the natural way the description of each woman’s physical appearance and living space takes. Instead of telling the reader directly, McMillan weaves these descriptions into interior monologues or dialogues rather than making these part of the authorial narrative voice. The reader learns about Savannah’s small bosom but shapely behind when she is dressing for the New Year’s Eve party; John’s threat to leave Bernadine if she has her hair cut sheds light both on her

⁶⁴⁷ Guerrero, “‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White,” in *Chick Lit*, 94.

⁶⁴⁸ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 11.

⁶⁴⁹ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 44–45.

⁶⁵⁰ Guerrero, “‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White,” in *Chick Lit*, 94. Robin explains, “My mother always told me that things are never as bad as they look and to always give a person the benefit of the doubt.” McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 42.

⁶⁵¹ Guerrero, “‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White,” in *Chick Lit*, 95.

⁶⁵² Janet Mason Ellerby, “Deposing the Man of the House: Terry McMillan Rewrites the Family,” *MELLUS* 22.2 (Summer 1997): 105–117. *Literature Resource Center*, accessed May 13, 2013, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420005489&v=2.1&u=opave&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.

appearance and their relationship; one of Gloria's stylists as well as Tarik tell her she is "too pretty to be fat."⁶⁵³

To sum up, "[t]o the richness of her four main characters' bonding, McMillan adds a number of revealing variations,⁶⁵⁴ both in the form of the major and minor characters. And the scope of the situations described in the novel expands it to "three generations, implying a sense of growth and continuity."⁶⁵⁵ The "four well-rounded and superbly developed female characters"⁶⁵⁶ are often contrasted with one-dimensional male characters by critics.

8.5.2 Men Characters in *Waiting to Exhale*

When it comes to male characters in *Waiting to Exhale*, the novel depicts African American men as a kind of "endangered species."⁶⁵⁷ The shortage of eligible men within the African American community can be easily explained, having a look at the demographic evidence.⁶⁵⁸ Richards notices McMillan also explores "the changing definition of what constitutes an 'eligible man' in the eyes of upwardly mobile African American women."⁶⁵⁹ (This particular topic is discussed in detail in the following chapter.)

The incomparably smaller space and no narrative weight dedicated to the black male characters is one of the problematic issues. The narrative does not make the thoughts of any male characters accessible to the reader, "so there are no psychological motivations to explain why the male characters do the things they do in the story."⁶⁶⁰ Wendy Smith, for instance, disagrees with the author's "depiction of black men, who are seen only through the often exasperated eyes of her four central female characters." McMillan's reaction explains her reasons: "The men are on the periphery, they're not the focus of this story, therefore they don't get the three-dimensionality that the women do." Aware of the potential critique, she continues, "Periodically, I would stop and say, 'Oh, they're going to be pissed off at me now!' But I said exactly what I meant, and I'm not apologizing for any of it. This book is not meant to represent or portray any gender or group of people. Nobody thinks that a Czech writer is representing all Czechs, or a Russian writer is writing for all Russians."⁶⁶¹ Ellerby adds that [i]n a clear feminist gesture, McMillan's contemporary African American families allocate to men a different space than the patriarchal center. In fact, her fiction appears to be affirming African American patterns of kinship groups based on mutual aid and community participation. The women in her novels rediscover their own sustaining power in kinship bonds which have historically served African Americans well in surviving.⁶⁶² As Richards sums up, what McMillan's detractors "have rarely recognized is that the story explores why women make poor choices concerning the men in their lives."⁶⁶³

Male-bashing label is another source of critique. Both the "good" and "bad" men characters are drawn with the recognizable traits expected by the reader from both groups.

⁶⁵³ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 100.

⁶⁵⁴ Charles R. Larson, "The Comic Unlikelihood of Finding Mr. Right," review of *Waiting to Exhale*, *Chicago Tribune*, May 31, 1992, accessed February 10, 2013, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1992-05-31/entertainment/9202180638_1_terry-mcmillan-exhale-black-men.

⁶⁵⁵ Larson, "The Comic Unlikelihood of Finding Mr. Right."

⁶⁵⁶ Bronson, "Terry McMillan: Overview."

⁶⁵⁷ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 217. For precise statistics concerning African American males, see Haki Madhubuti, *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1990), where the author not only examines the trends effecting negative changes on the African American male, but also responds with solutions.

⁶⁵⁸ For more particular statistics concerning births, divorce rates, etc., see Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 117–120.

⁶⁵⁹ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 119.

⁶⁶⁰ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 111.

⁶⁶¹ McMillan qtd. in Smith, "Terry McMillan: The Novelist Explores African American Life From the Point of View of a New Generation," 51.

⁶⁶² Ellerby, "Deposing the Man of the House: Terry McMillan Rewrites the Family."

⁶⁶³ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 111.

The first (and more numerous) group includes men who lie, cheat, avoid serious commitment, are unsupportive, patronising, selfish, or possibly a combination of these. Those belonging to the latter group possess the opposite characteristics from the ones listed above. Besides Marvin and Robin's father (that is, however, before the disease has taken its toll), there is no unquestioned and unquestionable model of masculinity to look up to. Tarik's personal traits of thoughtfulness and responsibility, together with his good grades, and engagement in volunteer work—for he wants to join an organization called Up With People in his gap year before he heads toward a black college in Atlanta in order to “know what it's like being around people of [his] own color”⁶⁶⁴—make him one of the best male characters in the novel.

In the previous chapters it is suggested that black women were unwillingly forced to take the role of a family provider or breadwinner in the past.⁶⁶⁵ This was, in fact, a parallel process to the one that systematically deprived black men of their manhood, that is, of the possibility to provide for the family; as a result, in Guerrero's opinion, even the modern black men as well as women are faced with “asserting a kind of hypermasculinity to protect their fragile claims to manhood, an assertion that has never been necessary for white men.”⁶⁶⁶ This even may lead to their looking up to white men, and imitating their success, which is ridiculed by the protagonists. John's high aspirations—“one day I'm going to have exactly what they have,” ... ‘They’ being rich white folks”⁶⁶⁷—become a major source of Bernadine's contempt. As a matter of fact, John turns out to be perhaps the worst male character in the novel, plotting against her and being indifferent to her feelings and aspirations, he chases the white ideal of the American dream. Because John is not given any voice in the novel, both Bernadine and the readers have no insight they would need to identify with John's attitudes.

Susan Dodd concludes, “there are at least three men for each woman, and not all men turn out to be so bad.”⁶⁶⁸ By contrast, Guerrero makes a relevant point when saying that the good men in *Waiting to Exhale* are not “idealized models of manhood,” or “the bad men are always bad and the good men are never good enough.” Kenneth, Savannah's old flame who reappears after a long time would be good, accomplished, and devoted, but is married; Tarik is still too young for the reader to see, but probably is on a good way; Michael, Robin's colleague and potential boyfriend is depicted as pitiful, cloying, needy, and what Guerrero labels “*too* faithful.”⁶⁶⁹ McMillan speculates about the reasons for this state of things: “Something happens to black men. ... They don't have confidence in themselves, or they don't get support from their families.”⁶⁷⁰

8.6 Themes

In her 1985 essay “Black women writers: taking a critical perspective,” Susan Willis identifies three central concerns in writing by black women, that is, community, journey, and sexuality. They problematise the community, pointing at the lack of black cultural identity based on the characters' surrender to commodification under capitalism; journey, by contrast, becomes a means of self-knowledge (often through “re-entry into collective historical experience”); sexuality and sexual experience are often distorted by the male-dominated

⁶⁶⁴ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 299.

⁶⁶⁵ That is also why Lionel, whom Savannah meets on a blind date, initially seems successful and sensitive, but when he starts to ask to borrow money from her she loses her initial enthusiasm. For more information, see for instance Stephanie Coontz, “African-American Women, Working-Class Women, and the Feminine Mystique,” in *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*, 121–138.

⁶⁶⁶ Guerrero, “‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White,” in *Chick Lit*, 96.

⁶⁶⁷ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 30.

⁶⁶⁸ Dodd, “Women, Sisters and Friends,” 11.

⁶⁶⁹ Guerrero, “‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White,” in *Chick Lit*, 96.

⁶⁷⁰ McMillan qtd. in Hubbard, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” 94.

heterosexuality and burdened by double standards, yet capable of sensual pleasures.⁶⁷¹ As demonstrated below, many of the themes tend to be interconnected and should be read in such way; often, it is not the themes which change but the very different perspective of them McMillan offers.

8.6.1 African American Community

In depicting the African American community, McMillan tries hard to close a circle. As Willis rightly observes, while “traditional society defined the subject in terms of community, advanced capitalism has generated a society in which subjects are isolated individuals,” which necessarily leads to the fragmentation of social relationships. McMillan’s contemporaries scrutinise

the community as it existed in the past in order to question whether or not and in what form it might exist in the future ... and tend to associate the existence of community with their mothers’ generation, while they see themselves struggling and writing against the devastating influence of late capitalist society, particularly as it erodes the cultural black identity of black people, replacing cultural production with commodity consumption.⁶⁷²

McMillan, by contrast, puts emphasis on the present day achievements of the educated blacks, celebrating their resourcefulness, and upwardly mobility. But if they succumb to any kind of overconsumption, she is not hesitant to show its harmful effects in a rather evident manner. Whether in particular within the kind of family the four protagonists create, or in a broader context of the BWOTM (Black Women on the Move) organization,⁶⁷³ she not only depicts the symptoms of alienation within the individualised society, paying it lip service, but seeks alternatives, namely in the form of depicting how the members of a group formed by the African Americans might be attentive to satisfying their needs and helpful to one another. The fact that she depicts the community as it is, and not as it should be, results in criticism, to which she reacts as follows: “Unfortunately, the black people who are the most militant are the ones who seem to be more hung up than anybody on what white people think. ‘We’re airing our dirty laundry, why can’t we portray ourselves more positively?’—to me, that’s stuck in the ‘60s stuff. They make the assumption that we are anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, when all we are is storytellers. They try to put this weight on our shoulders, which I totally dismiss.”⁶⁷⁴

8.6.2 Contemporary Issues

Dodds is right when she states that “[m]en aren’t the only problem, of course. *Waiting to Exhale* is a veritable litany of current dilemmas and dangers: aging parents, spoiled kids, divorce, and money and cars and work and cigarettes.” Moreover, “[i]ts vocabulary is a rap song of contemporary urgency: AIDS,⁶⁷⁵ Alzheimer’s, cellulite, cholesterol, commitment, glass ceiling, networking, Nintendo, Prozac, Section 8, Victoria’s Secret, Ysatis. It’s all up-to-the-minute, it not quite new.”⁶⁷⁶ The same critic, however, points out at the fact that

⁶⁷¹ Namely, Willis takes into consideration various works by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, and Zora Neale Hurston, showing how each of them comes to terms with the past and constructs a critique of the present. Susan Willis, “Black women writers: taking a critical perspective,” in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1985), 211.

⁶⁷² Susan Willis, “Black women writers: taking a critical perspective,” 213–214.

⁶⁷³ The organization’s long-term activities aim at changing the conditions of black people living in Phoenix and include long-term giving out scholarships, teaching black women how to make extra money, offering legal advice, organising workshops which suggest how to deal with breast cancer, incest, sexual harassment on the job, single parenting, financial planning, stress, and so on. McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 170–171.

⁶⁷⁴ Qtd. in Smith, “Terry McMillan: The Novelist Explores African American Life From the Point of View of a New Generation,” 51.

⁶⁷⁵ A crisis in Oasis is caused by one of Gloria’s stylist’s becoming unable to work due to his worsening AIDS.

⁶⁷⁶ Dodd, “Women, Sisters and Friends,” 11.

McMillan's novel and the characters "suffer some from an overdose of the 'the hysterical present.'"⁶⁷⁷

Savannah's siblings are not as fortunate as she is: Sheila's husband loses his job during the course of the novel; one of the other two brothers ends up in jail for passing counterfeit money; and the other one serves in the military, which takes him to the Persian Gulf. Gloria's weight and the chronic health problems such as high blood pressure which results from being overweighted—in combination with prolonged working hours—cause her a massive heart attack. She observes poignantly: "I don't know which is worse, trying to raise a teen-age son or dealing with a husband who leaves you for a white woman."⁶⁷⁸ She has been trying to teach her son the importance of education and respect to other people in order not to let him "grow up to be as trifling and irresponsible as some of these fools running around out here parading as grown men."⁶⁷⁹ In relation to drugs, Savannah admits, "right after college cocaine became my drug of choice but I stopped doing that shit years and years ago. Now that we're all damn near middle age, I don't want to be around *anybody* who's still into drugs."⁶⁸⁰

In her monograph, Richards generally reads McMillan's novels as blues testimonials in which the centrality of redemption is not only a spiritual matter, for "it also defines a political stance." It is vital to point out, once more, that as such, her novels have their own political logic. McMillan has been criticised for being apolitical and raising social questions, but failing to provide answers. However, as Williams suggests, "[u]nlike sacred music, the blues deals with a world where the inability to solve a problem does not necessarily mean that one can, or ought to, transcend it." The blues sensibility helps her to "translate African American experience into written forms."⁶⁸¹

Tate rightly argues that contemporary African American women writers write stories inviting readers to assume the roles of central characters,⁶⁸² which makes the readers (regardless of skin colour) participate actively in the reflection and make their own conclusions. This approach is in concordance with McMillan's aim to avoid obvious preaching, as expressed in her introduction to *Breaking Ice*. (What strategies the author uses to reach the reader's participation in particular is dealt with in the subchapter on narrative patterns.)

8.6.3 Importance of Family and Sisterhood

The community consisting of the four protagonists as portrayed in the novel is—not equally important as the central romantic relationship as in other chick lit novels—but arguably more important. Black women's relationship to their families and the way these operate in the novels is shaped by the fact that all four protagonists become the ones responsible for the economic stability of their closest ones. Savannah provides financial care for her mother who is on prohibitively fixed income, co-paying her rent; Robin worries how to support her parents due to their inadequate health care benefits, for the father's deteriorating Alzheimer disease requires a full-time daily care which they cannot afford. Gloria's parents passed away fifteen years before, but she is a single mother; and only Geneva, Bernadine's mother, is financially self-sufficient; still, before the financial settlement, Bernadine has to provide for her children.

⁶⁷⁷ Dodd, "Women, Sisters and Friends," 11.

⁶⁷⁸ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 168.

⁶⁷⁹ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 382.

⁶⁸⁰ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 13.

⁶⁸¹ Sherley Anne Williams, "The Blues Roots of Contemporary African-American Poetry," in *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*, ed. Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto (New York: Modern Language Association, 1979), 74. For more information about the blues aesthetic and blues romance, see Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 38–42.

⁶⁸² Gloria Tate, introduction to *The Flagellants* by Carlene Hatcher Polite (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.)

All in all, the protagonists become responsible for the members of their nuclear family and two of them also the major source of their parent's well-being. Their families do not represent any inescapable burden to them; simultaneously, they do not seem to be of any nurture either.⁶⁸³ In addition, "McMillan's characters, like McMillan herself, [definitely] have little time for theories of racism, but they have a strong sense of themselves as African-Americans. They are keenly aware of who is black within their professions and gravitate to them as potential allies."⁶⁸⁴

What else than friendship—in this case sisterhood—should be a focal point of what Dietzel labels "girlfriend novel" (explained in the chapter on African American popular novel). Friends are not only vital for the protagonists' harmony but also serve as "the primary support system," forming a sort of extended family or "a communal unit" of constant presence.⁶⁸⁵ Whoever of the four protagonists experiences a crisis, the others are there to offer her a helping hand. The responsibility for the friends is well comparable with that for the family. And that is exactly what makes Mabry apply the term the "urban family,"⁶⁸⁶ whose bonds are often as strong, if not stronger, than those of the nuclear family, and—above all—those of the romantic relationship. As Savannah frankly notes, "'If I had a man and it was your birthday, and you were going to be over here by yourself all lonely and shit and Robin and Bernie called me up to come over here to help you celebrate, I'd still be here, girl. So don't ever think a man would have that much power over me that I'd stop caring about my friends.'"⁶⁸⁷

At the same time, unresolved and tense relationships with black fathers are presented. Tarik's relationship to his father David is worsened by David's scarce interest in him and his confession that he is a gay. Bernadine and John's conflicts over their children are obvious, and even prevent John from caring properly for his children. Both David and John fail in the role of providers of unconditional love and role models; their emotional tolls is what their children carry along, meanwhile the women supply one another as well as the children with emotional support, advice, and financial help if needed.

8.6.4 Journey

While women have been traditionally portrayed as remaining at home, as Yvonne Johnson explains, "African American women present the motif of journey for their speaking subjects, whether the journey is inward or external. ... The motif of the journey may well derive from the slave narratives, but African American women writers in the twentieth century have transformed their protagonists' lives through such journeys."⁶⁸⁸ Willis adds that "[c]alling it motif, theme or literary strategy, the criticism groups this along with other common and recurrent themes in the attempt to define a black woman's aesthetic." She, however, points out the short-sightedness of such formula, for African American women writers' writings are much more than "collections of motifs and strategies, but a mode of discourse which enables a critical perspective upon the past, the present and sometimes into an emerging future. ... the notion of travelling through space is integral to the unfolding of history and the development

⁶⁸³ For instance, Geneva, Bernadine's mother (and a retired school bus driver) serves as a good example, loving her grandchildren, but having "a strange way of showing it." Cf. McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 81–82.

⁶⁸⁴ Max, "McMillan's Millions."

⁶⁸⁵ Guerrero, "'Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves': Chick Lit in Black and White," in *Chick Lit*, 97.

⁶⁸⁶ Mabry, "About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary 'Chick' Culture," in *Chick Lit*, 202.

⁶⁸⁷ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 326.

⁶⁸⁸ Yvonne Johnson, *The Voices of African American Women: The Use of Narrative and Authorial Voice in the Works of Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 99.

of the individual's consciousness with regard to the past."⁶⁸⁹ As a result, journey has to do with not only spatial mobility but also class mobility, as well as psychic growth.

By contrast, McMillan uses the theme in a slightly different way. Savannah moves in to Phoenix to join her college roommate Bernadine; in the last ten years she moved four times, moving freely as she has preferred. Her journeys are only partly motivated not by a need to escape the atmosphere of the parochial community, but she self-assuredly sets off in pursuit of a realisation of her professional ambitions and making her dreams come true. Simultaneously, there is certain rootlessness in her existence, for she does not seem to be able to settle down. In case of other characters, what Willis terms "non-journeys"⁶⁹⁰ is significant too, for the three protagonists feel comfortable enough in the space they have inhabited.

8.6.5 Freedom

Unlike many other African American women writers such as Polite, Jones, Morrison, Walker, etc. who champion civil liberty for the race as a whole, McMillan "emphasizes the quest for personal liberty."⁶⁹¹ Again, that does not mean she is unaware of the oppressive forces that have been shaping lives of black people living in the United States. She pays particular attention to examining how individuals empower themselves, what shape their sense of freedom takes, and to what extent they are willing to become responsible for themselves. It is very important that the protagonists are "women of substance" who reflect the unprecedented professional success of her generation in the mainstream society.⁶⁹² She lets her characters grow consistently so that these can achieve greater levels of personal integrity for which the "healing power of transformation" (as suggested by Tate⁶⁹³) become central. Only then, strong themselves, the characters can contribute to the well-being of their community.

8.6.6 Love

According to Richards, McMillan's depiction of love as blues romance is complicated by two conditions. First, "characters in a romance story must have enough autonomy to commit themselves to each other," which was more than difficult to achieve in the past. Second, authors of African American love stories "have always faced the mainstream audience's resistance to identifying with black men and women as romantic heroes and heroines" for the very same reasons.⁶⁹⁴ McMillan's decision was not to embellish the truth or provide the reader with a chance to escape into an idealised reality; and if so, as in case of Robin, it is done only to show how twisted her expectations are. Instead, McMillan embraces mimesis, i.e., a high degree of reality with which a work of art represents life, which makes her work convincing and true-to-life. Richards sums up that this lifelike quality, also known as verisimilitude, "is more difficult to achieve when the protagonists are African Americans, because ... a long history of oppression makes it more difficult for readers to suspend their disbelief in African American protagonists who are sufficiently empowered to serve as romantic heroes and heroines."⁶⁹⁵ The same could, unfortunately, be applied on the critics.

Replacing the traditional romantic ideal favoured by the American mainstream audience with the blues romance appears to be a very challenging act, especially when combined with addressing a general audience. All four women find themselves in the situation of facing the prospect of a life that may never include a male partner. What is more,

⁶⁸⁹ Willis, "Black women writers: taking a critical perspective," 220.

⁶⁹⁰ Willis, "Black women writers: taking a critical perspective," 222.

⁶⁹¹ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 46.

⁶⁹² Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 46.

⁶⁹³ Qtd. in Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 46.

⁶⁹⁴ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 41.

⁶⁹⁵ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 41.

Richards suggests that the failure of Bernadine's marriage "represent the failure of a common dream," precisely because she is the only one out of the four protagonists who has ever been married.⁶⁹⁶ In addition, Gates has asserted that the act of writing itself "is inherently political/politicized for African Americans, then writing about loving relationships between black people must be even more so."⁶⁹⁷

The title of the book is linked to hoping for the ideal mate who would take the four women's breath away, although he never seems to materialise.⁶⁹⁸ (Savannah confesses she cannot lie: "Now I worry. I worry about if and when I'll ever find the *right* man, if I'll ever be able to exhale. The more I try not to think about it, the more I think about it."⁶⁹⁹) Although the men often leave them breathless—not always in a positive sense, as a matter of fact—the four women learn to breathe just fine by themselves.

8.6.7 Sexuality

In comparison with her contemporaries, McMillan is far from depicting repression or even deformation of black female sexuality, but women characters who "have a healthy interest in sex."⁷⁰⁰ The way in which the sexual behaviour patterns are depicted makes black chick lit very different from the romance novel: "Rather than presenting their protagonists as subordinate to male advances, chick-lit authors present women as sexual agents. They give their female protagonists a number of sexual partners and experiences." Some critics argue, this tendency goes hand-in-hand with the contemporary literature's tendency to "deemphasize a central romance and highlight the female protagonist's nonromantic relationship with her close community of mostly female friends."⁷⁰¹

Sex is treated (and of course discussed among the four girlfriends) in a very open manner as something alluring but also elusive. Their relationships with men are naturally reflected in sex. Kiernan adds that the "characteristic cynicism about 'the ways of men' is key to understanding the motivations of newer metropolitan heroines and their conquests."⁷⁰² How explicit these accounts are is obvious from the following lines.

What I want to know is this. How do you tell a man—in a nice way—that he makes you sick? ... This list is too long to name names, but of course all black men think they can fuck because they all have at least ten-inch dicks. I wish I could tell some of them that they should start by checking the dictionary under *F* for "foreplay," *G* for "gentle," and *T* for "tender" or "take your time." ... and I'm not interested in rehabilitating anybody either. I've tried it, and it doesn't work.⁷⁰³

It may come as a surprise to various readers that the same Gloria who is rather surprised by Tarik's sexual activity is "wondering what kind of lover her son possibly could be at sixteen and a half years old." And even though she hates to admit that, "she envie[s] him."⁷⁰⁴

⁶⁹⁶ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 110.

⁶⁹⁷ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 40.

⁶⁹⁸ A particularly entertaining passage unveils why they are without a man at that moment. Drunk from several bottles of champagne at Gloria's birthday party, the girlfriends name the reasons. Cf. McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 332.

⁶⁹⁹ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 14.

⁷⁰⁰ Review of *Waiting to Exhale*, *Publishers Weekly* 239.15, March 23, 1992, 58. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter and Deborah A. Schmitt. *Literature Resource Center*, accessed May 13, 2013, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1100003980&v=2.1&u=opave&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.

⁷⁰¹ Ferris and Young, introduction to *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, 10. Simultaneously, Richards links the growing sexual assertiveness of romance novels women readers in the last decades of the 20th century as a basic premise for McMillan's open-minded treatment of bodily matters. Cf. Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 22–25.

⁷⁰² Anna Kiernan, "No Satisfaction: *Sex and the City*, *Run Catch Kiss*, and the Conflict of Desires in Chick Lit's New Heroines," in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, 208.

⁷⁰³ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 12–13.

⁷⁰⁴ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 106.

Adrienne Rich's thesis in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1985) is that heterosexuality is not a matter of choice for a woman but it functions as a violent political institution through which patriarchy is maintained but also manifested.⁷⁰⁵ Simultaneously, what Harzewski terms "late sexuality" opens a new sphere of straight relations in which women are less susceptible to romantic myths; what is more, in and after the 1990s, judgements about sexual orientation become questions of image and not political issues. "Late sexuality embraces this increased freedom, in which men operate nearly as accessories and courtship is juxtaposed to business. (Preoccupation by men in chick lit, however, is perceived as deceptive, for mere wanting more money is blurred with postfeminism in Harzewski's opinion.⁷⁰⁶) For instance, Savannah comments, "I didn't have to be in love with the man to do this, and my poor body'd be grateful to get fed, since it'd been on such a starvation diet."⁷⁰⁷

Harzewski develops on this idea, claiming that one of the contributions of the genre of chick lit is "the production of what we might call a sexual theory of late capitalism or a reflection of how the latter one has filtered into and commercialized the most intimate arenas of everyday life."⁷⁰⁸ As a result, alternative images of female sexuality are offered. For instance Anna Kiernan argues that by treating sex in a businesslike fashion (as if it were an economic exchange), the traditionally gendered roles are subverted, placing women in a position of power over men. The unfortunate side effect is that such books spread objectification of men, which is exactly what feminism has been trying to reject the other way around.⁷⁰⁹ Treating men as if they were mere sexual objects, approaching sex as sport, or any other "reductive identifying practices"⁷¹⁰—although initially attractive and/or interesting for some of the characters—eventually does only harm to the women themselves.⁷¹¹

What McMillan also has in common with contemporary chick lit is that it presents the protagonists in other sexual relationships with men other than the intended stable partners, but it is done "without 'punishing' her or questioning her actions."⁷¹² It remains an interesting issue whether the fact that a heroine is not judged for her promiscuity and interest in charming cads also simultaneously do not operate as reinforcing the attractiveness of the "bad boy," provided that she is, after all, aware of his commitment reluctance.⁷¹³ And "if he doesn't call

⁷⁰⁵ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986).

⁷⁰⁶ Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 11–12.

⁷⁰⁷ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 117.

⁷⁰⁸ Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 11. Willis sees commodities as something "that takes the place of spontaneity and caresses and ... fills in the dreadful gap created between men and women in non-reciprocal sexual relationships" also in previous works by African American women writers, e.g., by Marshall and Morrison. Willis, "Black women writers: taking a critical perspective," 228.

⁷⁰⁹ Cf. Kiernan, "No Satisfaction: Sex and the City, Run Catch Kiss, and the Conflict of Desires in Chick Lit's New Heroines," in *Chick Lit*, 207–218.

⁷¹⁰ Kiernan, "No Satisfaction: *Sex and the City, Run Catch Kiss*, and the Conflict of Desires in Chick Lit's New Heroines," in *Chick Lit*, 211.

⁷¹¹ After Bernadine thinks she has partly recovered from John's betrayal, she compensates for her grief and sorrow by enjoying herself with various men. Herbert, for instance, is married, Vincent—with whom she is "just playing"—is ten years younger. The affair with Herbert rather takes the form of a symbolic revenge, meaning "just fucking him" for her, something "men've been doing ... it's just nice to know I can get it what I need when I need it." In addition, Bernadine knew she "used him. But so what? That's what they'd been doing to women for years. Taking advantage of us." McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 295, 189, and 274–275.

⁷¹² As Mabry adds, in the romance novel, by contrast, such relationships would be "almost necessarily presented as rape scenarios, because the sexually innocent heroine could not be allowed to enjoy a sexual encounter with any man other than her intended mate." Mabry, "About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary 'Chick' Culture," in *Chick Lit*, 201.

⁷¹³ The appeal of the charming "bad boys" such as a drug-addict Troy or chronically unfaithful Russell is commented on by Bernadine who turns to Robin, "What is it you've just got a thing for dogs?," since Robin is

the next day,” they are not devastated. McMillan’s characterisations obviously also “dramatize changing mores that offered women of the baby boom unprecedented freedom to define their own sexuality.”⁷¹⁴

For a long time, Gloria has made her son Tarik the focal point of her life: before she becomes familiar with her new neighbour, Marvin, Bernadine says about her, “the only thing Gloria [has] had energy for was Oasis Hair and that sixteen-year-old husband she called her son;”⁷¹⁵ in other words, “[s]o far the one *man* who hasn’t broken [her] heart.”⁷¹⁶ Herself having not been dating for years, Gloria is forced to come to terms with his sexuality and manhood assertion. (It is, however, not her knowing that he has been sexually active, but the fact that he is almost ready to leave home that is the source of her anxiety, since letting him go “will require Gloria to define her own interests in life for the first time.”⁷¹⁷) Gloria does not condemn his premarital sexual activity (even though catholic and because/despite he was born out of the wedlock, too) but has a frank conversation with him about birth control.

8.6.8 Career

Meanwhile the “mystic spaces of ‘hearth and home’ have come to characterize womanly identity and represent fortification of womanhood” in general, black women as depicted by McMillan, alternatively, seek a relationship that would give them the opportunity “to define their womanhood beyond domesticity.” In other words, these mystic spaces represent contradictory places that have to do with the personal past of each character, and therefore also a certain reduction of *sistah* identity, which has also another implication: the importance of and narrative weight put to career of black women.⁷¹⁸ The previously prevailing kitchen settings in fiction which remain symbols of female bonding and protagonists’ sanctuaries are this time complemented by restaurants, gyms, and offices.

Willis finds it striking that “nowhere in black women’s writing is the workplace ever seen as the basis for community,” for it is associated with long hours spent away from home.⁷¹⁹ Gloria’s hair and beauty salon Oasis is rather special not only in this respect (as suggested in the synopsis of the novel). As Baumgardner and Richards point out, beauty shops have long been sites for activism in the African American community. In the 1950s and 60s, Saturday hair appointment went hand-in-hand with a voter-education seminar that often also blossomed into dealing with other subjects.⁷²⁰

In order to fully comprehend the phenomenon of shifting the setting and accentuated careers, the historical fact that for centuries, black women (perceived as the Other), “were denigrated as unwomanly due to their inability to aspire to the ideal of a fragile femininity” in

not attracted to Michael, a man who would be willing to offer what she wants but excitement. McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 159.

⁷¹⁴ Richards, *Terry McMillan: A Critical Companion*, 118.

⁷¹⁵ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 278.

⁷¹⁶ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 382.

⁷¹⁷ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 104. The authorial voice contemplates, “What was she going to do with herself then? How was she going to survive? And just how do you go about making a life for yourself when you’ve been socially crippled and emotionally bankrupt for years?” McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 70.

⁷¹⁸ The fact that black women have had a lesser chance to marry a man who would supplement the families with a regular income and the impossibility of the “male breadwinner–female homemaker” pattern regardless of their preference has not been entirely overlooked by white feminists, cf. Stephanie Coontz, “African-American Women, Working-Class Women, and the Feminine Mystique,” in *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 121–138.

⁷¹⁹ Willis, “Black women writers: taking a critical perspective,” 219.

⁷²⁰ For instance hairdressers have been trained to pass on information about breast-self exam and mammograms; a salon in Washington, D.C. has offered HIV/AIDS education and another salon in Salisbury, Connecticut, has trained its stylists to detect signs of domestic violence among its clients. Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 303.

need of protection should be mentioned.⁷²¹ Their reasons for looking for worth then must be rather different from those of white women: as Guerrero poignantly sums up, “as they ha[d] been taught by society to believe in their disposability and the fact that they should be loathed, even demonized. Having grown suspicious of these truths, sistahs seem to be seeking validation of their suspicions.” Such struggles are therefore marked by much more than just by negotiating how to fit into socially constructed ideas of womanhood, but because of their race, they must also establish their own sense of womanhood.⁷²²

8.6.9 Commodity Culture and Fake Empowerment

Reading the African American novel in relation to artifacts of mass culture, such as advertisements or popular music is not a question of the latest years. In 1989 Susan Willis’ essay titled “I Shop Therefore I Am” became a part of *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women* edited by Cheryl A. Wall. In the essay Willis reuses and modifies her argument from *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* that African American women writers condemn the mass culture that “dispense commodities and values across gender, race, and class lines” by valorising the differences denied by mass culture.⁷²³ In her essay Willis begins with a powerful image of Claudia MacTeer questioning of the basis for white cultural domination, whose hostility toward Shirley Temple and destruction of white dolls originates in her “realization that in our [American] society, she, like all ‘others,’ participates in dominant culture as a consumer, but not as a producer.”⁷²⁴ More important, Willis asks whether mass culture can be conceived of as black culture; or whether mass culture by its very definition is white culture with a few blacks in it, and the blacks can even “begin to imagine the media as a form capable of expressing Afro-American cultural identity.”⁷²⁵

Furthermore, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra identify various shortcomings of postfeminism in one of its most sophisticated analyses. In *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (2007) they say that “postfeminism commodi[fies] feminism via the figure of the woman as an empowered consumer;” it “tends to confuse self-interest with individuality and elevates consumption as a strategy for healing those dissatisfactions that might alternately be understood in terms of social ills and discontents.”⁷²⁶

McMillan’s black women contemporaries do not focus on condemnation of consumption as “a hollow solution to the problems of race, class, and gender,” and the ultimate degradation of the black consumer who is far from equal in being able to purchase commodities.⁷²⁷ McMillan rather shows how alienating the commodity culture and ephemeral

⁷²¹ Cf. Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*, 72 and Coontz, “African-American Women, Working-Class Women, and the Feminize Mystique,” in *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*, 121–138.

⁷²² Guerrero, “‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White,” in *Chick Lit*, 92–93.

⁷²³ Wall, “Taking Positions and Changing Words,” in *Changing our Own Words*, 15.

⁷²⁴ Susan Willis, “I Shop Therefore I Am: Is There a Place for Afro-American Culture in Commodity Culture?,” in *Changing our Own Words*, 173.

⁷²⁵ Susan Willis, “I Shop Therefore I Am: Is There a Place for Afro-American Culture in Commodity Culture?,” in *Changing our Own Words*, 175. Her essay is novel in dealing with advertising, clothes, toys, and other commodities, criticising the recent trends in marketing which promote mere black replicants of the white world, for “white supremacy suggest the equalization of the races at the level of consumption.” Ibid, 183–184.

⁷²⁶ Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, introduction to *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007), 2.

⁷²⁷ Morrison and Walker with their works from the 1970s and 80s are repeatedly referred to. Susan Willis, “I Shop Therefore I Am: Is There a Place for Afro-American Culture in Commodity Culture?,” in *Changing our Own Words*, 179.

the gratification are, and that buying a new self becomes a mere compensatory yet affordable activity. Her characters fully participate as consumers in the U.S. society,⁷²⁸ but only as part of more sociable behaviour which takes the form of reciprocity and not self-efficiency; their possession of material goods, therefore, gains a meaning. Bernadine only learns to appreciate her custom-built house after she nearly loses it, having been sick of what it represented. Her and John's costly designer clothes as well as other of his material possessions signify a burden for her. Savannah likes to buy pieces of art from young African American artists now and then when she can afford.

One of the recurring themes in fiction by African American women (and other women too) is the use of "clothing iconography." Three of the characters are no "wearers" of corporate logos,⁷²⁹ for the actual pieces of clothes they wear (by contrast with chick lit) is not as intriguing as what their clothes symbolise and how they reflect various stages of their psychic states. Robin, on the other hand, as suggested above, could be described as a "walking collection of commodities." Her passion for expensive lingerie and other items is not caused by a mere internalised acceptance of the larger society's measures, but—blinded by fairy-tale notions of love and marriage—she "turns to the only means our society holds out to individuals to improve their lot and solve their problems: consumption."⁷³⁰

8.6.10 Race and Racial Tensions

McMillan's own explanation of her attitude to this crucial topic is stated in the introduction to *Breaking Ice* from 1990 (two years before *Waiting to Exhale* was published): aware of the metamorphoses through which the African American fiction had gone, she says

It wasn't that race was no longer important, it's just that in much of the work I've read from the seventies to now, race wasn't always the focus. There has been an understanding that many African-American writers were *out of Africaness*. Or say it differently, our only frame of reference is African-Americans, so we write about what our experiences mean to us, what concerns us as African-Americans.⁷³¹

No need to prove African Americans as sovereign people to anybody (the least to the white audience or critics) is the reason for setting her works to purely black communities. Those who criticise her for the absence of the white (and therefore racial) element apparently do not take into account this fact. Neither has it made sense to McMillan to still write "we hate whitey" stories."⁷³² Still, some critics accuse her of "creation of societies in racial vacuum,"⁷³³ to which Max adds that her "relationship with the white world is marked with such misinterpretations. A mutual fascination fanned by uneasy jousting."⁷³⁴ Suzanne Ruta finds "racism coyly hinted but never confronted" in the novel.⁷³⁵

The idea that much of the novel deals "implicitly (and oftentimes explicitly) with the socially created battle between black womanhood and white womanhood over the mantle of beauty and worthiness"⁷³⁶ is not the case. The settings she generally chooses are mostly

⁷²⁸ Intriguingly enough, a British film and art critic Kobena Mercer has a very different approach to consumer society which, for instance in black new hairstyles, gives new forms of access to black people's self-expression. "Black Hair/Style Politics," *New Formations* 3 (Winter 1987): 33–54.

⁷²⁹ Willis, "I Shop Therefore I Am: Is There a Place for Afro-American Culture in Commodity Culture?," *Changing our Own Words*, 177. This statement might seem arguable in case of Bernadine whose closet is full of designer clothes, but the reason she wears them is to keep certain standard set by her snobbish ex-husband.

⁷³⁰ Willis, "I Shop Therefore I Am: Is There a Place for Afro-American Culture in Commodity Culture?," *Changing our Own Words*, 178.

⁷³¹ McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xx.

⁷³² McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xx.

⁷³³ Guerrero, "'Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves': Chick Lit in Black and White," in *Chick Lit*, 100.

⁷³⁴ Max, "McMillan's Millions."

⁷³⁵ Suzanne Ruta, "Review of *Waiting to Exhale*," *Entertainment Weekly*, accessed December 10, 2012, http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20569554_310780,00.html.

⁷³⁶ Guerrero, "'Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves': Chick Lit in Black and White," in *Chick Lit*, 93.

purely black worlds—places where the white presence mostly tends to be insignificant, and serves as a mere background to the African American contemporary experience. The white element occurs as a part of interracial marriages and relationships in both novels. White women mean a challenge to *sistas*, but not a threat, or even a model of womanhood to aspire to. Robin feels free to express openly in an exchange of opinions with Savannah about this topic that she hates “black men who run to white women” and she has the same attitude to “the fact that they think white girls epitomize beauty and femininity.” Savannah, by contrast, is more tolerant, saying it does not bother her that much, since she thinks “people have a right to love who they want to.”⁷³⁷ Gloria’s reaction to a white girl from the neighbourhood in Tarik’s room, by contrast, speaks for itself: “Get out of my goddamn house!”⁷³⁸

The most obvious racial tension lies in what Bernadine and her friends perceive as a traitorous act—not only for them but also as a symbolic one for the whole community of *sistas*—that is, her husband’s affair with a white woman and the subsequent break-up with Bernadine. When John leaves her, Bernadine’s spirit seems to be broken. “All she wanted to do was repossess her life. To feel that sense of relief when the single most contributing factor to her uttermost source of misery was gone. But he beat her to the punch. Not only was he leaving *her*. Not only was he leaving her for another woman. He was leaving her for a *white woman*. Bernadine hasn’t expected this kind of betrayal, this kind of insult.”⁷³⁹ It is not only John’s betrayal but also the feeling that her courage failed her and does not seem to have any satisfaction of controlling her life. John (who has been plotting in order to “protect himself financially,”⁷⁴⁰ as her lawyer puts it) underestimates Bernadine and her wit. To regain her sense of self, she even subversively objectifies herself, claiming “My pussy is worth more than three hundred thousand dollars.”⁷⁴¹ In a fit of rage, Bernadine collects all John’s clothes and burns them in his BMW; then she sells the rest of his things, including he most valuable items such as his golf clubs or vintage car only for a dollar per item. This act reveals how humiliating the situation is for her. The act of closing their bank accounts and therefore leaving her without money to pay the mortgage follows as his revenge. Richards reads the act as John’s indication that “no black woman is good enough for him.” She adds that most of McMillan’s core black audience “take [his] defection as an assaults on their honor.” As a result, she sees Bernadine’s winning of the final divorce settlement as a symbolic of “black women’s desire for just treatment in the society at large.”⁷⁴² The novel shows Robin and Savannah’s working places that have glass ceilings as potential sites of triple exploitation where the “good old boys” refuse to see the prospect their work brings.⁷⁴³

Despite what some critics say, blackness and being black are accentuated in the novel. Tarik hopes to get to a purely black college in Alabama; Savannah’s future job revolves around the issues of corner for African Americans in Phoenix, and her motivation to choose a man for what she hopes will turn into more than an affair lies in the fact that “he hadn’t forgotten he was black ...[and] he still knew where he came from.”⁷⁴⁴ Similarly, Bernadine’s mother Geneva decides to move back to Philadelphia, for she is “tired to death out” in Phoenix. She also states, “I don’t have any friends, and I’m tired of all these white folks.

⁷³⁷ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 176.

⁷³⁸ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 191.

⁷³⁹ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 25.

⁷⁴⁰ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 126.

⁷⁴¹ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 131.

⁷⁴² Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 103.

⁷⁴³ As a result, Savannahs perceives her job at the local television station merely as a way of getting into more creative production. McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 195.

⁷⁴⁴ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 364.

Don't get me wrong, it's not that I don't like 'em, but I'm tired of being not around my people."⁷⁴⁵

8.7 Narrative Situations and Point of View

Before classifying the particular narrative situations which occur in the novel, it is vital to refer to a basic term that has to do with mediacy. In Stanzel's opinion, mediacy (the rendering of mediacy) is "perhaps the most important starting point for the shaping of the subject matter by an author of a narrative work."⁷⁴⁶ He attempts to apply consistently the term "point of view," suggesting the difference between the teller-character in an authorial or first-person narrative situation, and the reflector-character (a figural medium). In other words, to narrate, i.e., to "transmit something in words" and to experience, that is, "to know as a character what is happening in the fictional space," are two distinct contexts in narrative theory. Stanzel not only shows point of view in its double nature, but also shows the possible overlap of the two functions of point of view which happen "especially frequently where authorial and figural elements of the narrative situation of a novel appear in close association."⁷⁴⁷

Stanzel accentuates one important issue more in connection with the point of view. As Käte Friedman says as early as in 1910, it is the narrator who "'as the one who evaluates, who is sensitively aware,' conveys to us a picture of the world as he[*she*] experiences it and not as it really is."⁷⁴⁸ According to Norman Friedman (with reference to Mark Schorer), a novel makes it possible for the author to create "world of values and attitudes;" the author, then, is assisted in his[*her*] search for an artistic definition of these values and attitudes by the controlling medium offered by the devices of point of view through these devices he[*she*] is able to disentangle his[*her*] own prejudices and predispositions from those of his characters and thereby to evaluate those of his[*her*] characters dramatically in relation to one another within their own frame.⁷⁴⁹

The differentiation of the figure of the authorial narrator from the author is not as obvious as one might think. The four protagonists of McMillan's novels are independent characters who have been created, and "with whose peculiar personality the reader and critic are confronted."⁷⁵⁰ Judging from the critique she has received, this basic principle is still sometimes neglected.

Whether the story is narrated by a present (or invisible) narrator, or one of the characters who experiences decides about the "telling" and "showing" narration.⁷⁵¹ There is an important difference between the two: telling, "the report of a narrator, has as a rule a certain affinity with aperspectivism," meanwhile showing, "scenic and figural presentation through a reflector-character, has an affinity with perspectivism."⁷⁵² In other words, in the telling style, the account is "explicit, specific and purportedly complete;" in the showing one, by contrast, it is "implicit, specific and conspicuously incomplete, because it focuses not on the whole but on a part." More important, the basic difference between a story which is "communicated by a teller-character and one which is presented by a reflector-character" lies mainly in the teller's awareness of the act of narration on one hand, and the absence of such awareness in the reflector on the other one. It is vital to point out that in addition to the

⁷⁴⁵ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 344.

⁷⁴⁶ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 6.

⁷⁴⁷ Stanzel also refers to Lubbock's terms "speaker of the narrative words" and "knower of the narrative story." *A Theory of Narrative*, 9.

⁷⁴⁸ Friedman qtd. in Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 11.

⁷⁴⁹ Norman Friedman, "Point of view in fiction," *PMLA* 70 (1955), 1167. Qtd. in Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 12.

⁷⁵⁰ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 13.

⁷⁵¹ This pair of terms is just one out of many offered by Stanzel in this respect—cf. *A Theory of Narrative*, 47.

⁷⁵² Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 120.

reader's illusion that he/she is witnessing the action directly, the quality of the reflector's experience as well as the credibility of what is presented are not affected.⁷⁵³

Besides, there are two techniques which often occur in conjunction but should be distinguished for the purpose of a further analysis. The first one is "the dramatized scene" which consists of "pure dialogue, dialogue with brief stage directions, or dialogue with very condensed narratorial report." The second technique is "the reflection of the fictional events through the consciousness of a character in the novel without narratorial comment," that is, through a reflector.⁷⁵⁴

The narrative situation in *Waiting to Exhale* is a subject to regular modification. In the chapters dedicated to Savannah and Robin, the figural narrative situation is used; the mediating narrator is replaced by a reflector, "a character in the novel who thinks, feels, and perceives, but does not speak to the reader like a narrator."⁷⁵⁵ Therefore, the reader looks at the other characters of the narrative through the eyes of this reflector-character. Because nobody narrates in these two cases, the presentations seem to be direct, and "the illusion of immediacy is superimposed over mediacy."⁷⁵⁶ In the chapters where the events related to Gloria and Bernadine are accentuated, the authorial narrative situation is used.⁷⁵⁷ As Stanzel puts it, the narrator is "outside the world of the characters" and he/she exists "on a different level of being from that of the characters."⁷⁵⁸ The narrator in this case simply functions as a mediator between the author and the reader. The narrator does not perform before the eyes of the reader, what is more, he/she is so withdrawn behind the characters of the novel that the reader is by no means aware of his/her presence.

The combination of two reflectors and authorial narrative situation, as used by McMillan, causes that the reader is not "at the mercy of the reflector-character and his/[her] existentially limited knowledge and experience."⁷⁵⁹ The narrative weight is distributed by means of altering voices and providing two characters, i.e., Savannah and Robin with stronger voices than Gloria and Bernadine. Donella Canty sees the reflector-character narrative situation as enabling "the reader to fully comprehend [the] protagonists' complex, eventful lives."⁷⁶⁰ Although McMillan skilfully balances the four characters, Savannah emerges as the strongest one, even in comparison with Robin. These two reflector-characters speak more intimately to the reader than the authorial voice used in chapters which centre on Gloria and Bernadine's parts of the story. The reader's sympathy towards her is also motivated by the fact that she shows more self-awareness and ability to learn from her mistakes than any other character, which—however—does not mean she is faultless. In addition, she is fully capable to take responsibility for her actions. By contrast, Robin continually repeats the same mistakes; as Richards observes, "first-person narration enables McMillan to make Robin's self-delusion

⁷⁵³ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 146–147.

⁷⁵⁴ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 47–48.

⁷⁵⁵ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 5.

⁷⁵⁶ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 5.

⁷⁵⁷ According to Richards, the function of Bernadine's part of the story line in the novel is illustrated by her words at Gloria's birthday party when she compares herself to an upright bass. (Her story line is the only with a traditional conflict, followed by a crisis and resolution.) *Terry McMillan: A Critical Companion*, 102. She says, "they're always in the background but they carry the whole beat." McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 329–330.

⁷⁵⁸ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 5.

⁷⁵⁹ Provided that only the reflector is used, through his/her sharply focused perspective, "a section of the fictional reality is isolated and spotlighted in such a way that all the details important for the reflector-character become discernible. Outside of this sector, however, there is darkness and uncertainty, a large area of indeterminacy, which the reader can penetrate only here and there by drawing inferences from the illuminated sector. This mode of presentation lacks the higher authority which could inform the reader whether something relevant to the events presented exists outside of that sector of fictional reality illuminated by the perception of the reflector-character." Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 153.

⁷⁶⁰ Canty, "McMillan Arrives," 86.

perfectly clear to readers while allowing them to judge her for themselves.”⁷⁶¹ By contrast with Savannah, Robin could be regarded as “a classic naïve narrator” used by McMillan to manipulate “the dramatic ironies of Robin’s self-delusion to make a powerful comment on women who depend on men to validate their existence.”⁷⁶² Richards adds that in case of Bernadine, more action is used “to present her than the other characters, “for her actions “vividly express what she is feeling as she tries to cope with the divorce.”⁷⁶³ Gloria’s character is the least explored of the four women in the novel, “which ironically reproduces precisely the same experience of the women like Gloria that McMillan is hoping to give voice to,” according to Guerrero.⁷⁶⁴ Still, the way Bernadine and Gloria deal with their situation is “simultaneously funny, sad, and realistic,” and their authorial third-person account is considered to be “very revealing.”⁷⁶⁵

In *Waiting to Exhale* the above described shifts of point of view occur regularly. As Stanzel explains, “the variation of the narrative situation in the course of the narrative process in a novel is connected with a number of factors, of which two are especially significant: the organization of the content, that is to say of the story and the structure of the novel, its composition as a complex of certain basic narrative forms.”⁷⁶⁶ The demarcation line of these shifts in this particular novel are individual chapters. As a matter of fact, there are also subtler variations within the chapters, for instance, Savannah’s introductory chapter contains inner monologues with direct speech of other characters; in Bernadine’s introductory chapter the authorial voice uses the pronoun “you” several times to first speak in general, and then becomes part of Bernadine’s inner monologue in which she addresses herself, e.g., “You fool.” In addition, several sentences in this chapter are told from the first-person perspective.⁷⁶⁷ Free indirect style is employed on page 128 and 224, again in chapters centred on Bernadine. In chapter eighteen the authorial voice makes comments about Bernadine’s inner state; deliberative questions used frequently, as a result, it is more personal than the rest. Chapter seventeen (where Robin functions as a reflector) contains an imaginary dialogue with Russell which gives the reader a precise picture of her tormented mind after she finds out he has been married from a message he left on the answering machine; in the same chapter, an implied reader is addressed by means of “you,”⁷⁶⁸ which makes her contemporarily distant from her usual function of the reflector.

Most of the chapters focus on a particular protagonist, but in a simultaneous relation to the rest of them. The reader learns more about the other characters from gossips in Oasis, through phone conversations, etc.⁷⁶⁹ The women talk to, think about, and help one another even when not being in one another’s presence—this technique draws them together throughout the whole text. On the other hand, in chapters ten, fifteen, and twenty-one the same narrative weight is given by the authorial voice, for all four protagonists are reunited,⁷⁷⁰ and the story is told in past tenses without any focus on either of them. The recurrence of these phenomena give the novel certain rhythm which is apparently structurally

⁷⁶¹ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 107.

⁷⁶² Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 105.

⁷⁶³ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 109.

⁷⁶⁴ Guerrero, “‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White,” in *Chick Lit*, 95.

⁷⁶⁵ Canty, “McMillan Arrives,” 87.

⁷⁶⁶ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 64.

⁷⁶⁷ Cf. McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 18–35. These passages with the second-person narration indicate not only her momentary inner state but also the circumstances of submerging her own personality over the course of her marriage; the shift back to the authorial voice is a signal for the reader to return to the events of the main plot.

⁷⁶⁸ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 266 and 268–269.

⁷⁶⁹ It is rare but chapter seventeen is without a single mention of the rest of the female protagonists.

⁷⁷⁰ To close the circle symbolically, in the last chapter the same space is covered by all four women protagonists, too.

determined.⁷⁷¹ All the same, the novel is on the verge of “schematization,” which “denotes just that kind of perseverance or the recurrence of certain sequential patterns in the succession of basic narrative forms.”⁷⁷²

More important for the analysis of McMillan’s novels in particular, due to the amount of dialogues in them, it is necessary to explain two basic groups of forms Stanzel speaks about. These are narrative forms (these include report, description, and comment) and non-narrative or dramatic forms (speech and dramatised scene which comprises essentially dialogue interspersed with narrative elements which function as stage directions and as brief reports of the action). The novel is not a homogenous genre but a mixture of diegetic-narrative and mimetic-dramatic parts; it is even possible to notice a gradual progression from the first kind of parts to the latter ones, to which “indirect style, indirect speech, speech report and largely dramatic scene are more closely related.”⁷⁷³

Strictly speaking, a dramatised scene which consists predominantly of dialogues the characters perform cannot have a narrative but rather a dramatic function, as stated in the Czech translation of Stanzel’s book.⁷⁷⁴ That, however, does not mean it should be neglected as part of constitutive elements of a narrative text.⁷⁷⁵ That is why “depending on the predominance of narrative or non-narrative elements, a dramatised scene can be reckoned either to the narrative forms or to the non-narrative ones.”⁷⁷⁶ As a result, despite its frequent occurrence in epic texts, it cannot be used for constituting the basic types of narrative situations. Still, as some critics point out, the prevalence of dialogues in McMillan’s novels can be—when it comes to the genre of the novel—a sign of trying to avoid the rendered mediacy provided in any narrative situation. Namely, McMillan offers the reader basic information not only about the protagonists’ present emotional and physical state but also the past; details about the families and relationships among their members are also included in dialogues, phone conversations, etc. Last but not least, the dialogues reveal spatio-temporal orientation. (Especially, these are presented in a very condensed manner in the four introductory chapters of the book.)

Meanwhile “the alternation of narrative and dialogue parts largely takes place independently of the narrative situation, the succession of the basic forms of narration in a novel is primarily determined by the narrative situation.” Here, the transitions from one narrative situation to the other play a rather important role, since “narratives with considerable alternation of the basic forms and with frequent transitions between narrative situations have a strongly pronounced rhythm.”⁷⁷⁷ The scenes with dialogues and dramatic action absolutely prevail over the narrative ones in *Waiting to Exhale*, which means it could easily be called what Stanzel terms as “dialogue novels;”⁷⁷⁸ in narrative passages the novel alternates from one basic form to another. The transitions from the authorial outside view to the figural inside one can be explained by various reasons. First, McMillan’s intention to write a girlfriend

⁷⁷¹ Such variations are apparent in the Western literature after mid-20th century, as Stanzel observes. Cf. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 63–64. Wolfgang Heinz Schober attempts to take hold of the changing narrative situations in modern novels by using the term “narrative position.” Qtd. in Stanzel, *Teorie vyprávění*, transl. Jiří Stromšík (Praha: Odeon, 1988), 85.

⁷⁷² Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 77.

⁷⁷³ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 66.

⁷⁷⁴ In addition, dialogue functions as “a non-narrative structural element of a narrative,” and thus cannot by itself “decisively determine the classification of a work on a typological circle.” Still, due to the withdrawal of the authorial narrator and simultaneous absence of figural presentation, Stanzel places it approximately halfway between the authorial and figural narrative situation. *A Theory of Narrative*, 67.

⁷⁷⁵ Stanzel, *Teorie vyprávění*, 65.

⁷⁷⁶ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 65.

⁷⁷⁷ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 69.

⁷⁷⁸ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 67.

novel motivated her to use various voices, wanting to convey messages of a certain kind to the reader, she gives preference and therefore also a stronger voice. Second, if any of such shifts occur within the chapters, the shift can be explained thematically, which is in concord with what Stanzel says: “the transition to an extended inner view with figural narrative situation is found most frequently in scenes of great inner pathos of the characters.”⁷⁷⁹ The rhythm of the novel can be described as marked; the narrative and dramatic forms are altered in a consistent yet rather mechanic way. By doing so, McMillan creates what Stanzel terms “a narrative pattern,” which can—among other—result from “the stereotyped recurrence of a certain contour of a narrative profile.”⁷⁸⁰

The change of tenses from the past simple (or continuous) to the present one of a corresponding aspect is, again, arranged mostly thematically, that is, it occurs in crucial moments. For instance, in the third chapter, Robin uses present simple and present perfect for expressing general statements; in addition, this increases the effect of immediacy and urgency, for she also states what she wishes for at the moment.⁷⁸¹ Similarly, Savannah’s intense feelings are presented in present tense.⁷⁸² The shifts into the present tense gain a relatively high degree of existential relevance for two reasons. First, in the personal narrative situations, they are natural part of the reflectors’ thinking and—as stated above—are conditioned thematically. But in case of the chapters dedicated to Gloria and Bernadine where the authorial narrative situation is used, the authorial narrator “approaches the world of the characters by allowing his/[her] narrative present to become simultaneous with the time in which the experience of the characters is concluded.”⁷⁸³

The above described complete shift of point of view produces the notion that the reader can see a reality which becomes familiar to him/her through various eyes.⁷⁸⁴ Simultaneously—and that is very important—the narration of each chapter, irrespective of whose part of the story is being told, pushes the story forward for all the women. As a result, no event is (re)viewed from different angles and referred to again, which contributes to an even cadence of the story. As it becomes obvious from the previous paragraphs, the choice of narrative device is crucial to the reception of a literary work.

8.8 Plot and Ending

Similarly to other McMillan’s novels, *Waiting to Exhale* does not employ a traditional plot structured around a central conflict between a protagonist (the main character) who is surrounded by minor ones and forces opposing his/her goals. As stated above, the plot revolves around the four African American girlfriends, their families, ups, and downs. In order to keep the reader in suspense, McMillan supplies her audience with mini-climaxes. These, however, do not imply that the books aimlessly offer process without progression (in combination with irreversibility of changes in the overall plot), which is for instance condemned by Dennis Porter as one of the typical basic features of soap operas, a great example of worthless low art. He observes that “mini-climaxes and provisional denouements ... must never be presented in such a way as to eclipse the suspense experienced for associated plot lines.”⁷⁸⁵ Such reading, linked to classic metaphysical understanding of

⁷⁷⁹ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 71.

⁷⁸⁰ The tendency to “shift from an authorial to a figural narrative situation, which can be observed with particular frequency” can likewise be included. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 76.

⁷⁸¹ In chapters nine, twenty, and twenty-seven in which Robin functions as a reflector-character are written in present tenses only.

⁷⁸² Cf. McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 372.

⁷⁸³ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 97.

⁷⁸⁴ This is exactly what the title of the dissertation suggests: there are more sides to every story.

⁷⁸⁵ Dennis Porter, “Soap Time: Thoughts on a Commodity Art Form,” *College English* 38 (1977): 783–4.

literature based on expectation and desire for its closure as well as true knowledge and fulfilment of the reader's knowledge, must be replaced by a different approach that would not insist on such rigid notion of what is "true." Instead, Luce Irigaray, describing a woman's "rediscovery" of herself, offers looking at women's writings as "a sort of universe in expansion for which no limits could be fixed and which, for all that, would not be incoherence."⁷⁸⁶

What actually pushes the plot, as suggested above, is primarily the women's personal growth and development; Richards adds "the desire for justice"⁷⁸⁷ to the search for a partner, too. What the women have learnt was dealt with in above; what is more, Robin and Bernadine become at last able to apprehend critically the way their lives were dominated by their partners' demands and desires, and to step outside the sphere of their influence, which gives their story a feminist orientation.

As far as the reviews are concerned, Charles Larson states that the novel is not plotless, rather "McMillan is such a clever storyteller that while the ending seems too predictable about two-thirds of the way through her narrative, everything shifts around once again as a series of final surprises unfold."⁷⁸⁸ A reviewer of *Publishers Weekly* agrees: "After many vicissitudes, two of the heroines find love, but until then McMillan keeps us constantly guessing about which members of her lively quartet will be thus rewarded."⁷⁸⁹ In Canty's opinion, it is "one of the most well written, true-to-life books" she had ever read" due to "McMillan's [exceptional] story-telling strategies and precise command of narrative voice."⁷⁹⁰

Unlike in traditionally end-oriented fiction, there is an open ending. According to Stanzel, "there exists a structural connection between a narrative beginning with a reflector-character or a reflectorized teller-character and an open ending," that is, "a situation in which matters remain peculiarly up in the air."⁷⁹¹ What fiction characters experience throughout the story is thought about as "knots" by McMillan; the complications then are "things are knotting up." And by the end of the story, the reader sees "an 'unknotting' of sorts," by which she means "[n]ot what they expect, not the easy answers you get on TV, not wash-and-wear philosophies, but a reproduction of believable emotional experiences. All I want my readers to do is care about what's going to happen to these folks in the story."⁷⁹²

The novel ends with each woman finding "a place to begin to stake her claim to self and happiness."⁷⁹³ Having discovered the true nature of the discrepancies in John's financial statements, Bernadine is rewarded with almost one million dollars. Her winning symbolic justice is accompanied by a new relationship, too. (As a matter of fact, both Gloria and Bernadine have a relationship.) The ending, then, becomes a new beginning for them; Savannah and Robin remain single but satisfied. Bernadine's partner James Wheeler agrees to relocate to Phoenix where he intends to fight to make the state honour the federal holiday on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday.⁷⁹⁴ What is more, thanks to their reliance on one another, they rediscover strength and themselves outside of a relationship with men. *Waiting to Exhale* is much more than a novel about African American women in search of happiness and

⁷⁸⁶ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (USA: Cornell UP, 1985), 31.

⁷⁸⁷ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 105.

⁷⁸⁸ Larson, "The Comic Unlikelihood of Finding Mr. Right."

⁷⁸⁹ Review of *Waiting to Exhale*, *Publishers Weekly*.

⁷⁹⁰ Canty, "McMillan Arrives," 86.

⁷⁹¹ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 163.

⁷⁹² McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xxiii.

⁷⁹³ Guerrero, "'Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves': Chick Lit in Black and White," in *Chick Lit*, 100.

⁷⁹⁴ Richards comments, "Bernadine's love stands for justice." The fact that his first wife who has just died of breast cancer was white and his choice to have a relationship with a black women "restores the racial honor that John has besmirched at the start of the novel." *Terry McMillan*, 104.

fulfilment, but it is a narrative about the importance of a female community whose every single member contributes to these processes. As Guerrero sums up, “the overarching theme is the power of the black female community and the importance of asserting and cherishing that power in a society that has often made it difficult to just do that.”⁷⁹⁵

In comparison with the rest of the chapters, the closing four ones are considerably shorter. As Dodds observes, “A lot of loose ends are tied up in bows in the novel’s last few pages. These intimations of the fairy-tale finale give *Waiting to Exhale* a strangely naïve quality. But there is some mighty sweet satisfaction, too, in a book that insists, as Terry McMillan’s seems bent on doing, that what goes around, comes around.”⁷⁹⁶ Larson agrees: “It is not a pat ending, but something more bittersweet-all good bawdy fun.”⁷⁹⁷

8.9 Humour

In *Humor and Social Change* Joseph Boskin notices that humour and art are related in the sense that “each attempts to create a perspective that within which humans can define their individual and cultural existence.”⁷⁹⁸ The task to specify both individual and cultural existence has been more than problematic for African American women, since for a long time they were trapped in a culture that defined them, preventing them from becoming its active shapers. As a result, black women have been more susceptible to widely acknowledged stereotypes and confining images. It is particularly interesting to have a look at McMillan and other self-confident black female voices and the ways they cope with them, whether they take form of stepping apart from such culture, decide to undermine it, or even point at them subversively from inside.

In his prefatory note to *The Book of Negro Humor* (1966) Langston Hughes defines humour as something “what you wish in your secret heart were not funny, but it is, and you must laugh. Humor is your own conscious therapy.”⁷⁹⁹ Even after several decades, this definition is perfectly applicable on popular African American novel. Gloria Kaufman makes an attempt to define a feminist humour, distinguishing between “female” and “feminist” one. For the first one certain bitterness and the ‘that’s life’ kind of attitude is typical, meanwhile “the *nonacceptance* of oppression characterises the feminist humour and satire. Feminist humour—which, then, becomes very close to Hughes’ concept—is “humor of hope” and instead of bowing to circumstances, it assumes that it is the circumstances and not the women themselves to be wrong and blamed, and therefore the women refuse to be bound by them.”⁸⁰⁰

As Nancy A. Walker explains, feminist humour in Kaufman’s view does not laugh at the mission itself, because that would mean to trivialise it; “nonacceptance of oppression” shows an overt political message as well as leads to the ultimate rejection of oppression of any kind. Instead, it laughs at “the very idea of gender inequality and in attempt to render such inequality absurd and powerless.”⁸⁰¹ Still, taking into account that mostly humour in general,

⁷⁹⁵ Guerrero, “‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White,” in *Chick Lit*, 100.

⁷⁹⁶ Dodd, “Women, Sisters and Friends,” 11.

⁷⁹⁷ Larson, “The Comic Unlikelihood of Finding Mr. Right.”

⁷⁹⁸ Joseph Boskin, *Humor and Social Change in Twentieth Century America* (USA: Trustees of the Public Library, 1979), 3.

⁷⁹⁹ Langston Hughes, “A Note on Humor,” in *The Book of Negro Humor* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1966), vii.

⁸⁰⁰ Gloria Kaufman, introduction to *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor and Satire*, ed. Gloria Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980), 13. Despite men’s expectations “that feminist humor will return their treatment in kind,” it does not create negative stereotypes of men analogous to stereotypes of women in male humour: “[s]ince it arises from a subculture that has no patience with stereotyping, especially in relation to sex roles, we should not be surprised at the tendency of feminist humor to avoid stereotypic characters.” *Ibid.*, 13–14.

⁸⁰¹ Nancy A. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women’s Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 145.

as Kaufman says, “may ridicule a person or system from an accepting point of view,” it actually results in a confusing overlap of both female and feminist humour. Walker offers “a more subtle form of feminist humour” which is inherently subversive. The small nuances of different types of feminist and/or female humour could be explained by applying Umberto Eco’s distinction between “humor” and “the comic,” as explained in his essay “Frames of Comic Freedom.” The frames function as sets of rules or expectations which are considered as a form of acceptable social behaviour within a particular culture. The comic effect occurs when a frame is broken in a way which is approved by the audience:

In humor we smile because of the contradiction between the character and the frame the character cannot comply with. But we are no longer sure that it is the character who is fault. Maybe the frame is wrong. Humour reminds the audience (the reader) of the existence of such frames; it gives us the feeling, or better, the picture of the structure of our own limits. It is never off limits, it undermines limits from inside.⁸⁰²

Walker points out an essential reason why humorous voices of feminist protest should be heard. It is not far from the tears-veiled-with-laughter definition by Langston Hughes mentioned in the first chapter, and that is to “dismiss the fundamental seriousness’ of the witty statement, to assume that she who expresses herself humorously feels no pain.”⁸⁰³ McMillan’s protagonists’ pain tends to be masked by means of humour, showing that it is not the women themselves but the system that is wrong. Walker adds that “a reading of contemporary humor by both women and men serves as one among many indicators that the women’s movement has done little to change women’s lives, despite repeated attempts at fundamental revisions of political and social policies and attitudes.”⁸⁰⁴ The four protagonists and the way they live actually show the opposite, as none of them has a primary gender-identity of a homemaker.

Humour in *Waiting to Exhale* deals with a broad range of issues, including dating and mating, parenting, looks, discrimination in the workplace, people’s unusual personal traits, etc. The tone of this humour is often jubilant, representing rather what Kaufman labels “humor of hope.” If anger becomes a part of humour, it is directed to men, social welfare conditions of the parents, male-created institutions, white women, the characters as mothers and their failures, confronting parents, or marriage. To give particular examples, seemingly cool and competent, Savannah relates her experiences with honesty and a risqué humour that is particularly effective when describing her ill-fated sexual encounters such as with Lionel.⁸⁰⁵

When dealing with issues of relevance to black women, McMillan takes the following stances to reach comic effect. Frequently exaggeration is used in order to point at paradoxes and absurdities, also irony aimed at debunking myths and stereotypes, together with hyperbole to make the reader smile or laugh. A combination of an emphasised emotionally-loaded word with a swear one produces the comic effect, too: Gloria wonders, “Her *baby* was fucking?” Even Gloria has difficulties, trying to keep a straight face, having learnt about her son’s sexual activities: “That’s probably why his grades have dropped, she thought, and wanted to chuckle but didn’t dare. He’s pussy-whipped. Coming has effected the boy’s brain.”⁸⁰⁶ A pun (or a play on words) is used for instance in chapter ten.⁸⁰⁷ Hughes’ definition of humour suggested above corresponds with the situation when Savannah tries not to succumb to her former boyfriends charm again,⁸⁰⁸ or when there is no other remedy for Robin

⁸⁰² Umberto Eco, “Frames of Comic Freedom,” in *Carnival!*, Thomas A. Sebeok, ed. (Berlin: Mouton, 1984), 8.

⁸⁰³ Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 154. The healing function of housewives’ humour is precisely what Betty Friedan overlooks in her *The Feminine Mystique*.

⁸⁰⁴ Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 165.

⁸⁰⁵ Cf. McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 118–119.

⁸⁰⁶ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 101.

⁸⁰⁷ “The Penn State” is mixed up with “the state pen” on purpose. Cf. McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 210.

⁸⁰⁸ Savannah says, “‘Why do you think I used to get so mad at you? ... I’d be waiting for your black ass to call me, and finally, when you did, you’d talk about some damn article in *Newsweek* and then tell me to have a nice

than to laugh after she realises how foolish she has been when it came to Russell.⁸⁰⁹ Humour of hope and encouragement is employed in a situation in which an elderly lady in Oasis is reflecting upon the old good days when she had younger male partners, and trying to put herself in Bernadine's shoes: "I'd go ahead and enjoy myself if I was you, baby. These younger men treat you better, they got more energy, they ain't set in their ways, and they ain't half as stingy." She giggled and went back to pretending she was reading her magazine."⁸¹⁰ After Bernadine finishes her private conversation with Gloria about very personal details of Robin's love life, she turns back to the same lady, "Better than the soaps, huh?"⁸¹¹ Last but not least, a sort of gallows humour appears in the novel in connection to Gloria's bad health caused by being overweight: at the hospital, Savannah urges Gloria to pull herself together, "You better hurry up and get your ass out of here, ... [m]y hair needs to be cut." Robin adds, "That's all right, ... [w]e'll still love you when you're skin and bones."⁸¹²

When it comes to the reviews, Larson sees the subject matter of dating as "the only true lament of this otherwise very funny novel. Because of her biting comic tone, McMillan's work is distanced from that of a number of her contemporaries (Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Marita Golden, for example). Although *Waiting to Exhale* is rooted in ethnicity, that ethnicity is never angry, bitter or bleak."⁸¹³

8.10 Language

Richards appreciates McMillan's use of standard English in combination with European-derived forms "to express truth that grows out of African American lived experience. Her skill in translating black English dialect into print cements her relationship with her core African American audience. At the same time, the skill is a measure of McMillan's artistry." In short, she "does not simply transcribe contemporary black vernacular speech. Instead, she captures an urban black vernacular style while conforming to the rules of standard English grammar and usage so that all audiences can comfortably engage in her prose."⁸¹⁴

Richards insists on the idea that the most remarkable element of McMillan's style is her "ability to evoke an urban vernacular that black readers recognize as their own language."⁸¹⁵ Savannah and Bernadine are from Pittsburgh, Robin's parents moved place a lot due to the father's position in the army, and Gloria's parents were originally from Alabama. Despite the black dialectal diversity, as far as lexical choices and syntax are concerned, the four characters sound the same. Richards sees that not as "a flaw in McMillan's technique," but rather it is "a sign that she is creating an artistic representation of vernacular black speech that allows her to engage her readership more effectively than absolutely authentic description of dialect would;" in addition, "her style does not exclude readers from any ethnolinguistic background."⁸¹⁶ McMillan captures the rhetorical style of black English in combination with conforming to the rules of English grammar usage to a large extent.⁸¹⁷

day. Like it was business. I wanted to kill you sometimes, I swear. Can I kill you now, for all the anxiety and heartache you caused me?" McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 258–259.

⁸⁰⁹ Robin comments, "And then I started laughing. Because there was nothing left to do but laugh." McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 269.

⁸¹⁰ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 295.

⁸¹¹ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 297.

⁸¹² McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 398.

⁸¹³ Larson, "The Comic Unlikelihood of Finding Mr. Right."

⁸¹⁴ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 34.

⁸¹⁵ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 112.

⁸¹⁶ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 112.

⁸¹⁷ As much space is devoted to dialogues, as suggested above, the question remains what makes them authentic and real-to-life. McMillan makes use of a great variety of the features of the spoken language, which significantly contribute to the authenticity to of her characters' language. When it comes to monologues, various

Richards applies Geneva Smitherman's theory of four basic communicative modes in vernacular black English. These are "call and response, signification, tonal semantics, and narrative sequencing." The novel itself serves as a testimonial which "calls directly for some response from the reader," even though it is a print document. First, both the reflector-characters and often personalised authorial voices speak directly to the reader as if they were "confiding in someone who can validate [their] experience." It is visible, e.g., in the opening lines of the first chapter where Savannah speaks in "complex discursive sentences to create a rhythm that climaxes in the shorter, aphoristic final sentence which contains a vivid metaphor."⁸¹⁸ Second, signifying is used as "a complex mode of commenting, indirectly and usually unfavourably, about people and situations," for instance with additional connotative meaning. (Richards adds that Gates says this rhetorical device is commonly used to "signify on" something.) Third, tonal semantics is rather difficult to represent in written, since different meanings depend on how the particular words are pronounced; but McMillan's decision not to employ alternative spelling makes it harder for her to convey this feature. Instead, some words are italicised and even repeated. Richards explains that "judicious repetition is a device that works in all languages and literature, but tonal semantics in vernacular black English allows speakers to add even more nuances of meaning to repeated elements, with subtle changes in pitch and stress for each occurrence."⁸¹⁹ (Simultaneously, McMillan's use of effective vernacular black rhetorical style helps her develop this character and makes the reader contemplate the possible interpretations of her motives.) Fourth, telling what Richards terms "microstories" has to do with a technique of "using indirection and experiential rather than formal logic [which] is a common feature of black vernacular narrative sequencing. The strategy has more functions: the characters tell ministories about their family members and friends, which provides the reader with a large amount of information about all of them, and the stories have also a rhetorical function."⁸²⁰

Last but not least, Smitherman stresses that the use of "high talk" can be effectively combined with, e.g., swear words. Those who are not in favour of profanity in McMillan's novels do not realise that "within the black vernacular speech community, the four-letter words and variations of them frequently function as grammatical intensifiers that can emphasize either good or bad meanings."⁸²¹

conjunctions, longer and complex sentences are used together with contemplative questions, etc. The dialogues contain non-clausal elements, verbless and short sentences, echo questions, backchannelling, vocatives (used especially by Gloria when scolding her son or having a serious conversation with him about contraception, the importance of education, etc.–cf. McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 296–106). Both categories can be characterised by use of grammatical reduction, inserts, changing topics, a changing degree of implicitness, stance adverbials, contracted forms, discourse markers (so, well), lexical bundles, dysfluency, incompletions, interjections, moderated expletives, ellipsis, diminutives, intensifiers, elliptic replies, vague expressions (kind of, a little), spelling variants (ain't), follow-up questions, repetition, taboo intensifiers (damn), recasting, and so on. For more information about feature of the spoken language, see Ronald Carter and Michael McCarthy, *Cambridge Grammar of English: A Comprehensive Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 168–205 and Douglas Biber et al., "The Grammar of Conversation," in *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Pearson Education ESL, 1999), 1038–1125.

⁸¹⁸ Cf. McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 2.

⁸¹⁹ Another common element of vernacular black English tonal semantics is "mimicry." It means that a shift into a voice that imitates and mocks at the same time would be expected by the members of black vernacular speech communities. Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 114.

⁸²⁰ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 112–114.

⁸²¹ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 114. The word "ass" seems to be one of the most flexible ones in this respect: it is used as an intensifier in "simple-ass husband" and "lame-ass excuses"—McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 1 and 43; "my ass" instead of my goodness—ibid., 101; worried Gloria warns her son AIDS "is one disease that can kill your black ass" - ibid., 102; in "his ass'll be in big trouble" the word functions as a synecdoche—ibid., 157. It can also express praise: "Now you're getting some life into your big ass," Bernadine says to Gloria at her birthday

Features of figurative language appear not very frequently; if so, these include hyperbole, irony, or metaphors. For instance, Bernadine describes Savannah as “one of those glass-is-half-full people,”⁸²² or the authorial voice states “Bernadine was off her rocker.”⁸²³ What occurs much more frequently is the above described call-and-response pattern applied in different layers of possible meaning, which contributes to making the respective parts of the text worth rereading, discussing, or examining.

As explained above, dialogues prevail in *Waiting to Exhale*. Larson says her dialogue is “raunchy and wild, half black street speech and half one-liners. It’s as if we’re listening to four foul-mouthed stand-up comediennes.” He comments further, while “the dialogue sparkles throughout, the F-word appears so frequently that one has the feeling that McMillan is trying to one-up Spike Lee (whose films are alluded to a number of times).” Larson characterises the choices of stylistic and lexical resources McMillan has made as a compromise between keeping “one eye on Hollywood” and “the other on the sisterhood of educated, articulate, independent black women who are very successful in their professions but frustrated and neurotic about the fact that there are so few black men they consider their equals.”⁸²⁴ Similarly, a review from *Publishers Weekly* states that the characters “share speech patterns that some readers may find disconcerting: they utter profanities with panache, unceasingly. Indeed, the novel’s major drawback may be the number of times such words as shit, fuck and ass are repeated on every page.”⁸²⁵ Meanwhile Mary D. Esselman finds the language “a bit graphic,”⁸²⁶ in her review from 2012 Ruta describes the language used throughout the novel as “a mix of yuppiespeak and down-home patter,” with expressions as “your black ass” or “I hear you, girl,” which makes the characters sound like “a Cosby spin-off on a bad night.”⁸²⁷

According to Smith, staying so close to her characters means “reproducing their salty, often profane language.” McMillan herself responds, “I was criticized for this with *Disappearing Acts* too, but basically, the language that I use is accurate.”⁸²⁸ To be precise, the critics do not seem to notice that each of the four women makes use of individual swear words to a different extent and in different situations. This kind of expressions mostly appear in connection with Bernadine’s rage after being left by John and her phone calls with Savannah which allow her to let the steam off.⁸²⁹ Use of bad words is generally not favoured by Robin—and especially Gloria—unless they are utterly enraged.

party—*ibid.*, 321. Even “bitch” and “the whore” can gain a positive emotional colouring used as a way of jokingly referring to Robin. *Ibid.*, 51.

⁸²² McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 92.

⁸²³ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 95.

⁸²⁴ Larson, “The Comic Unlikelihood of Finding Mr. Right.” What was mentioned about the gender-specific approach to McMillan’s works is embodied by Larson: in his opinion, male-bashing and foul language is what is typical of the novel. Simultaneously, he shows his respect for her ability to make the readers across the racial spectrum to identify with her. It might be of some interest that—paradoxically enough—her “intense racial identity came to the fore in her successful and much-publicized effort” to convince her co-panellists that the 1990 National Book Award in fiction should go to Charles Johnson’s novel *Middle Passage*. “No black man had won it since Ralph Ellison in 1953,” McMillan pointed out. Max and McMillan qtd. in “McMillan’s Millions.”

⁸²⁵ Review of *Waiting to Exhale*, *Publishers Weekly*.

⁸²⁶ Esselman, “Terry McMillan: Overview.”

⁸²⁷ Ruta, “Review of *Waiting to Exhale*.”

⁸²⁸ What is more, after some time McMillan admits, “You know, I think they’re right: it *is* on every fucking page! But so what? That’s the way we talk. And I want to know why I’ve never read a review where they complain about the language that male writers use!” Qtd. in Smith, “Terry McMillan: The Novelist Explores African American Life From the Point of View of a New Generation,” 51.

⁸²⁹ Bernadine repeatedly refers to him as “the Motherfucker,” other examples can be found in the chapter seven or in the chapter entitled *Freedom of Expression*, cf. McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 188 and 279–280.

8.10.1 McMillan and Oral Story-telling Tradition

The right to speak is something women characters in the previous literary works by African American women writers had to struggle to assert. Some literary characters fall victims (Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, for instance); others have someone to speak to (Janie Crawford addresses her storytelling to Phoebe in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*) or someone to speak for them before they learn to do so themselves (Nel Wright in *Sula* as well as Celie in *The Color Purple*), and claim the right to speak as a requisite part of claiming a self. These survivors are what Wall calls “potential and active agents of social change.”⁸³⁰ bell hooks uses the “liberation voice” to denominate the same. She declares, “moving from silence to speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and growth possible. It is that act of speech of ‘talking back,’ that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice.”⁸³¹

Talking (or writing) back is only a step from a dialogue which is of a significant importance to African American literature by women writers. Meanwhile in the 1980s and 90s monologues “become a favored device to represent the inability of women to ‘talk back’ outside the home as well as the refusal of men to engage in dialogue within it,”⁸³² McMillan’s books show a shift toward a predominant use of dialogues. These have several functions: first of all, they facilitate a faster pace at which the storytelling proceeds. Such strategy results to be particularly effective, if taking into account the number of protagonists as well as other supporting characters and their mutual relationships. Second, more important at this moment, dialogues imply a symbolic meaning of call and response, sharing, being present, attentive, and equal in the process of communication on the part of the speaker and hearer—all in all, the opposite of the voicelessness presented in previous works by African American women writers. The characters listen, hear, participate, and respond to what is being said.⁸³³

8.11 Values and Emotions

As stated several times, the novel “is less a book about life’s hardships than lifetime friendships. The men may come and go—and they do.” But through it all, in Dodd’s opinion, “these four vibrant and durable women are there for one another. It is a vision to cheer and console a reader yearning, as most of us are, for innuendoes of redemption in an era when hope suffers to many pratfalls.” She also sees the characters as

so well-drawn that by the end of the novel, the reader is completely at home with the four of them. They observe men—and contemporary America—with bawdy humor, occasional melancholy and great affection. But the novel is about more than four lives; the bonds among the women are so alive and so appealing they almost seem a character in their own right. Reading *Waiting to Exhale* is like being in a company of a great friend. It is thought-provoking, thoroughly entertaining and very, very comforting.⁸³⁴

Readers try to make sense of the world they live in—so do the four women in a rather intimate way. McMillan depicts characters whom the readers can identify with and who experience what they do, which is followed by their response in the process of reading. By examining human interrelationships and depicting the protagonists’ personal growth, McMillan consistently conveys the message of the importance of compassion, frankness, tolerance, open-mindedness, generosity, forgiveness, warm-heartedness, thankfulness, self-respect, commitment, activeness, firmness, trustworthiness, helpfulness, devotion, altruism,

⁸³⁰ Wall, “Taking Positions and Changing Words,” in *Changing Our Own Words*, 3.

⁸³¹ bell hooks, *Talking Back* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 9.

⁸³² Wall, “Taking Positions and Changing Words,” in *Changing Our Own Words*, 11.

⁸³³ Again, the idiom “changing words” might be mentioned in this respect. Cf. the chapter on literary context.

⁸³⁴ Dodd, “Women, Sisters and Friends,” 11.

creativity, appreciation, hospitality, optimism, integrity, conviviality, sharing, courtesy, kindness, bravery, contribution, harmony, dependability, and devotion.

8. 11 Waiting to Exhale: The Movie

Like any other African American artistic production, McMillan must be cautious about how her work is used. The reason simply is that “historically, the movie and television industries have either created their own distorted images of African Americans or taken some of [their] most successful literary works and sensationalized them beyond recognition.” Remaining “abreast of history” is the solution; they have the right to “present their hopes and dreams through their own eyes rather than through the censored eyes of the white establishment which prefers stereotypical images of both black men and women.”⁸³⁵ The success of the novel enabled McMillan as a best-selling author to negotiate a contract with Twentieth Century Fox that “provided her with an unprecedented degree of artistic control over the project.” For African American women all around the country, “[a]ttending the film during the 1995 Christmas season was a major social event.”⁸³⁶

The tagline made the content of the movie obvious, saying “Friends are the people who let you be yourself ... and never let you forget it.”⁸³⁷ Even if taking into account the immense popularity of the novel, still, “the magnitude of the response to the movie came as something of a surprise,” says Elaine Lutka. She quotes David Ansen, a movie critic, who sees the movie as “filling a void,” for “the black audience is fed up with inner-city ghetto stories that speak to only a small section of their community. ... There’s a great hunger for projects about the middle-class experience from a female point of view. Since women of all colors are frustrated with male-female relationships, [similarly to the novel,] much of ‘Exhale’ appeal is gender-based.”⁸³⁸

As early as 1982 Modleski observes that “[t]oo often feminist criticism implies that there is only one kind of pleasure to be derived from narrative and that it is an essentially masculine one. Hence, it is further implied, feminist artists must first of all challenge this pleasure and then out of nothing begin to construct a feminist aesthetics and feminist form. This is a mistaken position, in my view, for it keeps us constantly in an adversary role, always on the defensive, always, as it were, complaining about the family, but “never leaving home.”⁸³⁹

How to combine pleasure and certain agenda, in other words, how to amuse but also educate? Instead of starting from the scratch, Claire Johnston, a feminist film theorist, suggests looking for clues to women’s pleasures that are already present in existing forms, even if these pleasures are at the service of patriarchy for the time being. Johnston, comes up

⁸³⁵ In addition, Joyce gives several examples: the movie version of *The Spook Who Sat By the Door*, *The Color Purple*, and *Native Son*. *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 239–240.

⁸³⁶ Moreover, McMillan chose Ron Bass to cooperate with her on the screenplay on recommendation of Amy Tan, her friend, and retained the title of executive producer and had the right of approval in selecting the director (Forest Whitaker) and cast; for many of other positions behind the scenes black Americans were employed. Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 8–9.

⁸³⁷ “Waiting to Exhale,” DVDs Release Dates, accessed January 10, 2013, [http://www.dvdsreleasedates.com/movies/2974/Waiting-to-Exhale-\(1995\).html](http://www.dvdsreleasedates.com/movies/2974/Waiting-to-Exhale-(1995).html).

⁸³⁸ The same kind of reaction—which only shows how the horizon of expectations functions in reality—is expressed by one of the cinema visitors interviewed by Dutka who claims, “There’s a great sense of anticipation and excitement in the African American community.” Both Ansen and Hutchinson qtd. in Elaine Dutka, “‘Exhale’: The Right Film at the Right Time: Movies: The film—bolstered by women, primarily African American—fills a void, some say, because it doesn’t deal with ‘ghetto stories’ and is told from a female point of view,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 28, 1995, April 10, 2013, at http://articles.latimes.com/1995-12-28/entertainment/ca-18459_1_african-american-movie.

⁸³⁹ Modleski, introduction to *Loving with a Vengeance*, xxviii.

with a strategy that combines both “the notion of film as a political tool and film as entertainment.” In her opinion, the two have been regarded as “two opposing poles with little common ground.” The political film and the entertainment cinema should therefore draw from each other in a two-way process. “Women’s cinema must embody the working through of desire.”⁸⁴⁰ In order to engage the audience, texts which are both functional and entertaining should be taken into account by scholars.

8. 13 Mixed Reception and McMillan’s Shift of Horizon of Expectations

Susan Isaacs compares the novel to the best of her predecessors such as *The Group* by Mary McCarthy, *The Bets of Everything* by Rona Jaffe, or Consuelo S. Baehr’s *Best Friends*. She claims that aside from the distinction of skin colour of the protagonists “and the fact that the author brings a wicked wit to this often sentimental form of fiction, [that is, the girlfriend novel], ... no literary ground is broken. But going over the old ground is still great fun with Ms. McMillan’s characters for company.”⁸⁴¹ This is a very badly made observation, taking into account that for decades there had been a tendency to insist on historicising the prose written by black women writers by means dealing with the black problematic past, direct or indirect legacy of slavery, as well as rather poor characters.⁸⁴² McMillan transcends the horizon of expectations of the black and subsequently other audience both thematically and formally—by her appeal to personal freedom and cardinal values, by use of changing voices, colloquial language, exploring taboo topics, depicting dynamic, empowered, and self-confident characters.

The continuous appeal of her works “lies in her ability to create fresh, original black characters who lead intensely diverse lives.”⁸⁴³ It is, however, rather the interplay of the above mentioned factors combined with her unprecedented frank interest in the black American middle-class audience that make *Waiting to Exhale* a “hilarious, irreverent novel.”⁸⁴⁴ To sum up, “[p]aradoxically, the most radical and perhaps most important aspect of McMillan’s success may be her very conventionality. She writes the kind of popular books white authors have long written, but which black authors were discouraged from undertaking because publishing wisdom decreed that black people didn’t buy books.”⁸⁴⁵

McMillan has proved herself “a superb and confident literary infighter.” But she still remains “fundamentally uncertain about her effect on the white establishment.” And, as it became obvious from the various reviews taken into account in this chapter, she “walks an even trickier line with black intellectuals.” She has received help from Spike Lee in the form of a blurb for *Waiting to Exhale*; Ishmael Reed, “who elsewhere has been vociferous in opposing male-bashing by black female writers, nevertheless is a friend of McMillan’s and has helped her.” Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor, “names often on

⁸⁴⁰ Claire Johnston, “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema,” in *Movies and Methods: Vol I*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 217.

⁸⁴¹ Susan Isaacs, “Chilling Out in Phoenix,” review of *Waiting to Exhale*, by Terry McMillan, *New York Times Book Review*, May 31, 1992, 12.

⁸⁴² Clara Villarosa, for instance, suggests that “The people who bought *Waiting to Exhale* I felt were women who really identified with the characters. They don’t consider her like an Alice Walker or a Toni Morrison. She’s writing more about their experience.” Qtd. in Max, “McMillan’s Millions.”

⁸⁴³ “Although McMillan writes about the black community in general,” Esselman observes, “she focuses particularly on the stories and struggles of young black women. McMillan’s female characters are “survivors—tough, hip, self-directed; with each novel, her female protagonists seem a bit stronger and a bit more focused.” Mary D. Esselman, “Terry McMillan: Overview.”

⁸⁴⁴ Isaacs, “Chilling Out in Phoenix,” 12.

⁸⁴⁵ Max, “McMillan’s Millions.”

McMillan's mind, are nowhere to be found on her book jackets."⁸⁴⁶ But not all acclaimed black American women writers are not in favour of her writings; even Maya Angelou expressed her praise with the following words, "You're one good, good writing sister."⁸⁴⁷

McMillan herself comments on her stories, saying, "My stories are realistic.... I write about where I come from."⁸⁴⁸ Verisimilitude and McMillan's familiarity with what she writes about has apparently become a source of condemnation; simultaneously, the combination of such knowledge with bearing the long neglected African American middle-class target group in her mind—is "precisely what makes her special" for her readers.⁸⁴⁹ McMillan states the reasons for her popularity among black women are that she shows them "passionate, loving, tender and strong."⁸⁵⁰ She also shows them "lonely. A state of affairs she believes is common to women of all colors these days."⁸⁵¹ The frustration she communicates over black men in her novels does not seem to cost McMillan her male black readers either.⁸⁵² Charles Johnson, a novelist, calls her book "a tough love letter to black men everywhere."⁸⁵³

One of the questions raised in the methodology chapter was whether McMillan's novel *Waiting to Exhale* is what Umberto Eco terms an open or a close work. Having dealt with the text in detail and having described its form, setting in time and place, characters, themes, strategies used for storytelling and narration, plot, humour, and language of the novel, all in all, the work should be classified as an open one, and therefore does not fall into the category of primary "culinary writing." The strategic stylistic choices which were described above and McMillan has made in the novel allow for innumerable individual responses, but still these are under her control. Naturally, the phenomena that make the novel more "processable" for the reader have not been avoided completely. These include the predictability of certain parts of the plot,⁸⁵⁴ the consistent application of narrative patterns, and an ultimately happy ending.⁸⁵⁵

From the very beginning, the authorial narrators' and especially reflector-characters' communication with the reader (or narratee) takes the course of a bilateral one, i.e., that of a call and response. The reader is constantly encouraged to identify with the characters' changing voices by means of personalised storytelling modes, but McMillan shifts away from impassioned revolutionary rhetoric, letting the reader judge himself/herself. By doing so, her novel offers a fusion of the political with the aesthetic, and demonstrates a strong confidence both in her readers and in a cultural territory that permits a great artistic freedom. And being criticised for profane language, focus on the black middle-class characters, and their particular

⁸⁴⁶ For more details about the attitude Walker has to McMillan and McMillan's search for literary respect, see Max, "McMillan's Millions."

⁸⁴⁷ Qtd. in Hubbard, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," 93.

⁸⁴⁸ Qtd. in Hubbard, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," 93.

⁸⁴⁹ The article written by Kim Hubbard refers to the current promotional tour where one of the fans commented, "You write from a black female perspective that we don't get to hear." Qtd. in Hubbard, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," 93.

⁸⁵⁰ Qtd. in Hubbard, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," 93.

⁸⁵¹ Hubbard, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," 93.

⁸⁵² For instance, Max expresses his general surprise over black men's support despite the harsh portrait she paints of them. "McMillan's Millions."

⁸⁵³ Qtd. in Hubbard, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," 93.

⁸⁵⁴ Predictability of events occurring in sex scenes and their development, as well as the conflicting forces of the rational and the bodily are what might be looked at as the romance novel's legacy. Cf. McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 261 (Savannah and Kenneth), or 287 (Bernadine and James). By contrast, in the sex scenes with Charles Turner, a man Savannah has an affair at a conference in Las Vegas, more sensuality is presented and it is better depicted. *Waiting to Exhale*, 369.

⁸⁵⁵ Richards states that originally, McMillan intended that Gloria would die, wanting to use her high blood pressure and obesity in an exemplarily as common problems within the black community. "As the character developed, however, McMillan felt unable to kill her off." *Terry McMillan*, 104.

topics of interest, in combination with a reluctant attitude to political as well as racial issues only shows the critic's inability to come to terms with verisimilitude and the amount of space given to her multiracial audience. McMillan takes the role of a blues critic, for she not only shows how things within the black community are but also calls for changes.

Judging from the success of *Waiting to Exhale* and the effect it had on the given audience as well as broader phenomena explained in the chapter on the African American popular novel, it is not unreasonable to speak about what Jauss terms a "horizon change," which is defined as "the [aesthetic] distance between the given horizon of expectation and an appearance of a new work."⁸⁵⁶ The analysis provided in this chapter shows effectively how the novel both negates the familiar experience black (women) readers previously had, and shows how McMillan's third novel articulates the middle-class experience for the first time.

⁸⁵⁶ Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," 14.

9 Getting to Happy

It may sound naïve, but I always thought as you got older the quality of your life would improve, that things would be smoother, calmer, and you could finally exhale.

If only. Savannah Jackson⁸⁵⁷

“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.” Savannah Jackson⁸⁵⁸

Reading McMillan’s eighth book, *Getting to Happy* (2010), in this chapter will take the same path as in the previous one, considering McMillan as a creative writer on one hand and the receptive reader and reflective critic on the other one. The shape of the latter ones’ expectations as well as subsequent responses will again apparently largely depend not only on the impact of her previous works but also on the appearance of other literary works of the respective period. In other words, the discussion of the horizon of expectations with respect to her previous works are followed by a brief synopsis of the novel, the analysis of the form of the novel, its setting in time and place, male and female characters, themes, strategies and patterns used for the narration and plot, humour, language of the novel, and implied values. The fact that the novel is the sequel to *Waiting to Exhale* must not be underestimated; as a result, the actual analysis will bear in mind both books, focusing on the same aspects as the previous chapter, this time—however—without the necessity to largely introduce any theoretical concepts, which makes the chapter shorter than the previous one.

The book was published in 2010 and, as Jennifer Schuessler stated in September of the same year, meanwhile *Waiting to Exhale* “had a 38-week run on the hardcover list back in 1992-93,” the sequel hit “the hardcover fiction list at No. 4.”⁸⁵⁹ Paradoxically, the more it is known about McMillan’s authorial intentions thanks to numerous interviews with her as well as her participation in television talk shows, etc., the less critical attention she has deserved in the eyes of academia.⁸⁶⁰

9.1 Horizon of Expectations

As suggested in the previous chapters, before the success of *Sex and the City* or *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, there was *Waiting to Exhale*, a quality book which has reached a similarly iconic status as the two and, more important, which has earned Terry McMillan a loyal cross-racial following—both as a novel and a high-grossing film—, an audience who would be happy

⁸⁵⁷ Terry McMillan, *Getting to Happy* (New York: Viking Press, 2010), 9.

⁸⁵⁸ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 248.

⁸⁵⁹ Jennifer Schuessler, “Inside the List,” *The New York Times Book Review*, September 26, 2010, 22L. *Literature Resource Center*, accessed May 14, 2013, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA237995148&v=2.1&u=opave&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.

⁸⁶⁰ An incomparably larger amount of critical attention has been paid to McMillan and her works, especially in the mid- and late 1990s in comparison with after the year 2000. What is more, the reviews of *Getting to Happy* are often limited to plot synopses and superficial observations. A good example is for instance a statement that “[w]ithin the first few chapters, Gloria and Savannah are struck by disaster, and things go rapidly downhill from there for everyone.” Review of *Getting to Happy*, by Terry McMillan, *Publishers Weekly*, July 5, 2010, 24. The same can be said about the review of the respective audiobook, reviewed by Whitney Scott. Cf. “Review of *Getting to Happy*, Read by the author and others,” *Booklist*, November 1, 2010, 37–38. Vanessa Bush’s review for Booklist Online even contains factual errors: “Robin ... is so stressed by her boring accountant job that she’s hooked on shopping and an assortment of pills.” “Review of *Getting to Happy*,” *Booklist Online*, July 2010, 7, accessed April 10, 2013, <http://booklistonline.com/Getting-to-Happy-Terry-McMillan/pid=4244835>. Emphases added.

to get back into the four black women protagonists' world(s). Most of the readers can, therefore, be assumed to hope that, nearly twenty years later, its sequel would live up to the third novel's reputation, and to be interested in how all the characters have grown. (The ladies are now in their fifties; another intriguing subject matter, therefore, is whether their age is a factor in the audience's relating to their lives.⁸⁶¹) The reader's curiosity might also concern the role that the various children (now teenagers and adults) might play in the story—whether they add to the protagonists, or they overpower them in any ways. Another kind of expectation on the side of the reader has to do with whether the sequel actually respects the eccentricities of the four characters as well as the form and narrative strategies of the first book, that is, the amount of prevailing dramatised dialogues, plot pushed by changing voices, and so on. The second group of expectations has to do with other popular novels written in the respective period.

Juliette Wells observes a noteworthy part of the chick lit authors' strategy which can be also applied in this case: the sense of herself a particular chick lit protagonists gains towards the end of the novel seems to be "vulnerable to disruption," and, therefore, "[t]he maturation of chick lit heroines, like the conclusion of their love plots, often seems temporary or conditional; both circumstances, of course leave the door open for sequels."⁸⁶²

9.2 Synopsis of the Novel

The sequel resumes the story of the same women protagonists fifteen years later, and the issues of the protagonists' youth have morphed into new ones, placing them at each own midlife crossroads. Not only have they to deal with issues such as failed relationships or businesses and second mortgages, but there are also their children and grandchildren whose lives are not idyllic either. Savannah Jackson accidentally discovers that she has made too many concessions in her marriage with Isaac whom she met at church. Due to his addiction to porn web sites and an affair, but mainly because of their constant growing apart, at the age of fifty-one, she decides to face life single again, focusing on her career before she is ready to start dating men again. Bernadine Harris-Wheeler faces an even worse crisis than after John left her in *Waiting to Exhale*, having been in a self-medicated idle state. (Six years before the sequel takes up, she is contacted by James Wheeler's—whose real name is Jesse Hampton—simultaneous second wife Belinda. Both marriages are annulled and for years, Bernadine finds herself unable to get over these misfortunes.) To make things worse, her café (Bernadine's Sweet Tooth) has been closed due to financial reasons, and both children study at distant colleges. Robin Stokes' boring yet rather well-paid job is not rewarding either; shopaholism and working out regularly in a gym provide her with a rather momentary satisfaction. Her daughter Sparrow, to whom she has been a single mother, is a premature and spoiled but warm-hearted company to her; still, the big dream of once wearing a wedding dress has so far gone unrealised to start with. Things change for Robin through the course of the book: her encounter with Michael, whom she repudiated in the first novel, together with the unexpected loss of her job turn out to be new starting points for her life. And for years,

⁸⁶¹ McMillan's comments on the circumstances of writing the sequel are revealed in her interview for abc News. First, she intended to write a distinct story about four different African American women "undergoing four scenarios," when it dawned on her that she did not want to repeat herself, and—in addition—it might be more challenging to have a look at where she had left the four particular women characters, and how she could possible "pick up," she thought. She also wanted to explore the very different concerns women face in their 30s on one hand and 40s (or 50s) on the other one. Namely, she implies in the interview that her four characters are "still somehow obsessed with men," but deal with them differently at this age. "EXCERPT: 'Getting to Happy' by Terry McMillan," abc News, accessed April 10, 2013, http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Books/terry-mcmillan-book-excerpt-happy/story?id=11574391#.UdZr7_IM-Sp.

⁸⁶² Wells, "Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History," in *Chick Lit*, 52–53.

Gloria Matthews-King who was part of a marriage full of happiness and security, which she did not take for granted, nevertheless,⁸⁶³ loses Marvin in a gang gunfight. Her son Tarik gets divorced, becoming a single father of four. Joseph, a hairstylist Gloria has been working with for twenty years, becomes her partner in a newly found place for Oasis Hair & Beauty.

9.3 The Form of *Getting to Happy*

Formally, the novel agrees with *Waiting to Exhale* to a large extent: there is no doubt it is a girlfriend and/or sister-girl novel, as well as what Stanzel calls a dialogue novel. Besides that, due to the age group and especially themes it explores, *Getting to Happy* also fits the description of black chick lit, namely its lady lit subgenre (as termed by Ferris and Young). On the other hand, in Kirkus Reviews, the book is labelled as “aging chick lit at its most superficial.”⁸⁶⁴ Because of the key role a wedding in a white dress plays in Robin’s life,⁸⁶⁵ it is also close to the romance novel in some respect.

9.4 Setting in Time and Place

As far as the setting in time is concerned, again, there are direct references to a particular year, i.e., 2005 as well as several events that mark the year, for instance then young senator Obama’s speech, engagement of Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes, the Katrina hurricane, or phenomena such as the changing habits of black Americans in naming their children, new means of communication such as emails or text messages, contemporary black American writers (Bernice McFadden), lycra, metrosexuals, and so on. In addition, more references to pop culture appear in comparison with *Waiting to Exhale*, these are especially references to movies, television programmes, and series (“So You Think You Can Dance,” “Days of Our Lives”), magazines, etc.⁸⁶⁶

What Richards claims about different spaces the four women inhabit in the first book is more than valid in the sequel, too. The author “skilfully uses setting to indicate significant differences among her characters, even though they share the same socioeconomic circumstances. She uses action to differentiate them further.”⁸⁶⁷ Only after Isaac is long gone, Savannah realises how much he has contributed to the usability and appearance of the house she previously bought,⁸⁶⁸ her inability to do much around the house leads her to enrolling in a do-it-yourself kind of course. Bernadine’s empty large house becomes the same source of anxiety and her sense of uselessness as before. Intriguingly arranged photographs of Marvin with Gloria can be only removed nine months after his death when she is finally able to sleep in their bed again, having nearly overcome his loss. Her empty house gets lively only with the arrival of her grandchildren. A massive cleanup of Robin’s closet full of even unused items symbolises her departure from consumerism.

It is intriguing to observe what role nature and changing weather conditions play in particular moments of the protagonists’ lives. The stormy and suddenly changing weather in chapter twenty-one reflects the tumultuous relationships and turnovers such as Tarik’s

⁸⁶³ Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 49.

⁸⁶⁴ “McMillan, Terry: *Getting to Happy*,” *Kirkus Reviews*, September 1, 2010. *Literature Resource Center*, accessed May 14, 2013, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA256561124&v=2.1&u=opave&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.

⁸⁶⁵ When the reader encounters Robin in the book in chapter two for the first time, she expresses her mixed feelings: “I also can’t believe I’ve never been married, when just about everybody I know has been divorced at least once.” McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 19.

⁸⁶⁶ Namely, Halle Berry’s *Catwoman*, Terrence Howard’s *Hustle and Flow*, or *Crash* among others are referred to, which has to do with Gloria’s interest in purchasing bootleg movies.

⁸⁶⁷ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 109.

⁸⁶⁸ She admits “how much stuff Isaac used to do around here and how little I actually know how to do.” McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 216.

decision to get divorced. By contrast, long rainy days provide Robin and Sparrow with an opportunity to enjoy each other's company, watching various kinds of movies and simply spending precious time together.⁸⁶⁹

9.5 Characters

In addition to what was written above about the circumstances of McMillan's intentions (not to write a sequel to *Waiting to Exhale*, in the afterword, she explains that the impulse for *Getting to Happy* were the characters themselves who "began to reclaim their place in [her] heart, and, like old friends you haven't seen since college, [she] wondered how they might be faring now."⁸⁷⁰ It might be of some interest that the potential parallel between Terry McMillan and Savannah Jackson suggested in the previous analysis is reinforced also in the sequel, since in the audiobook this character is read by the author herself, where McMillan "exudes a convincing balance of self-doubt and anger, reflective of Savannah's discovery of disturbing truths about her marriage,"⁸⁷¹ making use of her famous speaking skills.

As for the amount of characters in the sequel, there is an apparent increase. According to Karen M. Thomas, these characters contribute to "push[ing] the story forward. All work together to help the [four] women heal deep emotional wounds."⁸⁷² Unfortunately, the amount of new minor characters in combination with the appearing and reappearing older ones, as well as explanations of previous events results in a somewhat lengthy and less vivid descriptive passages. These minor characters are mostly the members of the protagonists' families, their friends or acquaintances, the protagonist's old friends, former members of BWOTM,⁸⁷³ Gloria's customers,⁸⁷⁴ and so on, who are often somehow not significant for the story; in addition, McMillan sometimes includes the description of their appearance, which makes the pace of the novel even slower. Despite these reservations, even the minor characters do not represent any racialised gender identities and/or predictable stereotypes.

9.5.1 Women Characters

The four protagonists remain unique in their own ways, and—most of the time—despite the problems they face, "their you-go-girl spirit seems intact."⁸⁷⁵ They still possess characteristics and qualities that are double-edged in their connotative meanings. Their weaknesses often remain potential threats to their well-being. Naturally, they have been subjects to some change both throughout the years and the course of the novel as it follows. As the reader revisits Savannah, he/she encounters the same woman who is substantially resourceful when it comes to her career, yet rather passive even in her marriage to Isaac. The real reasons for their divorce seem to be the unchanging marital routine in combination with mutual disillusionment after ten years; the relationship is only finished off when Savannah discovers his addiction. After her marriage with Isaac ends on rather friendly terms, she realizes her happiness does not depend on anybody else but her again. Gloria is another character that seems to remain true to herself. The promising ending of *Waiting to Exhale* leads to her

⁸⁶⁹ The same impact of the weather on human relationships is suggested in *Waiting to Exhale*, for instance, the arrival of James' letter addressed to Bernadine is followed by when the sky clears up in the October monsoon. In Onika's opinion, "'God stopped crying.'" McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 342.

⁸⁷⁰ Thomas claims that McMillan's "personal realizations [after the divorce] made her revisit the characters." Karen M. Thomas, "Fiction Review: 'Getting to Happy' by Terry McMillan."

⁸⁷¹ Scott, "Review of *Getting to Happy*, Read by the author and others." 8.

⁸⁷² Thomas, "Fiction Review: 'Getting to Happy' by Terry McMillan."

⁸⁷³ The abbreviation stands for the Black Women on the Move Organization—for details, see the previous chapter.

⁸⁷⁴ These include for instance Sister Monroe, a hypocritical and disagreeable customer who appears in *Waiting to Exhale*. Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 162–163. Another example is the unnecessary description of Lucille, Robin's co-worker. Cf. *ibid.*, 260–261.

⁸⁷⁵ Schuessler, "Inside the List."

marriage with her former neighbour Marvin with whom she has been happy until he dies on the fourteenth anniversary of their wedding. In addition, she learns she is about to lose the lease on Oasis, and her daughter-in-law has been neither a good wife to Tarik nor a mother to their children. Gloria's interest in her life, health, and salon is only slowly renewed, which would not happen if it were not for Tarik's troubled part of the family to help keep her focused. Bernadine, previously known as the strong one of the girlfriends, has turned to self-medication. Besides overcoming her addiction on antidepressants, she must cope with the fact that her daughter is a lesbian, but mainly forgive her ex-husband(s), and cope with the financial damage James has caused her. When everyone—including her girlfriends—begins to notice her dependency problem, she decides to make a change once and for all, and goes to a twenty-eight-day rehab. Of course, her strongest supporters are the girlfriends and her children; what, however, comes as a surprise to both Bernadine and the reader is John's (her ex-husband) unfeigned affection. Having been without a male for fifteen years, Robin concentrates entirely on her teenage daughter with an old head on young shoulders, while neglecting her own happiness. Online dating Sparrow talks her into causes more harm than does any good, before she runs into Michael who has moved back to Phoenix after some years. The man she rejected in the past due to his looks and lack of attractiveness reappears in her life and turns out to be the one she marries at last. The loss of her job means an opportunity to find out what she likes doing and to discover some more stimulating activities both workwise and in her free time, whether it means a renewal of her ski club membership or return to making pottery. The four women now "have the wisdom and strength to forgive and take control of their happiness through the choices they make," Karen M. Thomas concludes.⁸⁷⁶

As far as the characterisation is concerned, meanwhile the protagonists are, as Lisa Page puts it, fleshed out "by shifting the point of view, sometimes writing in the first person, sometimes in third,"⁸⁷⁷ the minor characters receive both direct and indirect characterisation. It means their personalities are revealed through their speech, actions, appearance, etc., which is rather absorbing for the reader. At the same time, the episodic characters who apparently do not play an important role for the plot, unfortunately receive more attention than necessary, especially as part of the prevailing dialogues.⁸⁷⁸

9.5.2 Male Characters

Not all male characters "get short shrift,"⁸⁷⁹ as Laurie Cavanaugh claims. Kathleen Daley considers the male characters "responsible for [the protagonists'] rainbow moods,"⁸⁸⁰ overlooking the positive impact of various male characters such as John or Tarik. The first one actively supports Bernadine, being her friend and making "a much better ex-husband than husband." In Bernadine's opinion, he would also "get top honors for being a good father to Onika and John Jr."⁸⁸¹ When Tarik decides to divorce Nickida, he automatically adopts Brass,

⁸⁷⁶ Thomas, "Fiction Review: 'Getting to Happy' by Terry McMillan."

⁸⁷⁷ Lisa Page, "'Getting to Happy,' Terry McMillan's Sequel to 'Waiting to Exhale,'" *Washington Post*, September 7, 2010, accessed April 12, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/06/AR2010090603029.html>.

⁸⁷⁸ Robin's phone conversation with her assistant Fernando is one of the examples which could be mentioned. Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 185–186.

⁸⁷⁹ Laurie A. Cavanaugh adds in a too simplified way, "but who cares?" Review of *Getting to Happy*, by Terry McMillan, *Library Journal*, July 2010, 76.

⁸⁸⁰ Daley paraphrases Savannah's somewhat childish complaint "What I do know is I'm tired of feeling navy blue when I have the right to feel lemon yellow." McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 8. Kathleen Daley, "'Getting to Happy' book review," *New Jersey Local News*, accessed March 5, 2013, http://www.nj.com/entertainment/arts/index.ssf/2010/09/getting_to_happy_book_review.html

⁸⁸¹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 103.

his step-son, having been playing the role of the father for years in the boy's life; not to mention Marvin, who is mourned by most of the characters who are somehow related to Gloria. For instance, Sparrow “–like everybody else–adored Marvin. He was the father and uncle and brother none of them had been fortunate to have.”⁸⁸² Robin comes across Russell who was imprisoned for two years. He comments, “[g]ot out a little earlier. Good behavior. Not going back. I'm in a program. Getting my life on track for real. Tired of living behind bars.”⁸⁸³ The man shows frank interest in his daughter who pays back to him in the same way.⁸⁸⁴

Chapter five is a good example of McMillan's ability to work with the dialogue as a means of both characterisation and storytelling in a brilliant way: Savannah and Isaac exchange opinions about the reasons for their break-up. This ability enables the author to create an intertwined world of the major and minor characters' values and attitudes.

9.6 Themes

9.6.1 African American Community

Some rather serious problems bothering the African American community are presented in the novel. Savannah expresses her concern about the enormous amount of black men incarcerated in the American prisons in general, “why prisons are so over-populated with black men. This is how it starts. It breaks my heart how easy breaking the law is for some of us. And how hard it is to deal with when they get caught.”⁸⁸⁵ Also James, Bernadine's second husband, and Russell, Sparrow's father, spend several years in jail. Further, the topics of drugs and pornography are not avoided either. Gloria's daughter-in-law Nickida and Savannah's nephew smoke marihuana, and Isaac spends more time browsing the porn web pages than with his wife before their final break-up.

The novel's characters live in period when resentment, distrust, and alienation are felt in the black community–the reader finds relationships between African American men and women in a state of crisis. By showing the state of things as they are, McMillan has no intention to sensationalise disharmony within the African American community, though. Simultaneously, as the flourishing of Gloria's expanding hair and beauty salon proves, African Americans can afford to indulge in spa treatments she “still can't keep up with,” as “[f]olks want to glow, to leave their worries and dead skin behind.”⁸⁸⁶

McMillan shows also black people outside the United States. Savannah's enriching trip to Europe makes her happy for various reasons. One of them is she “saw more black people on the streets of Paris in two weeks than [she] saw in a whole year in Phoenix.” Savannah finds the people and atmosphere captivating; her account of her impressions makes clear what impact this experience has on her. “French isn't a color. I was fascinated watching how these folks used their hands and eyes to tell each other how they felt. They like to touch. I saw so many people of all ages kissing in public places it made me hopeful.”⁸⁸⁷

9.6.2 Contemporary Issues

Again, the book traces real problems of real people of colour, this time at the beginning of the 21st century. The protagonists are middle-class black women; “their troubles transcend

⁸⁸² McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 77.

⁸⁸³ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 190–191.

⁸⁸⁴ Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 230–231.

⁸⁸⁵ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 215.

⁸⁸⁶ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 53.

⁸⁸⁷ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 325.

race,”⁸⁸⁸ though. The purpose of sensitising the audience to these presented issues is a hard-hitting call for an individual, communal, and governmental action. The urgency of such problems is most visible in the chapters dealing with the Katrina hurricane towards the end of *Getting to Happy*.

Similarly to *Waiting to Exhale*, current real-life problems and dangers are depicted in the novel. Career advancement, divorce, single parenthood, the incessant search for love, antidepressants taken both by mothers and their curious teenage children,⁸⁸⁹ worsening health and insurance company coverage, homosexuality acceptance—these are the problems the characters face in the book. Savannah and Robin’s aging mothers live in elderly homes; there are the same diseases threatening not only the African American community in general, and other issues such as criminality of the youth, birth control, and teenage pregnancy, etc. are mentioned (especially as the topics of interest for Savannah’s television show). Difficulties the young people face are also included in the novel: Taylor, John and Kathleen’s daughter from his second marriage, epitomises a whole group of problematic issues such as mixed race, divorced parents, uncertainties of growing up, future studies, and career, etc.⁸⁹⁰

The same strategy as in *Waiting to Exhale* is employed also in this novel. The author uncovers the contemporary problems by merely pointing at them in order to enable the readers come to conclusions by themselves. It is possible to say that McMillan uses Savannah as a tool of a blues testimonial in her writer’s hands through whom she speaks. Isaac learns to appreciate his ex-wife’s interest “in social and political stuff,” but still, he wishes she could “take it a step further, ... Offer some solutions.”⁸⁹¹ Savannah thinks for herself, “[s]ometimes I get worn out looking at how much is wrong in the world, and I’ve been thinking maybe I might want to start shifting my focus to some of the good things people do. ... Nevertheless, I’m still grateful to have the kind of job that allows me to paint portraits of our lives, good or bad. We need to be able to see how we behave instead of ignoring it.”⁸⁹² Savannah sums up in a manner which is very close to the way McMillan approaches problems: “You can’t even think about [them] if you pretend like they don’t exist. I just try to paint an accurate picture and put it out there.”⁸⁹³

9.6.3 Importance of Friendship and Sisterhood

To start with, the consequences of one another’s alienation and lack of communication are dealt with in both novels, but especially in the *Getting to Happy*. “Times have certainly changed. We’re all busy. We don’t hang out” like before,” Savannah illustrates; in *Waiting to Exhale*, they used to “run their mouths on the phone half the night,” but now they “don’t gossip about each other the way [they] used to,”⁸⁹⁴ and in the sequel, they e-mail and text each other now and then. In addition, they are “too damn old to have fun at public places.” In order

⁸⁸⁸ Kathleen Daley, “‘Getting to Happy’ book review, New Jersey Local News, accessed March 5, 2013 http://www.nj.com/entertainment/arts/index.ssf/2010/09/getting_to_happy_book_review.html.

⁸⁸⁹ Taylor, one of such teenagers, observes with a great insight, “[a] lot of my friends’ parents—but mostly their Moms—are always in the clouds. They’re bored with their boring husbands who are workaholics like my dad. They’re bored with their boring lives, sick of us kids and all this puberty and rebelling, so they pop pills and watch the soaps, and then when it all starts to fall apart they realize they just want to be happy again, so they go to rehab to clean up their act and then start fresh.” McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 147.

⁸⁹⁰ Fifteen-year-old Taylor poignantly summarises when talking to Bernadine who underestimates what might possibly trouble her: “‘Duh. Just finals and driving and sex and drugs and boys and why did my mom desert me and my dad, and what I want to be when I grow up and is there a college out there waiting for me and what box do I check when they ask my race? I could go on.’” McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 148.

⁸⁹¹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 94.

⁸⁹² McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 88.

⁸⁹³ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 178.

⁸⁹⁴ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 9.

to make them “social creatures” again, Gloria comes up with the idea of Blockbuster Nights once a month when they make their “husbands and children disappear,” not caring “where they go, as long as they’re gone at least for four hours.”⁸⁹⁵

Together, they are willing to admit their lives are more than different from what they would like. Robin, after all, admits she is “lonely and bored;” Bernadine is “frustrated with [herself];” Gloria misses “her husband and [is] worried about [her] son and [her] grandkids;” Savannah adds she is “getting better. But [she] won’t lie. This is ... hard ... to go through.”⁸⁹⁶ And it is vital to be conscious of what Bernadine says: “the whole point of us getting together like this was meant to catch up, maybe give each other booster shots.”⁸⁹⁷

Gradually, suffering, losses, and personal catastrophes paradoxically turn into opportunities to find their way toward one another again, which results in their decision to make their existence rewarding again. It is Bernadine who suggests to organise the Blockbuster Nights again, since they “miss it. We miss you. We miss us,”⁸⁹⁸ as she says to Gloria who has been mourning her husband’s death. After her, also Robin expresses her wish to see her girlfriends face-to-face, for they have not done anything together “since Marvin’s funeral, and that wasn’t exactly a social occasion.”⁸⁹⁹ The emotional support they provide one another with is apparent both as they bolster one another’s self-esteem and security through their friendship. Since they “love each other like sisters,” they exchange painful yet frank pieces of advice and come to the following conclusion: “sometimes we need somebody to just tell us what to do even though we already know it. ... we shouldn’t be afraid to ask for help. Since we’re closer than family.”⁹⁰⁰ For example, Bernadine does not “have to explain a thing,” when she announces her decision to go to the rehab, for they have “just been waiting for [her] to do something about this,” but she did not want to listen to them when they tried to bring up the topic.⁹⁰¹ She should do whatever she has to do, and “whatever [she] need[s] them] to do, [they’ll] do it.”⁹⁰²

The help they offer to one another can take various forms, whether it means to have fun when helping Robin to choose her wedding dress together, for instance; but also when it comes to very practical matters: aware of her loss of the job,⁹⁰³ Savannah helps Robin overcome her lethargy⁹⁰⁴ and makes her aware of all the things she can do. Only then Robin reasons, “I don’t think I make a good candidate for depression. Feeling sorry for myself takes too much time and energy. I’m also finding out how hard it is to do nothing. Three days is long enough to be blue.”⁹⁰⁵

⁸⁹⁵ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 10.

⁸⁹⁶ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 247.

⁸⁹⁷ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 247.

⁸⁹⁸ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 102.

⁸⁹⁹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 128.

⁹⁰⁰ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 248–249.

⁹⁰¹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 256–257.

⁹⁰² McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 258. Bernadine’s spirit is, however, apparently shaken when she is told she “do[es] have mental health issues” by an unknown person on the phone when trying to register to the rehab. Cf. *ibid.*, 268–271.

⁹⁰³ Robin’s apathy replaces rage which is caused by the manner her employer has been “forced to make some adjustments in personnel—namely a reduction,” because she is immediately escorted from the building and her personal belongings are packed up in two boxes she must carry away herself. Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 260–264.

⁹⁰⁴ Robin’s initial way of coping with this particular problem reminds the reader precisely of what Bernadine did after John left her. Both read books, watch movies or television (without actually paying much attention to perceiving the content), neglect themselves in terms of clothing, eating, washing, etc.

⁹⁰⁵ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 280.

While it is true that “[t]he four friends support one another no matter what, offering encouragement and truth telling as needed,”⁹⁰⁶ they also become the ones who make one another aware of their vices and fouls. Both Robin and Gloria remind Savannah grievously of her contribution to the failure of her marriage.⁹⁰⁷ Robin admits that “Savannah and Bernadine get on [her] nerves” when it comes to how she raises her daughter. Savannah has “never had kids, so what does she know about being a mother?”⁹⁰⁸ Robin points at Savannah’s swearing, and tells her she has been “‘entirely too cynical.’” And Savannah “doesn’t say a word because she knows” her friend “is probably right.”⁹⁰⁹

Again, they are the ones who get under each other’s skin, which causes that “their friendship and banter conjure up the joys of black sisterhood.”⁹¹⁰ Robin is capable of a precise diagnosis that “Savannah’s more upset than she lets on about marriage being over because Isaac didn’t want to stay.” She “also think[s] that she’s as lonely as Gloria, but Savannah does a good job pretending she isn’t.”⁹¹¹ Only after Robin takes the risk and tells her friend in a brutally honest way she has been always complaining “about everything”—not only her marriage to Isaac—, Savannah finally confesses she, too is to be blamed for their divorce.⁹¹² In return, Robin frankly replies, “Let’s face it, I’ve never been good at picking good men.”⁹¹³ “Together, they voice their frustrations;”⁹¹⁴ but they can only do so after they have reopened themselves to one another, which comes after a period of discomfort which marks sharing personal issues. Then each of them can admit that they are desperate, “‘Yeah, but so is everybody else.’”⁹¹⁵

Wisely enough, Michael and Robin do not want to prevent each other from spending and having a good time with their friends. Shortly before the wedding Robin rejoices, “[m]y *husband* already knows I’m not going to stop doing things with my friends just because I have a *husband*. The same hold true for him. We’ve already talked about this. We’re not twenty-two. We’re grown-ups. We know who we are, what we’ve got and what we’re doing.”⁹¹⁶

Not only female friends but also male ones play a significant role in the protagonist’s lives. Bernadine and John have already been discussed above, Joseph who later becomes Gloria’s partner in Oasis, having worked with her for twenty years, turns out to be simply irreplaceable. The authorial voice states, “Gloria didn’t know what she’d do without [him],”⁹¹⁷ for he practically runs the salon weeks after Marvin deceases. Another somewhat unexpected support comes from Taylor to Bernadine: she asks Bernadine in a taken-for-granted manner whether the pills are what she is looking for in her handbag, which makes “Bernadine’s hand freeze.” A frank conversation about the topic follows. This incident only adds up to the desperate woman’s making sense of how serious the issue is, and—more important for her—leads to some action.

⁹⁰⁶ Cavanaugh, review of *Getting to Happy*, 76.

⁹⁰⁷ Sheila has been trying to tell her she is too critical and demanding herself for years, yet Savannah has never been willing to accept that from her. This time, Sheila says to her sister, “[h]ave you ever wondered if maybe you’re the one who’s boring?” However, both sisters agree that Isaac’s registration as a Republican definitely “is grounds for divorce!” McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 13. For Gloria’s opinion, see *ibid.*, 100.

⁹⁰⁸ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 100–111.

⁹⁰⁹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 247.

⁹¹⁰ Daley, “‘Getting to Happy’ book review.”

⁹¹¹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 113.

⁹¹² McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 113–114. The fact that she admits her part in the problem makes her reflect upon their divorcé in detail in the next chapter—cf. *ibid.*, 120–127.

⁹¹³ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 115.

⁹¹⁴ Page, “‘Getting to Happy,’ Terry McMillan’s Sequel to ‘Waiting to Exhale.’”

⁹¹⁵ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 108–109.

⁹¹⁶ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 371.

⁹¹⁷ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 81.

9.6.4 Family and Relationships with Men

The protagonists still remain providers responsible for themselves; what is more, Bernadine is indebted because of James,⁹¹⁸ Savannah lends money to Isaac, Gloria's rent in Oasis is rising, and Robin is a single parent. Page is rather correct when she suggests that "[f]amily can be a pain, whether it is a sister who wants Savannah to take in a teenage nephew, or a daughter-in-law that Gloria knows is no good."⁹¹⁹ But then family—and especially its members who would be the last ones expected to do so—turn out to be comforting: for instance, as Robin discovers, her fifteen-year-old daughter is mature beyond her years, and therefore has taken an active role in seeking a partner for her mother, or carefully reveals her interest in Russell in order not to hurt Robin's feelings. Bernadine's ex-husband John who is like her "old friend [she] happened to be married to a long time ago" and who has "definitely been there for [her]"⁹²⁰ provides support to her when trying to overcome her addiction, and even intends to give Bernadine one of his properties, aware that "James took [her] to the cleaners."⁹²¹ In return, Bernadine automatically considers Taylor her daughter and her children's younger sister, long before Taylor is left by Kathleen.⁹²² In fact, she helps John raise his teenage daughter who "has never felt like an outsider" in her house.⁹²³

The message of the sequel to *Waiting to Exhale* is summed up by Cavanaugh as "[m]en let you down, sometimes by accident but more often not, so don't rely on them for happiness."⁹²⁴ This is definitely true; which, however, cannot be said about the hasty generalisation suggested by another inaccurate review: "Most of the misery has to do with men who lie, steal, cheat, or disappear, or with adult children who face similar problems."⁹²⁵ It results from what was described above that this is not the case in *Getting to Happy*.

Robin's single parenthood does not represent financial trapping or an obstacle for her; on the contrary, Sparrow is not only her daughter who loves her unconditionally but also a sort of friend. The images communicated from the novel create contradictory images that challenge the reader's constructions and ideas of what an African American family looks like at the beginning of the 21st century. Sparrow describes the situation as it follows: "Everybody's families are like either so screwed up or like a really good mixed salad. I've got friends whose parents are lesbians or gay men, with kids that are white as snow to black as me and every shade of brown in between. Nobody cares anymore, Mom, get it? We are who we are and it's all good."⁹²⁶

Examples of poor treatment or even neglect of family members are not avoided by McMillan. Kathleen leaves her teenage daughter; Nickida's extramarital activities and marijuana smoking make her end up in prison. Even Savannah (who shows a frank interest in the serious issues of the African American community members) does not recall her sister's children by name, or is not willing to offer a helping hand to Sheila who subsequently accuses her of being selfish.⁹²⁷

⁹¹⁸ Due to this fact, Bernadine's attempt to borrow money to start a new catering business is unsuccessful.

⁹¹⁹ Daley, "Getting to Happy" book review."

⁹²⁰ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 369.

⁹²¹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 106.

⁹²² Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 104–105.

⁹²³ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 105. Taylor herself says that Bernadine has "been more than a mom to [her]" than Kathleen, her biological mother. *Ibid.*, 145.

⁹²⁴ Cavanaugh, review of *Getting to Happy*, 76.

⁹²⁵ Review of *Getting to Happy*, *Publishers Weekly*, 25.

⁹²⁶ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 26.

⁹²⁷ Sheila asks Savannah to let her son GoGo spend a few weeks in Arizona in Savannah's house, for a change might be beneficial for him, withdrawing him from the bad influence of "the thugs," so that "he can see there's a better way to live." The divorce Savannah has been through provides her with an excuse for this kind of reluctance; neither Savannah often sees her mother. Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 173–177. (Eventually, she

McMillan's examination of the changing definition of what constitutes an "eligible man" in the eyes of upwardly mobile African American women continues even more intensely in the sequel to *Waiting to Exhale*. Due to the demographic disadvantages caused also partly by the expectations what, in fact, constitutes such a man, it has not been easy for black women to find one.⁹²⁸ It is vital to say that McMillan "creates female characters who personalize these statistics by translating them into human terms." In the same way, she "makes the economic circumstances of her time understandable as forces that have a tangible impact on the lives of her characters."⁹²⁹ Meanwhile in *Waiting to Exhale* the reader is only partly able to see beyond the façade of societal expectations, in the sequel there is no "middle class clinical approach to relationships."⁹³⁰ Namely, Savannah has married a carpenter and Gloria's income from Oasis highly surpasses Marvin's. (At the same time, Savannah's mother who literally wanted her to get married at all costs, scolds her daughter with the following words not longer after their divorce: "I would like to say this and just get it outta the way if you don't mind. You married beneath yourself, Savannah, I never wanted to say anything to your face, but what on earth did you have in common with a lumberjack?"⁹³¹) By contrast, Bernadine insists on the idea that a woman should not "play down how intelligent she is just to make her friggin' husband feel secure."⁹³²

Nonetheless, meanwhile Gloria appreciates her husband's skills, Savannah sometimes pushes the male characters in a patronising way. Her constant questioning of the merit of Isaac's work results in their inability to communicate at last, as she unconsciously begins to strip him out of his manhood and pride. Their failure to communicate and feel secure within the relationship is only exacerbated by his porn addiction and her workaholicism. Besides finding out Isaac has been addicted to pornography, she also discovers he has been having an affair for more than a year.⁹³³ The usually firm Savannah keeps "wondering deep down inside" if she "really want[s] to end it," or if she just "want[s] to break up the monotony," wishing she could keep the parts of Isaac she still loves.⁹³⁴ The following words reveal how intense his frustration is: "Well, you know what? Savannah? What if I told you that as much as I still love you, I think I might be tired of married to you, too. I'm tired of you being in charge of my life. ... You've never tried to come over to my side. You always expect me to come over to yours."⁹³⁵ She gradually loses respect for him; in turn, he becomes hostile and resentful, not "feel[ing] the same kind of love" he once felt for her, even though he wants to.⁹³⁶ The more she pushes him, the worse things become—he withdraws from her, and escapes to the dreamy world of the Internet porn. The two people share the same house and beds, but end up living in two different worlds. Whether or how much Savannah's attention has Isaac tried to draw, whether there has been anger growing in him, or other motivations remain hidden from the reader, as—similarly to the first novel—the male voices are much less

does give her sister a helping hand, lending her the money to bail GoGo out. And noticing her made-up excuses, Savannah's friends advice her to pay a visit to the family in Pittsburgh.)

⁹²⁸ These phenomena which have made black women struggle when searching for a partner with whom they could form a permanent union include for instance lower male birth rates, higher mortality in African American men, their disproportionate number in prison, or higher cross-racial marriages in black men in comparison with black women. Cf. Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 117–120.

⁹²⁹ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 119.

⁹³⁰ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 229.

⁹³¹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 124.

⁹³² McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 100.

⁹³³ Isaac's explanation is that he has "met someone who does look inside and likes what she sees, and she understands" him. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 69.

⁹³⁴ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 65.

⁹³⁵ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 67.

⁹³⁶ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 68.

represented in the sequel in other passages than dialogues. The deal Savannah and Isaac make to be civil is kept, and after some time they can even discuss what they miss about each other as well as the reasons which made them stop loving each other.⁹³⁷

The above suggested lack of eligible men makes Robin actively try different ways of meeting a nice one. Savannah's usual critical reaction makes Robin admit, "[o]kay, so I'm rusty. But you've been out of circulation for years, Savannah. We don't go to happy hour anymore. And who has parties anymore? Nobody. So tell me, where do you go to meet a guy in our age bracket?"⁹³⁸ When she, however, gets bitterly disappointed, she completely gives up the idea of online dating, realising how many men put on fake identities there. "This is not a game, Dark Angel. There are millions of women out there hoping to meet a decent man online, and if your behaviour represents what's out there, I'm bowing out now,"⁹³⁹ she replies to one of them. Fake identities that African American men take go as far as to becoming bigamists as in case of James/Jesse. Disappointment in men becomes even more visible when the protagonists discuss it in relation to their youth and expectations back then. Savannah claims:

I think it might weigh more now than it did at thirty-six. So many people think because we're older we should be used to failed relationships and bad marriages, but especially disappointment. How do you get used to it? ... Back in the 70s I wasn't preparing for the worst that could happen. I was preoccupied with the best that could happen. ... we were honest. About most things, but definitely our feelings. ... we thought boys would grow up to become decent men who would love us as hard as we loved them.⁹⁴⁰

9.6.5 Journey and Self-growth

Robin and Savannah's psychic growths are naturally more accessible to the reader due to their first-person (reflector-character) account of the story. After Savannah becomes able to admit "the engine of [their] marriage just burned out and it's nobody's fault,"⁹⁴¹ her goal is to start living what her three-times divorced boss Thora⁹⁴² terms "life after marriage death," who encourages Savannah she is "still young and hot."⁹⁴³ Thora offers her to stay in her flat in Paris for as long as she wants. Discussing the journey with her sistas, Savannah explains, "I need a break from everything. So I can accept the reality that I'm a fifty-one-year old single woman. Which means I need to launch a whole new program to help me live like this is a new beginning instead of an ending. ... A change of scenery is good for the soul as the saying goes, sometimes you have to step outside of yourself in order to see yourself. So I'm going to Paris to rejuvenate."⁹⁴⁴

Besides, in this city she makes a decision to "take a more pro-active approach" toward men.⁹⁴⁵

When the divorce is final, she says she feels "officially free to do anything" she wants; Savannah continues, "Go anywhere I want. With whom-ever I want. Or I can do nothing at all. And I don't have to answer to anybody. I've been so busy thinking about my future and

⁹³⁷ Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 92–93.

⁹³⁸ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 109.

⁹³⁹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 229.

⁹⁴⁰ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 74.

⁹⁴¹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 120.

⁹⁴² Thora compares the stages of grief after a divorce to when someone close to a person dies. Encouraging Savannah, she adds, "after you accept that you aren't a failure at love, and that you wanted to end your marriage because you were unhappy, you can actually begin thinking of being happy again. It's a chance to build a new life, and hopefully with someone else one day." McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 216.

⁹⁴³ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 127.

⁹⁴⁴ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 258–259. Her trip does not function as a mere symbolic escape from the problems she faces at home; Savannah "didn't come to Paris to run from [herself]," but to run back to herself. *Ibid.*, 321. What is more, on the trip she does things she "hadn't done before," skipping the touristic attractions and landmarks, but enjoying herself wherever else she likes. Cf. *ibid.*, 325–326.

⁹⁴⁵ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 325.

it's here."⁹⁴⁶ Her future has to do with useful work, and when the disaster strikes, it turns into a new impulse to do something beneficial for the African American community; she plans to go to New Orleans in order to interview black people. At the personal level, the woman reveals her resolution "to get into the habit of not being so critical."⁹⁴⁷

Robin enters the novel, thinking, "I am forty-nine years old, with no love life and no prospects of bumping into a man that might increase my joy over the next however-many years. Add to it eighteen years of working at a job I feel no enthusiasm for." Wisely enough, in relation to starting over again, she also adds, "My girlfriends can't help me on this one."⁹⁴⁸ The reader learns a lot about her past from her recollections. "Back in the old good days I was a little bit loose, if I want to be honest with myself. The longest relationship I ever had was with Russell. ... Back then I confused passion and orgasms with love. It took me years to realize the two weren't synonymous."⁹⁴⁹ Gradually, she got "tired of chasing ghosts, hollow men who were outside my comfort zone, men who had nothing to give me except a rush. It was all I asked for, and all I ever got."⁹⁵⁰ Unlike in the first novel, she is not naïve anymore but able to learn from her mistakes. When she accidentally meets Michael in the gym, it soon becomes clear to both "how lucky [they] are to have this second chance."⁹⁵¹ It is Robin who asks Michael whether he would like to marry her, since she appreciates his integrity, values, behaviour toward her, as well as the way he makes her feel. He, in return, respects her, and considers her to be a good mother, among other.⁹⁵² When Katrina destroys thousands of people's homes, their misery causes some profound changes in her behaviour. "Too much is sometimes just too much," she comments. "It has made me sick standing in this closet, looking at how much I have knowing so many people don't have anything. I've been a slave to the good life. Which is precisely why I'm taking off these velvet handcuffs."⁹⁵³

When Bernadine finds out she has lived with a bigamist, it feels "like the second time she'd been killed." Her marriage with James is annulled, but she learns he had "been robbing her systematically for years." The pills help her to fake she has stopped worrying, "to smile when she [is] supposed to, to hold back tears when they [are] inappropriate, to forget she hasn't kissed in six years."⁹⁵⁴ Only when it comes home to her that even her friends can see the effect of her self-medicating, that she in fact must be "on something"⁹⁵⁵ which "has turned her into a different person," she becomes ashamed of herself,⁹⁵⁶ and decides that she "wants her life back, that much she does know. The one she's in charge of," which is one of the impulses to do something about her addiction at last. "Tired of keeping the pain of the past present," she does not "want to keep missing out on the good things."⁹⁵⁷ With John's help she gets to a twenty-eight-day inpatient rehab, after which she regains her former joy. The journey itself to Tucson and back, as well as the discussions with John also have a therapeutical effect. She finds out "all this negative energy has contaminated too many areas of [her] life." And she is starting to see "that [her] happiness is more important than [her] unhappiness. That's

⁹⁴⁶ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 178.

⁹⁴⁷ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 362.

⁹⁴⁸ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 29.

⁹⁴⁹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 28.

⁹⁵⁰ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 27.

⁹⁵¹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 330.

⁹⁵² Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 332–333.

⁹⁵³ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 327.

⁹⁵⁴ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 40–41.

⁹⁵⁵ Her girlfriends "can hear it in [her] voice." McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 134–135.

⁹⁵⁶ In addition, she is self-critical enough to see "[t]hey've lost patience with her. They're tired of feeling sorry for her, tired of her drone. She doesn't blame them one bit." McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 193.

⁹⁵⁷ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 48.

the pill [she] need[s] to swallow.”⁹⁵⁸ Her therapy counsellor teaches her that the emotions of resentment and anger toward James were “totally justified;” on the other hand, since “it doesn’t make a bit of difference if they’re justified or not,” it is up to Bernadine to live a healthy life again instead of putting herself to a position of a victim.⁹⁵⁹

Bernadine still makes a wonderful cook; what she does in the kitchen “is rather hypnotic, not to mention therapeutic” for her. “She forgets about time when she cooks, especially when she knows it’s for other people. The kitchen is the one place she feels safest. She’s in control of what happens in here. Bernadine knows she’s a phenomenal cook. It’s her very own form of artistry, the one thing she never takes a pill to do.”⁹⁶⁰ Cooking becomes her new source of self-confidence and empowerment. Because she wishes she “could cook entire meals for other people, not just desserts,” one of her biggest fantasies becomes running a restaurant that has a changing tasting menu.⁹⁶¹

Gloria’s self-growth is closely linked to her husband. It is Marvin that makes her change her eating habits and realise she needs more time for herself. He advises her not to “stop living because [he is] not around.”⁹⁶² As late as six months after his death the reader sees her cry for the first time, realising she “had no idea how much it hurts to lose someone you love. How hard it is to keep going. How it takes all the strength you have to just go through the motions to get from one day to the next.”⁹⁶³ Similarly to the first book, she requires another warning in order to be able to make up her mind and move forward: she “knows the danger. It’s called a heart attack.”⁹⁶⁴ This time the warning comes in the form of a scary sight at several elderly people gambling in one of the local casinos. A woman with emphysema who is smoking, “knowing she is so close to death,” makes Gloria aware of the potential threat her lifestyle means.⁹⁶⁵ Having seen them, she becomes “grateful for what she can still do. For how much she has left.” She thinks it was “so daunting, seeing what time can do to some folks and not others. Maybe it’s neglect. Maybe it’s apathy. Whatever it is, Gloria doesn’t want any. ... this means her mind has made the decision for her.”⁹⁶⁶ The new place for Oasis they need to find with Joseph is a sign for her. Last but not least, there is a means of symbolic protection she has “been relying on” which must be set aside. For a long time she used it to tell other people “she did not live alone.” Eight months after her husband passed away, she admits to herself she is no longer married.⁹⁶⁷ She has the engagement ring turned into a pendant with a diamond in it, which—together with the removal of many of Marvin’s photographs from the house—is a big step forward.⁹⁶⁸

The importance of self and focusing on one’s own needs is obvious. Savannah does not tell her friends she plans to accept Thora’s offer to spend some time in Paris on purpose.

⁹⁵⁸ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 275.

⁹⁵⁹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 314–316. Bernadine verifies this idea when she is given a letter of apology James wrote years ago, but has been hidden by Onika until she thought her mother would be strong enough to go through it. Because she has successfully come to terms with the suppressed anger, her reaction is, “[h]ow long had she waited to hear those words: I’m sorry? And now here they were. It didn’t change a thing.” *Ibid.*, 348.

⁹⁶⁰ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 142–143.

⁹⁶¹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 143.

⁹⁶² McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 81.

⁹⁶³ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 204.

⁹⁶⁴ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 208.

⁹⁶⁵ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 207–208.

⁹⁶⁶ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 211.

⁹⁶⁷ Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 290.

⁹⁶⁸ The next step for Gloria is to set her foot on the boat she bought for Marvin for their anniversary where she is strong enough to talk to him. Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 351–352.

She says to herself, “I need to go by myself. I need to hear myself think. Or not think. Mostly I just want to see if I remember who I am. And what I’m going to do about it.”⁹⁶⁹

9.6.6 Love

Love, by contrast to some other chick lit novels, is never ever portrayed in McMillan’s books (and especially not in *Getting to Happy*) as “a superficial pairing of equally attractive bodies, neglecting emotional connection and valorizing physical fetishism.”⁹⁷⁰ The increased amount of characters provides McMillan with a great opportunity to show various sorts of love—love between men and women; parents, children, and grandchildren, among friends, etc. Robin has “been so preoccupied raising her [daughter] and working long hours” that she “forgot all about romance,” which even prevents her from remembering “the last time [she] was in love.”⁹⁷¹ Simultaneously, Sparrow and Robin are “best friends, and talk almost about everything.”⁹⁷² Robin is able to admit that despite her daughter “has chutzpah and a lot of insight ... [and] thinks she knows everything,”⁹⁷³ putting her “life into a doggone spotlight for her inspection, ... there’s a small chance she might be right.”⁹⁷⁴

All three protagonists show unconditional love and support to their children. Bernadine encourages Onika to study social anthropology with a minor in book art, that is, something she is keen on, even though she knows there would be much more financially interesting fields of study. Similarly, she does not have doubts about John Junior’s decision to have a child with his girlfriend and postpone his Ph.D. Half of the money Gloria receives from the insurance company automatically goes to Tarik who is bound to be in need as a single father.

In love there is no competition among the women characters.⁹⁷⁵ What is more, it is Belinda Hampton, James’ second wife, who makes Bernadine realise what has been going on in her seemingly functional marriage with him. Being thanked by Bernadine, she comments, “[w]omen need to stick together and stop sorry men like Jesse from getting away with so much.” She adds, “[t]hey want us to be enemies, when they’re the ones who try to pit us against each other.”⁹⁷⁶

Metamorphoses of love between partners in the book are interesting to follow. The first chapter traces back how different values and attitudes to work shape Savannah and Isaac’s marriage. Meanwhile he does not consider “television shows about cultural and social issues ... as interesting as the things they could build out of lumber,” she is jealous of wood, since in his opinion, “we rely on it yet overlook its value to the point we ignore it and its beauty.” She sighs, “[i]t would be nice if he still saw me the same way.”⁹⁷⁷ Savannah feels unappreciated workwise, since Isaac hardly ever watches her shows, thinking her “stories

⁹⁶⁹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 224.

⁹⁷⁰ Umminger, “Supersizing Bridget Jones: What’s Really Eating Women in Chick Lit?,” in *Chick Lit*, 247–248.

⁹⁷¹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 18–19.

⁹⁷² McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 18. There are moments, however, when Sparrow needs to be reminded that, after all, Robin’s “love life and sex life are none of [her] business.” Ibid.

⁹⁷³ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 28.

⁹⁷⁴ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 22.

⁹⁷⁵ Even Robin says in relief she has “finally realized other women aren’t [her] competitors.” McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 190. Umminger speaks about competition among women characters in white chick lit, still her observation is precise and applicable. “When women are reduced to the embodied equivalent of objects competing for self space in some consumer-based economy where men choose the newest, shiniest, thinnest, blondest models, a profound mistrust of ‘lesser brands’ or envy of ‘designer models’ develops.” She hints at “this fairy tale of female bonding and [seeming] support,” as suggested by Allison Penny. Umminger, “Supersizing Bridget Jones: What’s Really Eating Women in Chick Lit?,” in *Chick Lit*, 247.

⁹⁷⁶ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 37.

⁹⁷⁷ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 2.

show problems that can't be solved, so what's the point?"⁹⁷⁸ These observations only stress what both know: their marriage has been "on a shaky ground."⁹⁷⁹ She does not feel safe, respected, or necessary, not to mention beautiful anymore. Their alienation from one another combined with her boredom and exaggerated expectations result in Savannah's conclusion that despite Isaac is the one she "once loved harder than any of the others," "marrying each other wasn't the best thing [they] could've one for each other."⁹⁸⁰ Savannah is aware of the fact that she is "not one of those women who feel [they] need a man to *complete* [them]," and does not reckon "there's just one person in the world meant for you." Her reflections lead to the fact that Savannah is "beginning to wonder if a good marriage is even possible" at all.⁹⁸¹

9.6.7 Happiness

In the sequel McMillan brings the four characters for what the reviewer of *Publishers Weekly* terms as "a disappointing and uninspired outing."⁹⁸² There is a partial overlap in what prevents the protagonists from being happy in their early/mid-fifties in comparison with the first novel, *Waiting to Exhale*. They enter the sequel experienced enough not to play their happiness on one card. In the author's note, McMillan observes, "apparently exhaling is a relative state that is difficult to sustain."⁹⁸³

In this process, alienation from one another, the healing friendship they once shared as well as loss of interest in BWOTM lead to their disconnection from the healing black community. Trying to put the four back together, Savannah claims, "We've been friends a long time. I always thought friends tried to do things that make each others' lives better. I know I run my mouth a lot and I'm an idealist, so you guys can tell me to go straight to hell if you want to. I'm just tired of us feeling like there's no tomorrow."⁹⁸⁴

The difference between *Waiting to Exhale* and *Getting to Happy* basically is that the concept of happiness becomes gradually enriched. While in the first book, to be happy has to do with finding the perfect job or the perfect man, it becomes a more complex notion in the latter one. It transforms into the ability to cope with one's loss, injustice, and addiction. Similarly to the first book, they find themselves "[s]till in a struggle to make sense of life and relationships," but this time (in the sequel), "the women are older, a bit wiser and in the process of discovering that happiness isn't permanent."⁹⁸⁵ Happiness becomes more than a state of mind to reach but a process and a way of getting to happy one contributes to, which is connected with the ability to get rid of self-delusion.

The theme of addiction as compensation for disbalances in all four protagonists' lives and lack of something important is carried through the sequel. Bernadine's addiction to antidepressant pills—a phenomenon called "a sign of the times"⁹⁸⁶ by Taylor—is only her way of coping with loneliness and anger towards James, over which she has lost control. After Marvin's death Gloria again indulges in excessive eating; and Robin, the shopping queen, seeks outlets and sales. Savannah's too sharp and critical standpoint becomes unbearable even to her friends, not to mention her sister Sheila; she also succumbs to work and neglects her health, which leads to diabetes two. Their struggles are all symptoms of the same thing; their

⁹⁷⁸ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 4.

⁹⁷⁹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 3.

⁹⁸⁰ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 4–5.

⁹⁸¹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 8.

⁹⁸² Review of *Getting to Happy*, *Publishers Weekly*, 24.

⁹⁸³ McMillan, Author's note, *Getting to Happy*.

⁹⁸⁴ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 253.

⁹⁸⁵ Thomas, "Fiction Review: 'Getting to Happy' by Terry McMillan."

⁹⁸⁶ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 147.

disappointment in others as well as themselves must necessarily transform into understanding and forgiveness.

The remedies they use function as sedatives for depression and anxiety; having once removed these comforters from their lives, the four women demonstrate their strength again. Gloria and Savannah lose weight, Bernadine quits taking pills partly thanks to meditation, and Robin, having seen the consequences of other people's having literally nothing when the hurricane Katrina strikes, she makes sense of the absurdity of her compulsive shopping habits. The personal catastrophes which seem to make things even worse at the first sight mostly prove to me meaningful turning points in the protagonists' lives: being made redundant means an opportunity to find out what Robin likes doing and to develop a taste for some more stimulating activities both workwise and in her free time. The incarceration of Nickida, Tarik's wife, results not only in his loss of faith in her and the discovery of how bad mother she was, but also contributes to Gloria's healing after her husband's death, since she becomes more active and needed as a grandmother, which is also accompanied by a renewed interest in her beauty salon. All this, however, happens after—as Page observes—they “decide *individually and together*, to upgrade their lives,” to get happy.⁹⁸⁷ In *Waiting to Exhale* their careers provide them with freedom. At this age, however, as Robin learns, success is measured by more than money. Success means “[d]oing what you love even if the pay isn't good.”⁹⁸⁸

One must learn to depend on his/her self for love and happiness; still, as suggested above, their determination is even stronger when together; then they begin to understand that “there's stuff that happens to [them] that throws [them] off the center and [they] have to figure out how to get through it in the best way [they] can.”⁹⁸⁹ One of the more positive reviews summarises, “All four are learning to heal past hurts and to reclaim their joy and their dreams; but they return to us full of spirit, sass, and faith in one another. They've exhaled: now they are learning to breathe.”⁹⁹⁰

9.6.8 Sexuality

Waiting to Exhale portrays successful, professional African American women as mature beings to whose natural part of life is their interest in sex. It would be short-sighted to say that the importance of eroticism is suppressed in the sequel, but due to the obstacles the four women face, it is partly replaced with (self-)irony, and all the protagonists become resigned to a life of sexual mediocrity at some point of time. These changes, however, are reversible: namely, Savannah becomes interested in Jasper, a renowned surgeon—who, in return, admires her independence;⁹⁹¹ Robin and Michael apparently enjoy each other's company also in terms of sex. The same Gloria who calls sex “the nasty” in *Waiting to Exhale*,⁹⁹² and has practically

⁹⁸⁷ Page, “‘Getting to Happy,’ Terry McMillan's Sequel to ‘Waiting to Exhale.’”

⁹⁸⁸ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 303.

⁹⁸⁹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 129.

⁹⁹⁰ “*Getting to Happy*, The Sequel to *Waiting to Exhale*,” Reader's Guide, accessed March 1, 2013, <http://www.terrymcmillan.com/view/gettingtohappy>. As it was suggested in the previous analysis of *Waiting to Exhale*, the book's title has to do with finding a partner, which is then related to a state of happiness and fulfilment. Toward the end of the sequel, Bernadine teaches them how to breathe through meditation in order to feel more “focused and relaxed:” “the idea is to focus on each breath. All you want to do is keep your mind on breathing. (...) Your mind is going to jump all over the place. The idea is each time it happens, bring your focus back to your breathing. (...) when we inhale, we're breathing in hope and vitality, and when we exhale, we're breathing out hurt and anger. You can breathe in faith and confidence and breathe out doubt and despair. And so on.” McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 357–358.

⁹⁹¹ She specifies her ideas as it follows: “I don't want another husband. I just want somebody 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 a concert with. The movies. And maybe spend the night every once in a while.” McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 245.

⁹⁹² McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 407.

“accepted the fact that she might never be sexually active again,”⁹⁹³ after Marvin’s death, returns to a sex shop named “Good Vibrations” she accidentally (and funnily) mistook for a hardware store, which happens nine months after this tragic event. Even though John feels like an old friend to Bernadine after all they have been through, there are hints to more than friendship as the book approaches toward the end, for she seems to again have some feelings for him. And she states she hopes “to do it again one day.”⁹⁹⁴

Sexuality of two of the protagonists’ children becomes one of the significant themes explored in the novels. Robin experiences the same kind of concern about her daughter in *Getting to Happy*, as Gloria does in the first novel about Tarik: despite Sparrow “has tried not to” do it, “but it was difficult, almost impossible to say no,” Robin is relieved to find out she has been using condoms, and is “trying to be smart about it.”⁹⁹⁵ Taylor admits her sex life troubles her in a frank conversation with Bernadine, too.⁹⁹⁶

The same message of tolerance to homosexuality and lesbianism is conveyed in *Getting to Happy*⁹⁹⁷ as in the first book. Onika’s sexual orientation represents a much more challenging issue for Bernadine only and purely because Bernadine’s reaction is heavily influenced by the dangerous combination of Zoloft and Xanax, two pills with rather different effects, which make her forget what she has seen. Now a college student, Onika visits her mother together with Shy, her girlfriend. Seeing them together in a revealing situation, Bernadine utters only “I think it’s healthy when you acknowledge who you like. ... What’s to be angry about? ... just don’t get too comfortable. I’m still your mother.”⁹⁹⁸ At that moment, she “isn’t shocked. In fact, she’s grateful this is finally out in the open,” since maybe “now her daughter can feel good about who she is and stop hiding it.” Her relief is seriously shaken, though, when she realises she cannot “remember anything except getting up this morning.” Bernadine has actually suspected this for years, but did not want to ask Onika, knowing she would tell her when ready. “Now she has. And Bernadine missed it. All because of a sleeping pill?”⁹⁹⁹ There is one more incident which illustrates McMillan’s open-mindedness to homosexuality. Sister Monroe, one of the recurring minor characters, is shocked by Joseph and his partner’s adoption of two little sons, calling him a faggot. Gloria asks her to immediately leave the salon and read the sign over the entrance to Oasis which sums up the “do-nots.”¹⁰⁰⁰

Onika and Bernadine openly discuss what it feels like to be a lesbian after Bernadine returns home from the rehab. They agree upon the fact that “women understand women. ... and it’s not all sexual. Too much emphasis is placed on the physical.” Both get “a feeling of comfort. And safety.” Bernadine claims she feels like this toward her girlfriends, meanwhile Onika is “drawn” by women on top of that.¹⁰⁰¹

9.6.9 Health

Savannah, the merciless observer, points out: “Well, they say by the time we turn fifty, we make more trips to the doctor than anywhere else.”¹⁰⁰² She continues,

⁹⁹³ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 163.

⁹⁹⁴ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 369.

⁹⁹⁵ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 19.

⁹⁹⁶ Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 147–148.

⁹⁹⁷ For more information about the generally positive reactions of the friends, see McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 136–137.

⁹⁹⁸ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 46.

⁹⁹⁹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 46–48.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 293–294.

¹⁰⁰¹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 347.

¹⁰⁰² McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 135.

Is this what happens after fifty? Your body starts turning against you? Years ago, it seemed as if every time I called Mama she was either on her way to, or just coming back from the doctor. Or going to pick up a prescription. Now my friends and I are doing the same thing. There's always some mandatory test we have to take. Some new ailment or complaint. We're always getting repaired.¹⁰⁰³

Discussing this topic with the girlfriends, they speak about Savannah's colonoscopy, Gloria's overweight, as well as Robin's flashes which go with the menopause,¹⁰⁰⁴ "as if bleeding once a month for thirty-five years wasn't enough,"¹⁰⁰⁵ as she complains. John's enlarged prostate makes him slow down his working habits and, paradoxically, as a result, he spends more time with his daughter Taylor, which leads to an improvement of their relationship.

In *Getting to Happy*, Gloria's hypertension related to overweight and unhealthy lifestyle as well as Bernadine's self-medication return to play in an intense and more threatening way, this time joined also by other ailments. Even Savannah, who used to pay attention to a healthy lifestyle, but has become too comfortable in her marriage, is diagnosed with diabetes as a partial result of her overweight, and is therefore forced to change her way of life. Robin suffers from various symptoms of menopause such as hot flashes and bad memory; the latter one bothers also Gloria and Bernadine. As a matter of fact, Bernadine, Gloria, and Savannah tackle the weight problem related to a more general negligence of their bodies: as, Daley notices, "[a]nd except for Robin, weight an ever-present ego killer."¹⁰⁰⁶

Gloria has obviously the most intriguing relationship to food, which is related not only to her health. In *Waiting to Exhale* she does not become a part of the self-punishing regimes of dieting and exercising to change her appearance. On the contrary, she only loses weight between the two novels, being helped by her husband, due to the health problems she previously developed. (The other characters do not function as contrastive friends/foils—as in other chick lit novels—whose physical perfection would even stress the protagonist's inferiority complexes. All four are far from being perfect, and do not aim to be whatsoever.) After she loses Marvin in the tragic accident, again, food supplants "sex as an erotic, sensory experience,"¹⁰⁰⁷ and it becomes a surrogate for the love she once experienced, turning her to size eighteen again.¹⁰⁰⁸

9.6.10 Beauty

According to Joan Gross, the reader automatically—as well as people in general actually—tend to think of overweight (and especially obesity) in terms of gluttony and overconsumption. All four characters become trapped in the "ambivalence provoked by living in a society that deeply wishes [them] to over-consume, yet savagely punishes all bodily evidence of overconsumption"¹⁰⁰⁹ at this age to some extent. Meanwhile, as Umminger implies, those women who are thin are "rewarded" by means of indulging, various spa treatments, etc., having been convinced "they are worth it,"¹⁰¹⁰ fat women are "punished for visible overconsumption."¹⁰¹¹ When Marvin dies, Gloria gains weight again; she carefully defends herself, monitoring her reactions to food and consumption. McMillan shows what Umminger

¹⁰⁰³ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 317.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 155. Gloria complains to Philip (her partner in Oasis) about a similar problem, she "must be losing [her] mind," for she forgets more than she remembers. *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁰⁰⁵ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 184.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Daley, "'Getting to Happy' book review."

¹⁰⁰⁷ Umminger, "Supersizing Bridget Jones: What's Really Eating Women in Chick Lit?," in *Chick Lit*, 247.

¹⁰⁰⁸ It might be of some interest that there is a factual mistake in the sequel. Meanwhile *Waiting to Exhale* is set in 1990, Gloria's memories narrated by the authorial third-person voice bring her back to a year earlier in relation to her heart attack. As stated in the previous analysis, this event takes place at the very end of the book.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Joan Gross, "Phat," in *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession*, ed. Don Kulick and Anne Meneley (New York: Tarcher, 2005), 70–72.

¹⁰¹⁰ The words hint at the famous L'Oreal series of advertisements.

¹⁰¹¹ Umminger, "Supersizing Bridget Jones: What's Really Eating Women in Chick Lit?," in *Chick Lit*, 242.

describes as follows: “even an active, intelligent, self-aware, accomplished overweight woman has unique soft spots in her daily armor, sites of vulnerability that her thin sisters do not share.”¹⁰¹² Savannah, an accomplished reporter, is equipped with more self-esteem than any other of characters; still, both she and Gloria perform their jobs in public and seem to be aware of the fact that they are more than likely to be judged not only for their accomplishments at work but also their appearance.

Mostly Robin has been susceptible to “the cyclical economy where beauty begets money, which buys beauty, which begets more money.”¹⁰¹³ She feels encouraged to treat and pamper herself; again, this is just another form of compensation for something she has lacked in her life until Michael, a man who becomes her stable partner, reappears. A mere weight loss is not “a solution for finding a way to allow oneself to live and be happy in the world.”¹⁰¹⁴ If only her body changed, it would be of no help. (Naomi Wolf expresses a similar concern in *The Beauty Myth*: she warns of the dangers of treating the surface without winding the actual cure for the problem that remains. In her opinion, “the beautiful woman is excluded forever from the rewards and responsibilities of a particular human love, for she cannot trust that any man will love her for ‘herself alone.’”¹⁰¹⁵) The women make peace with their bodies¹⁰¹⁶ and get past the destructive and superficial view of their fat selves as unworthy; simultaneously, if their overweight means a potential danger to their physical health, they take the necessary measures. Their meaningful existence is reached through their achievements, socialising, and, above all, rejection of the cultural model that they found so difficult to follow—the same kind of conclusion Savannah and Robin come to at the end of *Waiting to Exhale*.¹⁰¹⁷ Double standards for men and women when it comes to aging and beauty images are alluded to in the book, too. Savannah finds it “grossly unfair that God rigged this whole thing so men seem to get better-looking as they get older and women simply age out.” She asks herself, “[w]hy is it that their wrinkles make them sexy and more distinguished while ours make us look old and unattractive?”¹⁰¹⁸

The novel shows the ephemerality of the equation “beautiful is successful and worthy” and importance of other values in life than beauty. It does not undermine women’s empowerment; on the contrary, catastrophic consequences of self-negligence but also overgrooming are dealt with. In both books, McMillan rejects the current cultural trends which express the motto “surface over substance,” for the women’s talent to do various things better than others matters more than “the package,” i.e., their appearance. They create their own opportunities: when she overcomes the crisis after her loss, Gloria concentrates on a gradual improvement and update of Oasis; the closure of Bernadine’s Sweet Tooth means she starts to contemplate giving a try to another catering business. To make her television show meaningful is Savannah’s lifetime goal,¹⁰¹⁹ meanwhile Robin realises it is good for her to give up a job which does not satisfy her at last. By that they debunk the discriminating socially driven idea that opportunities and success are reserved for those who fit into some rigid appearance criteria. In either book they show no sign of “hysterical fear of the unbeautiful as a true glass ceiling.”¹⁰²⁰

¹⁰¹² Umminger, “Supersizing Bridget Jones: What’s Really Eating Women in Chick Lit?,” in *Chick Lit*, 243.

¹⁰¹³ Umminger, “Supersizing Bridget Jones: What’s Really Eating Women in Chick Lit?,” in *Chick Lit*, 242.

¹⁰¹⁴ Umminger, “Supersizing Bridget Jones: What’s Really Eating Women in Chick Lit?,” in *Chick Lit*, 251.

¹⁰¹⁵ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (New York: Perennial, 2002, reprint edition), 172.

¹⁰¹⁶ Umminger, “Supersizing Bridget Jones: What’s Really Eating Women in Chick Lit?,” in *Chick Lit*, 250.

¹⁰¹⁷ Instead of a cheap happy ending, McMillan lets them make a decision to remain single and come to terms with this status without feeling unworthy, frustrated, or even socially undesirable.

¹⁰¹⁸ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 300.

¹⁰¹⁹ Savannah states, all she ever “wanted was to do something with [her] life that would have a positive impact on other people.” McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 8.

¹⁰²⁰ Umminger, “Supersizing Bridget Jones: What’s Really Eating Women in Chick Lit?,” in *Chick Lit*, 246.

9.6.11 Racial Issues

The tendency to preserve the racial identity is visible from the attitude of most of the characters' tendency to seek a mate outside the African American community—especially a white man—, which is a far less popular solution for a black woman than marrying an African American one.¹⁰²¹ As it results from the previous subchapter, the women are forced to redefine their requirements, as far as partners are concerned. When Robin expresses her wish to have made better choices of men, Sparrow explains why Robin has not been attracted to white men. “It’s because you didn’t look at them as men because they were white.” By contrast, when it comes to the younger generation represented in the novel, Sparrow’s attitude to this subject matter is very different. Dating other than black men is commented on by Robin’s daughter like this: “I don’t like them because they’re white, Mom. I just like them. A lot of black guys at school aren’t attracted to girls like me. ... [White boys] make me feel special. Unique. To be honest. They make me feel even prouder than I already am to be black.”¹⁰²² Robin’s disappointing experience with online dating makes even her consider dating white men. She says, “I’m thinking about crossing over ... the color line. ... We’re stupid. ... here we are still holding on to blackness. We can still be black and love whoever we want to. It’s about time we gave ourselves more options.” To the reader’s surprise, neither of the other girlfriends is against this idea, for it does not mean compromising their racial identity.¹⁰²³

9.7 Narrative Strategies and Point of View

The narrative strategies in the book differ from the previous one in some respects. McMillan keeps the same structure of the book, i.e., the thirty-six chapters revolving mostly around one of the four protagonists. The story they share is told by the corresponding reflector-character narrators in the first person (that is, Savannah and Robin), and the authorial voice speaks, telling the story with respect to Bernadine and Gloria. This time, however, there are only a few examples of shifts from the reflector-charactres the third or even second person voices within the chapters, even not in inner monologues, which would have enriched for instance Bernadine’s account of her struggles with antidepressants, and so on. The narrative strategy pattern used in the book is rather simplified, which is possibly explicable by the increased amount of the novel’s minor characters and partly by the plot twists, as well as explicative passages which refer to *Waiting to Exhale*. (The question is whether such shifts would not have proved more intriguing than this sustainable but predictable narrative pattern.) Inner monologues appear in the first opening chapters where Savannah and Robin establish a kind of bridge between the first book, the fifteen-year gap, and the sequel for the sake of the reader.¹⁰²⁴ Robin’s monologues here, however, only regularly interrupt the action taking place in chapter two, and are complemented by dialogues with her daughter. Another variation occurs in chapter nine when Robin expresses her discontent about the heat which is less

¹⁰²¹ For more information about the general trends as well as uneven sex ratios of interracial marriages, see Maria P. Root, *Love’s Revolution: Interracial Marriage* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001), 6–13 and 17–19. Richards quotes a 1990 Michigan University research which found that “8 % of black men between 25 and 34 years old were married to someone outside their race,” meanwhile the same can be said only about 4 % of African American women of the same age. Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 120–121.

¹⁰²² McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 24.

¹⁰²³ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 254–255.

¹⁰²⁴ In addition, occasional hints reminding the reader of what happened in the first novel make it easier for certain characters to rejoin the protagonists in *Getting to Happy*. Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 109–111, Robin and Savannah’s debate about Michael, Russell, and other men “back in the stone age.”

related to the Arizona hot weather than her menopause flashes.¹⁰²⁵ The last three chapters in which the narrative voice speaks in present tense bring the four sistas together again.

Chapter twenty-five returns to McMillan's time-proven subtle variations within the personal narrative situation she has mastered in *Waiting to Exhale*. In this chapter the reflector-character (Robin) voice switches from one pronoun to another, adding to the confessional and conversational tone which is so attractive for the reader. "Having a fantastic pity party"¹⁰²⁶ and entertaining herself with a bottle of sauvignon blanc, self-help books, and movies, she reflects on her situation: "But where to start? I don't know. You can get a lot of inspiration from books. First, you actually have to read them." The wandering ideas and frequently changed topics reflect her mixed feelings, despair, and inability to focus. Her thoughts of Sparrow and her friends are interrupted by her own worries about the direction her life is to take from then on; her meditation is frequently interrupted by what she can see on television and more general observations she makes about commercials for antidepressants, etc. This stream-of-consciousness-like paragraph structure is used to convey effectively the message of immediacy and the idea that despite such state of mind, she is still able to tell her story to the reader.¹⁰²⁷

Chapter twenty-eight shows the same qualities as the one discussed above. Having been diagnosed with diabetes two, which Savannah sees as "a wake-up call to finally get healthy"¹⁰²⁸ in the end, first she becomes resentful about her extensive self-indulgence in the opening lines. Her inner monologue consisting of short sentences contains also swear words and she even talks to herself, "I have always said yes to Savannah, and now look at the price I'm going to have to pay."¹⁰²⁹ The passage is well contrasted with the rest of the chapter in which she depicts her trip to Paris as a reflector-character.

The impression of schematisation resulted from the above described regular employment of narrative patterns is not refined by the fact that there are no repetitions of the same event. In the chapters narrated by the authorial voice the reader learns much also from the vivid communication among the teenage children with, e.g., Tarik.¹⁰³⁰ Despite that, the reader encounters regularity within the variation of the narrative situation during the course of the narrative process in the novel, and the lengthy descriptions of the episodic characters¹⁰³¹ together with the dialogues they perform, which have no essential function in the further development of the main plot, slow down the pace of the book.

Again, the mimetic-dramatic (dialogue) forms and the narrative one alter regularly in chapters told by the authorial voice; dialogues and occasional inner monologues characterise chapters in which Robin and Savannah speak. In both, dialogues outbalance other forms beyond any doubt. Meanwhile these prove to be effective in some chapters, for instance in

¹⁰²⁵ "This heat will certainly do it to you," reads in the opening lines. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 76. Emphasis added.

¹⁰²⁶ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 278.

¹⁰²⁷ Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 278–281.

¹⁰²⁸ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 322.

¹⁰²⁹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 317.

¹⁰³⁰ It is particularly visible how the network of relationships among the major and minor characters operates for the narration in chapter six in which they spread the news of Marvin's decease either in person or via telephone. Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 76–82. Sometimes Sparrow babysits Tarik and Nickida's children, she also communicates with Taylor who is approximately of the same age. Taylor proves to be the new gossip of the family, sharing whatever news she knows, informing the reader about what happened while Bernadine was in Tucson. This is visible mainly in chapter thirty-two in which Bernadine returns home; in the same chapter Taylor and Sparrow discuss Robin's marriage.

¹⁰³¹ Both direct and indirect description is used to tell the reader details about Nickida's appearance and personal traits on pages 54–56. The same cannot be said about page 143 where in the description of Taylor's appearance the authorial narrator makes use of the second person pronoun you and makes witty observations.

chapter thirty in which excited reactions of numerous characters to the hurricane require certain amount of drama,¹⁰³² or there are brilliant dialogues between Savannah and her husband Isaac which reveal how and why love has been fading away from their relationship.¹⁰³³ In the rest of the book, dialogues are probably overused. The reason is that they become one of McMillan's indirect characterisation strategies. In any case, much of what was said about the prevailing dialogues and dramatic action in *Waiting to Exhale* is true about the sequel.

Still, Savannah is provided with most space again,¹⁰³⁴ being the character with the largest capability of insight. Her storytelling both begins the novel in the same in-medias-res manner as in *Waiting to Exhale*. The fact that Savannah and Robin function as reflectors-characters makes the reader perceive the fictional world and objects in it predominantly through their eyes: the reader is granted a direct insight into their inner thoughts and somewhat agitated states of mind. Gloria and Bernadine's parts are characterised by the same invisible authorial narration, but this time the narrator's voice seems to be somewhat less audible due to the fact that there are not many subtle transmissions between the authorial and personal narrative situations as it was stated above.¹⁰³⁵ A passage where Gloria reflects on the harmful effect of the negligence of her body for months after her husband's death, addressing herself, "You can't trick your body, because it's smarter than you are,"¹⁰³⁶ is a mere refreshing exception to the rigorously applied narrative pattern.

In both novels there is a tendency towards differentiation of the narrator in the authorial narrative situation and that of the individual characters. An opposing tendency can be found in the modern novel, as Stanzel observes, calling the phenomenon "the colloquialization of the narrator's language." The technique minimizes the differences between the narrator's and character's speech.¹⁰³⁷ (Free indirect style can be also simulated by a stylistic niveau which approximates colloquial speech; in other words, it approaches the spoken language which is not only syntactically simpler.) Use of this technique of "stylistic downgrading of the authorial language" and assimilation of the speech and thought of the characters results in a suppression of differences between the authorial and the free indirect style, which gives the reader the impression that "a figural narrative situation already predominates."¹⁰³⁸ This technique is used only in chapter six when Gloria contemplates her husband's death and whether it was avoidable in a might-have-been manner.¹⁰³⁹

The same strategy of shifts between the present and past tenses of a corresponding aspect is employed in *Getting to Happy*, too. The demarcation lines for them, however, are mostly the chapters,¹⁰⁴⁰ which also contributes to schematisation of the sequel. The use of past tense narrative in the sixth chapter is a good example of a thematically motivated strategy,

¹⁰³² Namely Robin's monologues, her dialogues with Michael and other characters, as well as phone calls are evenly distributed.

¹⁰³³ Cf. chapters one and five: McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 1–17 and 64–74.

¹⁰³⁴ Savannah functions a reflector in nine chapters and Robin in eight; the authorial narrative situations are used in Gloria's seven and the same number of Bernadine's chapters.

¹⁰³⁵ The only exception is Bernadine's imaginary discussion with Marlina, a similarly troubled protagonist of the endless television series "Days of Our Lives" in chapter twelve titled Soap Opera Digest in which she is lonely in the empty house and apparently chooses Marlina as an addressee, since there is no one else to talk to.

¹⁰³⁶ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 208.

¹⁰³⁷ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 194.

¹⁰³⁸ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 195.

¹⁰³⁹ Cf. chapter six, McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 75–77.

¹⁰⁴⁰ There are several exceptions. In chapter three the first passage that contains a phone call in which Bernadine learns the truth about James takes place six years before the sequel begins, and is why past tenses are used in the mimetic passages; then the rest of the chapter is narrated in present tenses. Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 32–38. Similarly, present and past tenses are used within chapter thirty in separate passages.

too: the chapter contains not only Gloria's memories of her suddenly deceased husband but also some details which are new even for the fans of *Waiting to Exhale*.¹⁰⁴¹ Savannah's contemplation of her lifestyle and present as well as future is written in present tense in chapter twenty-nine, meanwhile her activities in Paris are described in the past one. The shift from past tense in one passage to present one in another in the very last chapter creates the effect of immediacy on the reader where he/she is informed about the protagonists' future plans.

Similarly effective passages, however, are rather scarce in the rest of the book. As a result, general statements or spatio-temporal details are not contrasted with passages of immediacy and urgency. It is then possible to identify with the statement that "[u]fortunately, the beloved cast isn't given a story worthy of them; instead, this reunion reads like catalogue of personal catastrophes annotated with very long, rambling discussions on simple drama than character."¹⁰⁴² Daley is one of the few reviewers who even comment on the narrative pattern: the chapters take the protagonists "on one at a time; four plot threads blend when the sisters get together."¹⁰⁴³ (These are chapters are eleven, twenty-two, and the last three ones. While in the first book there is an apparent tendency to shorten evenly the last four chapters, in *Getting to Happy* this is not the case; it might be of some interest that chapter thirty-five, titled Wedding Dress, occupies two pages only.)

9.8 Plot and Ending

A significant space of the introductory chapters is devoted to a combination of deconstructing events from the first novel, and simultaneously drawing the reader's attention to the dramatic action of the sequel. (Narrative passages fulfil this function in Gloria and Bernadine's parts of the story, and inner monologues—as explained above—do so for Savannah and Robin.) Divorces, betrayals, and other means are used in order to give the reader a picture of where the protagonists find themselves.¹⁰⁴⁴ Despite the twists in the plot, the story flow is lacking any surprises; for example, Nickida's devastating characters development follows Gloria's suspicious observations of her daughter-in-law.¹⁰⁴⁵ The plot remains pushed by characters, through dialogues, and phone conversations—similarly to the first novel; in addition, emails, voice messages, or messages Robin exchanges online with her potential partners, etc. are added in *Getting to Happy*.

In Iser's opinion, a serial novel forces certain form of reading and aesthetic perception upon the reader. In this kind of a novel—the same could, as a matter of fact, be said about a sequel to any novel, including *Waiting to Exhale*—the interruptions tend to be more calculated than those that take place for external reader's reasons. Such instruments are based on the author's intention, and by means of interruptions the reader is forced to use his/her imagination and anticipate what is to follow in a more intense way than in connected reading.¹⁰⁴⁶ Alternating voices and episodic open miniclimaxes in *Getting to Happy* have precisely the same effect of non-specificity on the readers.¹⁰⁴⁷ (As a matter of fact, Kirkus

¹⁰⁴¹ Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 75–85.

¹⁰⁴² Review of *Getting to Happy*, *Publishers Weekly*, 25.

¹⁰⁴³ Daley, "'Getting to Happy' book review."

¹⁰⁴⁴ For example, six years before the readers revisit Bernadine Harris-Wheeler, she finds out her husband James (or Jesse) has been married simultaneously to two women.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 54–56. An exception to that might possibly be Kathleen's abandonment of Taylor, the daughter she has with John, to London.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Wolfgang Iser, "Apelová struktura textů: Nedourčenost jako podmínka účinku literární prózy," in *Čtenář jako výzva: Výbor z prací kostnické školy recepční estetiky*, ed. Miroslav Červenka (Brno: Host, 2001), 49.

¹⁰⁴⁷ At the end of the chapter Fourteen Years), for instance, McMillan appeals to the reader by means of non-specificity: due to Gloria's intuition, she can feel her husband is dead, knowing more than the authorial voice actually reveals. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 63.

Review finds the book “[f]ull of sitcom moments.”¹⁰⁴⁸) Page claims that some readers may feel that the novel does not “offer many surprises,” since “[t]he ladies learn to undo their vices, to visualize better lives and, through meditation, to breathe. And while this makes sense, in terms of the characters, it feels somewhat anticlimactic given the earlier chapters.” Still, Page finds “an integrity that isn’t compromised” in the book, which makes her come to the conclusion that McMillan “clearly respects her characters and her readers, too.”¹⁰⁴⁹

The reader identifies with the protagonists’ anger and frustration; on the other hand, due to his/her adherence to the rules of the formula of chick lit and certain desire for a happy ending, he/she partly wants the protagonists to emerge as victorious at any price. At the same time, taking into account the amount of women characters in *Waiting to Exhale* and especially its sequel, a collective happy ending is more than likely to ruin the playful and subversive tone of the novels. The reader’s conflicting emotions are what keeps his/her attention alert, simultaneously, his/her readiness for the termination of the process is prevented, as he/she focuses on the miniclimaxes presented in the book.

At the end signs of hope and renewal appear similarly to the first book, “[i]t’s a girls’ night;” the proceeds from the dancing the four friends take part in will go to the Katrina victims. A sense of renewal and something to look forward to in the form of an activity of a special meaning for them rewards all four. Robin goes back to college, Bernadine enrolls in a one-year programme at the Culinary Institute, Gloria and Joseph have found a new place for Oasis. Savannah heads to New Orleans, and is going to take part in a do-it-yourself Household Survival course.¹⁰⁵⁰ When the DJ plays “Everybody Dance Now,” they leave their fancy shoes that make their feet hurt under the table and enjoy themselves.¹⁰⁵¹

9.9 Humour

It is possible to say that the overall tone of the sequel is somewhat more serious than in *Waiting to Exhale*. On one hand, the four African American women have reached certain social status and have gone through various experiences, which prevents them from the necessity to intensely ridicule institutions, oppression, existing rules, etc. At the same time, they face numerous problems to which they are helpless, and therefore have a more bitter and disillusioned attitude to life. Still, McMillan skilfully combines the female and feminist sorts of humour. To do that, she describes the conditions in which the characters live, specifying their limits, but makes them question the general frames (as suggested by Eco) and laws of the world. Their humour is subversive and operates from inside, undermining the existent laws. The freedom of laughing at themselves and “proper” behaviour for women becomes even more important in the characters’ middle age. Similarly to the first book, the author is laughing with them, not at them.

In addition to what Kaufman terms female humour (with its “that’s life” kind of attitude) in combination with (self-)subversive humour, examples of puns, hyperbole, irony and self-irony, and absurd humour can be found—these are basically the same strategies as in the first novel. For example, on the day of their fourteenth wedding anniversary, the following conversation takes place between Gloria and Marvin.

“I hope you remember what I asked you not to do?” (Gloria)

“I can’t hear you!” (Marvin)

“I’m not kidding, Marvin. Don’t you spend a dime on me! Do you understand?”

(He pretends not to be able to hear her again.) “Did you say you’re gonna drop a dime on me?”¹⁰⁵²

¹⁰⁴⁸ “McMillan, Terry: Getting to Happy,” *Kirkus Reviews*.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Page, “‘Getting to Happy,’ Terry McMillan’s Sequel to ‘Waiting to Exhale.’”

¹⁰⁵⁰ Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 367–368.

¹⁰⁵¹ Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 373.

¹⁰⁵² McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 52–53.

Hyperbole as well as understatements can result in a comic effect: trying to suggest a dinner together, Savannah says, “Look, Robin, why can’t we just go to a cool restaurant and have a good meal?” Robin replies, “You mean like dinner?” “Yeah, and we could use like a knife and fork, too.”¹⁰⁵³ Comic effect is often reached by puns and use of words with multiple meanings: Bernadine frowns upon Robin’s online dating activities, calling one of the men Robin communicates with “Hark Angel” instead of DarkAngel.¹⁰⁵⁴ Figurative language and language comic are also represented: Savannah glosses, “[a]s soon as I get over my boredomitis—and now divorcitis—I intend to start taking much better care of myself.”¹⁰⁵⁵ Robin’s self-mockery is apparent from her remark, “I’m now an official member of the C.R.S.—Can’t Remember Shit Club.”¹⁰⁵⁶ Clichés can become a source of humour, too. Independently on one another, the girlfriends as well as Savannah’s mother, and Sheila hope she has brought them a bottle of a French expensive perfume from her trip.¹⁰⁵⁷

Men become targets of female humour again in the novel. Robin makes a comical summary of the “crepazoids” she has “met” online: “everything from convicted felons to religious fanatics, con artists who ask for loans, married guys with children, middle-aged men who still live with their parents, senior citizens, the unemployed or unemployable, the uneducated, or just plain dumb, a few who’d never had sex, and fat or ugly men—sometimes they’re one and the same.”¹⁰⁵⁸ Humour resulting from a rude remark which draws attention to Gloria’s increasing weight is to be found, too: one of her employees dares to ask her, “And you? What are you doing these days besides eating?”¹⁰⁵⁹ A typical example of female humour is related to the situation when a car accident occurs. Staring at the damage Sparrow has done to Robin’s car and garage by accident, she “cover[s her] mouth and “actually start[s] laughing.” She even finds herself “trying to picture Sparrow driving through a wall when she’s supposed to be going backward.” Knowing there has been no damage done to her daughter, she finds the situation funny, and is not angry with her shaken daughter. The situation is absurd in a way: the accident happens the very same day when Sparrow receives her driving licence.¹⁰⁶⁰

9.10 Language and Orality Features in the Novel

The increase of minor characters from distinctive socio-economic backgrounds and age groups requires that McMillan carefully considers the linguistic and stylistic choices necessary to make. As a result, for example, different vocabulary and structures are employed by the teenage daughters (Taylor and Sparrow); the way the middle-class characters express themselves differs to a large extent from the language of street spoken by the bootleg movies “hoodlum” distributors who are approximately twenty,¹⁰⁶¹ or the way Savannah and Robin’s elderly mothers generally speak.¹⁰⁶² Again, the author has remained faithful to the fruitful

¹⁰⁵³ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 132.

¹⁰⁵⁴ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 186.

¹⁰⁵⁵ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 218.

¹⁰⁵⁶ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 260.

¹⁰⁵⁷ The different ways they express their common wish speak volumes about them, for instance, Bernadine does not care whether the given perfume is expensive. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 338–340.

¹⁰⁵⁸ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 116.

¹⁰⁵⁹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 210.

¹⁰⁶⁰ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 188–189.

¹⁰⁶¹ Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 169.

¹⁰⁶² Despite that, Savannah is addressed “sista girl” in a phone call by her mother who is kept “up on the hippest of everything,” that is—among others—the way the black youth (her grandchildren) speak; she also keeps up with the latest forms of communication, sending emails and text messages to her somewhat surprised daughter. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 125.

combination of the urban black vernacular combined with standard English, which makes the novel accessible for numerous readers of different ethnic groups.

Smitherman's theory of four basic communicative modes (as applied by Richards) and dealt with in the previous analysis is, therefore, also well applicable on *Getting to Happy*. Again, McMillan engages the reader in a call and response process of reading, which means that the book is written in a conversational tone. Speaking directly to the reader and counting on his/her reactions, she makes use of different layers of connotative meanings.¹⁰⁶³ Emphasis (which often can also be interpreted in different ways) is put on certain ideas or notions by means of italics, e.g., "It looked like temporary housing was *finally* starting to happen since George Bush had *finally* come home from his fucking vacation and *finally* declared a state of emergency. I'll be so glad when we get a new president."¹⁰⁶⁴ It is obvious McMillan is far from being apolitical in *Getting to Exhale*. Ministories and episodic microclimaxes (whose great number is, again, related to the amount of characters) inform the reader about the spatio-temporal circumstances, but also push the story forward, entertain, and/or amuse.

Of course the novel contains many immediately comprehensible sentences which pass by almost without the reader's noticing them; still, McMillan often uses language that invites the reader to ponder her choice of words and consider the actual meaning.¹⁰⁶⁵ Similarly to the first novel, as for the figurative language, there are metaphors, hyperbole, irony, and self-irony used.¹⁰⁶⁶ The novels differ in the latter one's extensive use of quotational compounds that evoke informal atmosphere and familiar tone. For instance, Savannah says about Isaac, "I thought he was going to be my Mr. Once-and-for-all."¹⁰⁶⁷ When Bernadine returns from the rehab, her family members welcome her home two thirds of the paragraph which depicts this event are constituted by this device, which is probably too much.

The very same features of the spoken language which are listed in the previous analysis operate also in *Getting to Happy*. Vocatives become rather significant in Gloria and Marvin's big family: flirting over the phone, they address each other "baby;" "Blazie" functions as a pet name for Blaze, Gloria is called "gawa" (or also Gawa) by her grandchildren, and Marvin is spoken about as "Pops," Tarik is addressed "sugah" by his mother.¹⁰⁶⁸ Colloquial expressions replace euphemisms when something serious happens: to "check out" signifies to die.¹⁰⁶⁹ Short sentences in which the authorial voice tells Gloria's story when her husband passes away reflect her inability to concentrate on what is happening around her, trying desperately to turn back time and avoid her husband's death.¹⁰⁷⁰ Savannah's anger resulting from the lack of aid provided to those affected by the hurricane is

¹⁰⁶³ Shortly before Savannah's journey to Paris she is diagnosed with diabetes. The flight attendant offering refreshments on board asks, "Warm nuts, mademoiselle?" What first comes to her mind is "Yes, but not that kind." Food choices become vital for her, of course; simultaneously, it might also suggest certain protagonist's state of mind in relation to her disease. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 318.

¹⁰⁶⁴ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 336. On the one hand, Savannah is relieved some steps have been taken to help the African American people affected by the hurricane; on the other one, she lets her steam off, showing her anger to the reader.

¹⁰⁶⁵ When the four women discuss crossing the colour line, they use the word "pussy," which could possibly be related to sex, but also refer to the women themselves. Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 255.

¹⁰⁶⁶ The same creative use of the word "ass" can be traced in *Getting to Happy*. It can even have a positive connotative meaning and be used as an intensifier, e.g., "little bad-ass grandkids" or Sparrow's "smart-ass mouth." McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 14, 155. Figuratively, it functions also as a synecdoche: "Well, I'm taking it with or without your ass," and "I'm glad I divorced your sorry ass," Savannah says to Isaac. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 111, 252.

¹⁰⁶⁷ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 5.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 51–56. Similarly, Sparrow's grandmother calls her "sugar pie." Ibid., 158.

¹⁰⁶⁹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 81.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Cf. chapter six, McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 75–77.

also conveyed in shorter sentences,¹⁰⁷¹ meanwhile for more contemplative ideas, longer and complex sentences generally prove to be more suitable. The quality of dialogues fluctuates to some extent; the reviewers claim McMillan's "dialogue remains superb"¹⁰⁷² and "windy,"¹⁰⁷³ though.

The critique McMillan's first novel provoked for its profane language fortunately has not made her compromise the way the particular women protagonists speak in the sequel. Mostly, expletives are again uttered by Savannah and Bernadine¹⁰⁷⁴ when they find themselves in a state of rage and/or anger, as well as helplessness. Savannah is both angry and desperate to find out "much of New Orleans [is] under water" at the airport on her way back from Paris, calling the natural disaster "the bitch."¹⁰⁷⁵ Cavanaugh suggests, "[a]s in its predecessor, the bantering, snide remarks, earthy language, and sharp-tongue commentary of the women carry the book."¹⁰⁷⁶

Chitchatting with friends, they tackle a serious and very personal topic for Savannah, that is, her weight: she decides to learn to play golf for fun, and is also determined to lose ten pounds. She defends herself, "I'm not trying to win the fucking U.S. Open. I just want to learn how to hit that little ball in the hole and see what all the hoopla's about."¹⁰⁷⁷ The same kind of feelings lead other characters to the use of profane words. Reasoning the pros and cons of their age, Thora gives advice to Savannah, encouraging her to go to Paris: "Don't think. That's part of our problem. When we get to be our age we're too fucking practical. Just go and think about it once you've on the plane."¹⁰⁷⁸ To Bernadine's astonishment, Kathleen has left her teenage daughter. She reacts with the same uncompromised language she used in the first novel: "What do you mean, *she doesn't want her?* Her own daughter? That's the most ridiculous-sounding shit I've heard yet. How can you say that? ... I don't fucking believe this. How could she leave her own kid?"¹⁰⁷⁹ To leave a child is simply something beyond her comprehension: "*Me* I can understand. But not your child."¹⁰⁸⁰

Gloria, whose language has actually always differed from that of Bernadine and Savannah, complains about the way young African Americans speak; in particular, she comments on her employees who love rap and whose language she "couldn't stand: everybody [is] a bitch, a ho, a motherfucker or a fag."¹⁰⁸¹ The lexical choices the protagonists make change with their age, too. Savannah even suggests they "should stop calling each other bitches" and "agree not to refer to any woman—black or white or otherwise—this way."¹⁰⁸² When Gloria learns Dottie, one of the former leading members of BWOTM, has

¹⁰⁷¹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 336–337.

¹⁰⁷² Page, "'Getting to Happy,' Terry McMillan's Sequel to 'Waiting to Exhale.'"

¹⁰⁷³ "McMillan, Terry: Getting to Happy," *Kirkus Reviews*.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Bernadine knows her use of pills has been spinning out of her control; that is why she wakes up with the words "fuck" and "shit," McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 38, 39.

¹⁰⁷⁵ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 336. Savannah's dictionary becomes rather expletive when she discovers what her husband entertained himself with; Savannah herself states she gets more and more "pissed off than hurt," finding out detailed of what she calls "cheating," "[M]y husband has been having cybersex with hundreds if not thousands of women and the son-of-a-bitch has two names. He's Isaac Hathaway to me. But EbonyKing to all these nasty bitches he's been jerking off with and having virtual sex with via the little webcam attachment I gave him last Christmas." McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 11–13.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Cavanaugh, review of *Getting to Happy*, 76.

¹⁰⁷⁷ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 139. Cf. also *ibid.*, 247: "I won't lie. This is some hard shit to go through."

¹⁰⁷⁸ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 223.

¹⁰⁷⁹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 105.

¹⁰⁸⁰ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 106.

¹⁰⁸¹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 165.

¹⁰⁸² McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 255. It is obvious from Savannah's affectionate statement, "'You guys will always be my bitches,' the word can have multiple connotations, especially when addressing. Collins provides a detailed analysis of the expression, its origin, and the way its use defeminises black women, cf. Patricia Hill

passed away, she feel terrible, knowing “[s]he has called Dottie that awful *B* word. Never again would it slip and pass her lips.”¹⁰⁸³

9.11 Values

The values *Getting to Happy* presents are not very far from those in the first novel and other lady lit books either. In addition, the wisdom gained from experience goes hand-in-hand with different priorities and accentuation of various other values. Compassion, thankfulness, hospitality, devotion, trustworthiness, generosity, and commitment play key role in the characters’ relationships. Responsibility for one’s deeds and decisions sets the tone from the very beginning of the novel, as Kierkegaard’s statement “We create ourselves by our choices.” serves as one of the three mottos preceding the author’s note. After years John brings himself to admit that he not only “may have something to do with” Bernadine’s problems, but actually is “the one who disappointed [her] on a grand level ... and started” them, not James. For John, it is important that she knows he accepts some responsibility “for the invisible bruises [she’s] been walking around with all these years.”¹⁰⁸⁴

Hope, faith, and tolerance, together with generosity, willingness to share, conviviality help the characters to live fully. Page has a point when she says “[t]he outrage and the disappointment so vividly portrayed in the opening chapters must ultimately melt into understanding, even love, if possible.”¹⁰⁸⁵ If any of the characters, however, is not inclined to overcoming the harmful past as well as consequences of the present catastrophes, he/she prolongs his/her suffering. It takes Bernadine many years to make sense of this: “It would be so much easier if she could just stop hating James, but she can’t. She doesn’t know where to put the past. And the lingering pain. Doesn’t know what do with either one.” But whatever “it takes to free herself, she’s willing to do it.”¹⁰⁸⁶ Her friends, John, as well as her children and John Jr.’s pregnant girlfriend whom he is to marry help her to find a path to a meaningful existence.

In a generous and understanding way, Bernadine “reminds herself to keep her middle-aged maternal thoughts to herself, ... Besides, she knows Onika will tell her [about her lesbianism] anyway.”¹⁰⁸⁷ Similarly, Gloria “doesn’t want to give her son any advice unless he asks for it” when he finds out his wife Nickida has been having an affair with her ex-husband. “In all honesty, Gloria doesn’t really know what she’ll tell him to do if he does ask, because she’s not sure what she’d do if she were in his shoes.”¹⁰⁸⁸ (The fact that Tarik cannot trust his wife anymore makes him file for divorce in the end.¹⁰⁸⁹)

Much has been said about Savannah’s interest in real contemporary problems of the African American community. In one of the common chapters the girlfriends agree on the fact that “[i]t’s sad but true. None of us does anything for the other folks the way we used to when we were in *Black Women on the Move*.”¹⁰⁹⁰ Paradoxically enough, Katrina puts them to motion from their passivity shortly after they claim this. Empathy, solidarity, resourcefulness, and help to other people remain among the most important values. The way

Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 123–130.

¹⁰⁸³ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 297.

¹⁰⁸⁴ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 273–274.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Page, “‘Getting to Happy,’ Terry McMillan’s Sequel to ‘Waiting to Exhale.’”

¹⁰⁸⁶ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 193–194.

¹⁰⁸⁷ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 43.

¹⁰⁸⁸ To make things worse, they only find out when she is caught red-handed by one of the children, having sex in her and Tarik’s bedroom. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 233.

¹⁰⁸⁹ Cf. McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 237–238.

¹⁰⁹⁰ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 245.

not only each of the four protagonists reacts to the hurricane disaster reveals much about them. Robin and Sparrow “had to do something,” collecting clothes, blankets, etc “[they] could live without.”¹⁰⁹¹ To Savannah the catastrophe matters both professionally and personally; it becomes a good reason for Jasper who volunteers to offer a helping hand as a surgeon. All of them, of course, send “what they [can].”¹⁰⁹²

Optimism, stamina, activeness, and resourcefulness should be ideally accompanied with patience. Joseph is able to look on the bright side when the rent increase for Oasis comes, saying to Gloria it “‘is really an opportunity to make a change. Maybe you should thank’” them.¹⁰⁹³ As Savannah puts it for all the girlfriends, “[w]e get divorced, we get conned, someone who we love dies, or we can’t find anybody to love us or somebody breaks our heart and we realize this fairy tale *ain’t* fair. So we suffer. We feel like shit and we want it to hurry up and be over, but there are no shortcuts.”¹⁰⁹⁴ Bernadine “hears herself say” she has not tried to stop resenting James, holding him hostage, and blaming him for her pain, the same thing she previously did with John.¹⁰⁹⁵ McMillan herself observes, “All people go through their own forms of hell,” but they cannot be told how long to grieve. “[T]here is room for all of us to recover;” and especially women have the ability to get over almost anything and resurrect themselves.¹⁰⁹⁶

And—above all—forgiveness which should come from both sides is a red thread of the book. As Savannah realises there is no hate whatsoever in her toward Isaac, so he expresses his wisfulness and good intentions: “If you meet somebody else—and I pray that you do, Savannah, seriously—loosen up and lighten up. Be as silly as you can be sometimes.”¹⁰⁹⁷ In an 2010 interview McMillan observes that a lot of women in their fifties suffer from emptiness and loneliness;¹⁰⁹⁸ some of them (have) got divorced, meanwhile others have never been married, which they simply accept in a matter-of-fact manner. McMillan strongly disagrees with such stance, herself having been “through a lot,” but recovered due to her ability and willingness to forgive her ex-husband Jonathan Plummer. In her opinion, it is not simply time that heals people’s wounds, but once she became a person she did not like herself, she realised she had “more power over [her] well-being,” for she “had lost [her] centre over the actions of someone else,” that is of Plummer.¹⁰⁹⁹

Not only Bernadine learns something from Taylor who shows her how her self-medication harms her as well as other women, but also Sparrow teaches her mother a lesson: “‘You have to open your heart and learn how to forgive others when they disappoint you, Mom. Haven’t you always told me that?’” Robin can but only agree that her daughter “is right. She should be able to find out who her father is and what parts of him she might be able to love.”¹¹⁰⁰ It is shown that vindictiveness does not make the protagonist’s lives any better. Despite the enormous pain, “[t]he idea that three young men would spend the rest of their

¹⁰⁹¹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 327.

¹⁰⁹² McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 352.

¹⁰⁹³ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 204. Similarly, Robin states “they have no idea what a favour they’ve done for” her when given a sack. *Ibid.*, 264.

¹⁰⁹⁴ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 129.

¹⁰⁹⁵ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 275.

¹⁰⁹⁶ McMillan, “EXCERPT: ‘Getting to Happy’ by Terry McMillan.”

¹⁰⁹⁷ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 95.

¹⁰⁹⁸ The same fear of loneliness Gloria experiences in *Waiting to Exhale* is now faced by Robin who admits she is “‘a little scared that once Sparrow graduates and leaves for college,’” she will “‘feel a little anxiety about the thought of being by [herself] and working at the same old job, doing the same old thing.”” McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 114.

¹⁰⁹⁹ McMillan, “EXCERPT: ‘Getting to Happy’ by Terry McMillan.”

¹¹⁰⁰ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 231–232.

young lives in prison was not all gratifying to Gloria. It wouldn't bring her husband back."¹¹⁰¹ Savannah wishes she could take back what she said to Isaac about regretting ever marrying him: he filled years of her life "with love, magic and comfort. No one can ever take that from [her]. Not even him."¹¹⁰²

Logically, McMillan has good reasons for rejecting to be labelled as a chick lit author, because there are various aspects of this kind of literature she has been trying to avoid in her work. These could be summed up as chick lit's uniformity, commodity roots, and deception of its women readers. As far as the first aspect is concerned, the choice to write about four different African American women with different social backgrounds, personal traits, tastes, jobs, aspirations, vices, and virtues who primarily reject to live according to what is expected from them is evidence against the very idea of uniformity. Second, "[c]hick lit's denigration stems in part from its gendered reclamations of the novel's commodity roots. The connection goes beyond an interest in fashion to a full-fledged embracing of commercialism in all its manifestations." As it was argued above, the author does quite the opposite, showing consequences of the characters' addiction to material goods, shopping, or overgrooming. (On the other hand, McMillan makes no secret of intentions to speak to mass audience, or promoting her books by, e.g., providing links to vendors on her official website.) Third, as it was shown, her works mostly do not resemble "the escapist and fantastic plotlines that dominate much of the [black American popular] market."¹¹⁰³ What is more, she does the very opposite than for what Germaine Greer repudiates popular romance writers who by presenting an "utterly ineffectual heroine[s]"¹¹⁰⁴ in her novels that "thwart female liberation aimed at counteracting the fiction's capacity to breed self-deception."¹¹⁰⁵ The above depicted characters are far from being masochistic victims or slaves to any romantic myths.

As Wells says, "[l]iterary fiction's openness to interpretation depends in a large part on the complexity of its characters, which results not merely from competing impulses but also from fundamentally opposed traits."¹¹⁰⁶ The dynamic protagonists of *Getting to Happy* are often torn between loyalties to partners, children, jobs, parents, and themselves. The portrayal of such conflicting desires remains one of the strengths of the book, since it attempts to allow space for ambiguity and multiple reader's interpretations.

Still, the distance between the horizon of the reader's expectations and the novel itself, is incomparably smaller than in case of *Waiting to Exhale*. The fact that in the sequel McMillan does not make compromises and remains faithful to the characters, overall tone, and some of the techniques used in the first book must logically lead to confirming the reader's familiar sentiments and making the unusual experiences palatable as sensations. At the same time, however, there is no doubt she encourages dreams and hope, and raises numerous moral problems.

Instead of a serious, well-argued critical reaction as it was in case of *Waiting to Exhale*, the reviews are limited to plot synopses, final verdicts, and vague statements such as "[f]ans of McMillan will enjoy catching up with this ensemble of friends and, as this novel has been optioned for a movie, can look forward to seeing the transition to film."¹¹⁰⁷ Similarly, "[a]lthough the writing, delivered in girlfriend parlance, is at times as predictable as

¹¹⁰¹ McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 83–84.

¹¹⁰² McMillan, *Getting to Happy*, 337.

¹¹⁰³ Dietzel, "The African American novel and popular culture," 162.

¹¹⁰⁴ Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 185.

¹¹⁰⁵ Harzewski, "Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners," in *Chick Lit*, 36.

¹¹⁰⁶ Wells, "Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History," in *Chick Lit*, 66.

¹¹⁰⁷ Vanessa Bush, review of *Getting to Happy*. Cf. also Cavanaugh, review of *Getting to Happy*, 76.

the plotline, McMillan fans won't be disappointed."¹¹⁰⁸ Also, Cavanaugh concludes her review with stating that the fans of *Waiting to Exhale*, "many of now middle-aged themselves, will want to cheer on the women in this sequel."¹¹⁰⁹ Even if *Getting to Happy* shared most of the qualities of the book it relates to, these would be probably ignored.

In addition, as McMillan herself complained in one of the numerous interviews, the reviewers put more emphasis on her than a careful analysis of what she produces. "The back story to all of this, of course, is McMillan's own life," since before the novel begins, she includes a letter to readers that acknowledges her own struggles, having gone through a messy, public divorce,¹¹¹⁰ Thomas states. The truth is that the acknowledgements (situated at the end of the novel) contain a remark that "[t]he last few years have been rough. It's hard to write when you're angry, or numb. It's hard to do anything when you're angry or numb," but the above statement is just another example of an attempt to read between the lines and scandalise the author's life, ignoring the main aim of the passage is to express her gratitude to her son Solomon "more than anyone."¹¹¹¹

¹¹⁰⁸ Thomas, "Fiction Review: 'Getting to Happy' by Terry McMillan."

¹¹⁰⁹ Cavanaugh, review of *Getting to Happy*, 76.

¹¹¹⁰ Thomas, "Fiction Review: 'Getting to Happy' by Terry McMillan."

¹¹¹¹ McMillan, Acknowledgements, *Getting to Happy*.

10 What a Sista Should Do

I wonder if she prays for me and Luke. I remember a preacher saying once that you can't hate someone you're praying for. Yvonne Hastings¹¹¹²

Due to the fact that the last two analyses serve as a means of comparison with McMillan's breakthrough novels and reflect the ramification of the second wave of (black) chick lit, this chapter follows the same pattern as the previous one. What is, however, different is the inclusion of information about the author of the examined book and the subgenre of chick lit, that is, Christian chick lit (or church lit, if you wish). The reader and critic's horizon of expectations is taken into account as well before proceeding to the actual analysis.

10.1 Tiffany L. Warren: Introductory Information

The author is also a playwright and songwriter. Warren basically writes three types of fiction: popular young adult fiction; her novels and plays aimed at adult audience which concentrate on "African American women and their relationships," including "a spiritual component."¹¹¹³ She was born in 1974 and lives in Dallas, Texas, with her husband Brent Warren¹¹¹⁴ and five children. Together with him, she co-founded Warren Productions in 2006 and Faith and Fiction Retreat a year later,¹¹¹⁵ which is a yearly conference where the audience gets the opportunity to connect with some of their favourite faith-based authors. The retreat's Pitch Session is a hit with aspiring authors, because they are able to present their book ideas to industry deal makers.¹¹¹⁶

Similarly to McMillan, Warren's early literary activities are influenced by her membership of the Harlem Writers Guild; however, from the beginning, she engages in writing Christian fiction, to be more precise, Christian chick lit (church lit) and two series of novels for younger readers. Her debut novel *What a Sista Should Do* was released in June 2005, and has ministered to over 50,000 readers. The second book, *Farther than I Meant to Go, Longer than I Meant to Stay* from 2006 became a national bestseller. Among her other novels, there are *The Bishop's Daughter* (2009), *In the Midst of All* (2010), and *A Slim Chance* (2011) which is included in the anthology *A Woman's Revenge* (2013).¹¹¹⁷ In 2011, she published a prequel to her first novel, titled *Wolf in Minister's Clothing*, as well as *Chocolate Dreams*.¹¹¹⁸ In February 2013, the sequel to her first novel was released, *Don't Tell a Soul* in which the same women protagonists are "back with a whole new set of Sister to Sister issues." She has written sixteen novels including two "young adult series" published by

¹¹¹² Tiffany L. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do* (New York: Warren Books, 2005), 150–151.

¹¹¹³ "Tiffany L. Warren," *Contemporary Authors Online* (Detroit: Gale, 2013). *Literature Resource Center*, accessed May 14, 2013, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1000300517&v=2.1&u=opave&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.

¹¹¹⁴ Her husband is a minister, speaker, and evangelist. "Black Book Chat with Tiffany L. Warren," Rawsistaz Lit Group, accessed June 4, 2013, <http://www.rawsistaz.com/blog/black-book-talks/chat-with-tiffany-warren/>. (Rawsistaz Lit Group was founded in 2000 to support and promote the work of African American authors. The group, on and offline, represent close to six hundred readers, writers, aspiring writers, and others interested in literacy and the impact on black communities. Cf. Rawsistaz Lit Group, accessed June 4, 2013, <http://www.rawsistaz.com/>.)

¹¹¹⁵ "Tiffany L. Warren," *Contemporary Authors Online*.

¹¹¹⁶ "About Tiffany," Tiffany L. Warren's official website, accessed June 5, 2013, http://www.tiffanylwarren.com/?page_id=30.

¹¹¹⁷ Cf. Sherry L. Lewis et al., *A Woman's Revenge* (Urban Christian), 2013.

¹¹¹⁸ "Tiffany L. Warren," *Contemporary Authors Online*.

Kensington Dafina (*So For Real* and *The Fab Life*) under the pen name Nikki Carter, each of the series about African American teenagers, containing four novels.¹¹¹⁹ She is the author of two gospel musical plays, *What a Sista Should Do—The Stage Play*, which debuted in Cleveland at the famed Allen Theatre, based on her debut novel,¹¹²⁰ and *The Replacement Wife*.¹¹²¹

Warren herself suggests she has become a writer “because of her love of reading.” The writers she admires include Octavia E. Butler, Toni Morrison, Jean Auel, Stephen King, Terry McMillan,¹¹²² and Judy Blume. Her writings spring primarily from her imagination, but “there’s a little bit of my life in every plot and a little bit of me in every character,” she says at her home page. Nikki Carter, as Warren explains in her essay for the web site Brown Bookshelf, “is [her] alter-ego, ... the fun teenagery person that still lives inside of [her].”¹¹²³ Her basic strategy for the series, in Jones’ opinion, is to depict appealing protagonists “surrounded by a well-drawn supporting cast,” so that “the readers need not be familiar with earlier entries in the series.”¹¹²⁴

When it comes to reviews and critical attention paid to Warren’s Christian chick lit novels, again (as it is in case of *Getting to Happy*), the reviews of her books are limited to plot synopses and final verdicts, or brief notes stating that, e.g., “*What a Sista Should Do* has been adapted into a stage play, which should garner her new readers.”¹¹²⁵ As a result, more attention has actually been paid to the play than the book so far. The same, however, cannot be said about the two series of popular young adult fiction mentioned above when it comes to thorough reviews.

10.2 Horizon of Expectations

Opposing forces operating within the subgenre of Christian chick lit are what the reader naturally expects. Taking into account what characterises (black) chick lit as such, perhaps the most intriguing question remains to what extent is the religion a focus of such novels, and how in particular they combine the religious with the secular. Similarly, Gelsomino asks, “Can church lit girls be as devoted to their Prada as they are to their prayer beads?”¹¹²⁶ Meanwhile the chick lit reader assumes that the book in his/her hands follows certain

¹¹¹⁹ Tiffany L. Warren’s official website, accessed June 5, 2013, <http://www.tiffanylwarren.com/>. According to a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor, the series “improves with each episode.” “Tiffany L. Warren,” *Contemporary Authors Online*.

¹¹²⁰ Keshia Dawn writes in her review of the play that “Warren Productions, started by the author and her husband, brought their stage play to Dallas with great anticipation. Performances were executed with near perfection full of church drama, marriage drama all the way to baby mama drama. *What A Sista Should Do* was well received by its audience; something that Warren had hoped for.” Keshia Dawn, “Review: ‘What A Sista Should Do’ at Friendship-West in Dallas,” *Dallas South News*, accessed June 2, 2013, <http://www.dallasouthnews.org/2011/04/18/review-what-a-sista-should-do-at-friendship-west-in-dallas/>.

Warren’s reaction follows: “My expectations for *What a Sista Should Do*, were definitely exceeded. ... We were very pleased with the support from the DFW theatre lovers,” she said. Qtd. in *ibid*.

¹¹²¹ Also the second play has appeared to sold out audiences in Dallas, and starred R&B Christopher Williams and Gary “Lil’ G” Jenkins. Their second musical *The Replacement Wife* debuted in Dallas with the Gospel and R&B legend Shirley Murdock and Tommy Ford. “About Tiffany.”

¹¹²² She adds, “I’m used to being the avid reader who wants to know all about her favorite author. I can’t tell you all how excited I was to meet Terry McMillan at the Miami Book Fair last year. Say what you want to about Terry, but anyone who can be pleasant and smile AND sign at least five hundred books in one setting has much character to be desired!” “Black Book Chat with Tiffany L. Warren,” Rawsistaz Lit Group, accessed June 4, 2013, <http://www.rawsistaz.com/blog/black-book-talks/chat-with-tiffany-warren/>.

¹¹²³ “Tiffany L. Warren,” *Contemporary Authors Online*.

¹¹²⁴ Qtd. in “Tiffany L. Warren,” *Contemporary Authors Online*.

¹¹²⁵ Nancy Milone Hill, review of *In the Midst of All*, by Tiffany L. Warren, *Library Journal*, February 15, 2010, 83.

¹¹²⁶ Qtd. in Ferris and Young, introduction to *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, 6.

strategies and insists on undermining the traditional patriarchy at least to some extent; the mainstream Christianity has become synonymous with traditional, i.e., family values. The reader expects the following to be dealt with in any Christian chick novel: how to follow and obey God's will and live a Godly life, how to be faithful to God in one's everyday life, what it means to do good works, what the Christian moral and ethical values are, and what values and virtues are taught in the Bible, what should be done to avoid sinning,—simply—how to live a life in Christ at the beginning of the 21st century.

Harlequin even offers a whole new line to Christian chick lit called Steeple Hill Café,¹¹²⁷ devoted entirely to this kind of literature. The editorial director, Joan Marlow Golan, characterises the heroine's challenge as to “face her dilemmas with faith and humor, turning to Jesus as the Ultimate Best Friend who will help her with—in the words of our tagline—‘life, faith, and getting it right.’”¹¹²⁸ A new web site ChristianChickLit.com, which is affiliated with Chicklitbooks.com and TeenChickLit.com, has been established in 2012. Its founder claims it is a site “specifically featuring Christian chick lit, including Christian teen lit” so that “Christians and other people who enjoy books with good morals, clean romance plots, God-centered story lines and little to no swearing would be able to find what they are looking for without having to wade through the other stuff.”¹¹²⁹

This kind of literature is defined as follows. “Christian chick lit novels are like regular chick lit novels, only the main characters are of the Christian faith and the story lines reflect this.” Furthermore, “[m]any of the plots involve romance along with the usual elements of friendship, work, motherhood, dieting, pregnancy, relocating to the city, and more, while the main character(s) try to stay true to their moral and religious values. Also known as *Church Chick Lit* and *Inspirational Chick Lit*.”¹¹³⁰ Whether—and if so, then how in particular—Warren's book fits this formula or offers any variation to it is the concern of the following subchapters.

10.3 Synopsis of the Novel

*What a Sista*¹¹³¹ *Should Do* is the first novel written by Tiffany L. Warren, and it centres on three African American women belonging to the same church, the New Faith House of Worship. The women struggle to live good and meaningful lives as well as negotiate their faith and relationships. A brief outline of the plot and introduction of the three major protagonists shed some overall light on the way not only relationships are portrayed in the book. Pam Lyons is an African American professional woman—out of necessity, though—who has carried the financial burden of the whole household due to her husband's inability to fulfil his dreams. Simultaneously, she takes care of their two small daughters, Cicely and Gretchen. She compensates for her dissatisfaction with the family and personal life by making God and the church the focal points of her life, which further frustrates her husband Troy. Troy Lyons has been working in the music industry but without any success. Their growing apart which

¹¹²⁷ The website slogan goes, “Life, faith and getting it right! If you're looking for hip, fun and smart fiction created specifically for modern and savvy women of faith then Steeple Hill Café books are just for you.” “Steeple Hill Caf,” Harlequin, accessed June 1, 2013, <http://www.harlequin.com/store.html?vcname=backlist&cid=334>.

¹¹²⁸ Qtd. in Ferris and Young, introduction to *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, 6.

¹¹²⁹ “Christian Chick Lit,” ChristianChickLit.com, accessed April 14, 2013, <http://christianchicklit.com/>. In addition, he “especially feel[s] it is important that Christian teens can find the kind of books they want without being bombarded by the regular teen chick lit genre, which admittedly is often full of backstabbing, full-on romantic scenes, swearing and even drinking and drug use.” “About Us,” ChristianChickLit.com, accessed April 14, 2013, <http://christianchicklit.com/about-us/>.

¹¹³⁰ “Christian Chick Lit.”

¹¹³¹ Again, it becomes vital to remind of various meanings associated with the word sister (and “sistah” in case of African American vernacular language) in this respect. Cf. the introduction.

continues to some extent despite the fact that he manages to make a substantial amount of money, is only solved by his car accident¹¹³² and the birth of their son, as well as his ultimate acceptance of faith. Wondering where their future lies, Pam learns both to love her partner and God, which is her greatest achievement. The second major character is twenty-seven-year-old Taylor Johnson, a single mother of Joshua, the result of an affair she had with Luke Hastings, who also happens to be a minister of the New Faith House of Worship and is married to Yvonne, the last major character. Thirty-nine-year old Yvonne Hastings thinks she has the perfect (but childless) life, not being aware of the fact that her husband Luke has been unfaithful to her for years not only with Taylor but also leading a parallel life with another woman he has an adult daughter with. When she learns about Taylor's child and who the father is, Yvonne aims her hatred at Taylor and, at first, believes her husband's lies about his affair. Only after Luke attacks his wife so violently that he nearly kills her, she finds the strength to face the truth and leaves him. Taylor is determined to find a partner for herself and a fatherly figure for Joshua; before that happens, "in the meantime," her plan is to serve God, as he is "calling her to do this, convinced the Lord will give her what she needs."¹¹³³

10.4 Form of the Novel

As Ferris and Young explain, Christian chick lit "seems to be picking up on many other chick-lit subgenres, with faith-based versions of adolescent chick lit, mommy lit, southern lit, and African-American lit all currently appearing."¹¹³⁴ But unlike *Waiting to Exhale* whose reading required looking at the novel as a successful example of a fresh blend of various genres, *What a Sista Should Do* can be classified as Christian black chick lit or "church lit," representing one of various subgenres of chick lit, as explained in chapter five. Similarly to other subgenres of chick lit, the book does not avoid the collage of literary and popular forms which lies, e.g., in its use of diary-like form.¹¹³⁵ Realism prevails over romance in the novel. And, of course, what it has in common with the other analysed books is that it is a girlfriend novel, one of the more positive reviews labels as a "must-read" one.¹¹³⁶

10.5 Setting in Time and Place

The novel's setting in time could be estimated at the turn of the 21st century; however, there are not any hints at contemporary events or any other extralinguistic realities which would make it possible to say for sure. It is stated various times that *What a Sista Should Do* is set in Cleveland; this urban setting's references do not go beyond the scenic description, though. The book covers approximately a year of its characters' lives.

10.6 Characters

It is of some interest that the devil is often blamed for the male and females characters' sins and unacceptable behaviour. Pam observes, "I'm not even going to respond to Troy, because

¹¹³² Pam considers the accident to be "a wake-up call" for her husband. "Having a near brush with death is enough to make anyone stand up and pay attention." She adds it is "past time for all of Troy's fast ways to cease and desist." Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 216.

¹¹³³ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 253.

¹¹³⁴ Ferris and Young, introduction to *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, 6.

¹¹³⁵ Synthesis of diverse popular and literary forms could possibly mean inclusion of statistics, magazine articles, television news, allusions to contemporary events, etc. entangled into the structure of the novel. No such merging of genres such as in *Getting to Happy* which would have an effect of authenticity, however, is used in the book.

¹¹³⁶ "Review of *What a Sista Should Do*," Goodreads.com, accessed June 2, 2013, <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/160363361>.

he is just allowing the devil to use him” in one of their frequent arguments.¹¹³⁷ As far as characterisation is concerned, Warren scarcely makes use of the direct one, preferring to examine and describe the deeds of the respective characters as well as the choices they make.

10.6.1 Women Characters

Chick lit novels usually concentrate on the middle- and upper-middle-class women protagonists, often aspiring to greater material resources, for “to remain average is not the goal of a chick lit protagonist.”¹¹³⁸ In certain sense, the same could be said about the novel: Pam and her husband gain a rather large sum of money in the course of *What a Sista Should Do*;¹¹³⁹ Yvonne has never even worked before she gets divorced. The only character struggling financially is Taylor whose situation, however, is largely self-imposed, for she has never demanded any sort of Luke’s participation in her son’s upbringing.¹¹⁴⁰ Still, her situation changes, because later the court orders Luke to pay for Joshua regularly.

Warren shares with McMillan that both depict characters who are focused on their goals and have a strong set of values. Before the women protagonists discover their friendship, they do not seem to have much in common but belonging to the same church, endeavouring to reach balance between their belief and living a good life, “doing whatever it takes to do the right thing.”¹¹⁴¹ It is their faith and willingness to contribute to their personal development on one hand, and their doubt in themselves on the other one that enable them to become dynamic and true-to-life. Each of them experiences a somewhat different psychic growth on their common way.

The indirect characterisation strategy chosen by Warren proves to be very effective. Yvonne’s remarks about Taylor’s looks both make the reader imagine what she looks like, and unveil the initial relationship between the characters before they become able to see more than one another’s surface. She observes, “[a]t first glimpse she looks like one of those girls in a rap video. Her clothes are fine.... It’s just that her body is a little bit too voluptuous for them. The girl has more curves than the law allows, and it seems like she got curvier after she had her baby. That jean skirt is hugging all kinds of hips and behind.” What is more, Yvonne admits she is “a bit jealous,” for she “could never fill out clothes like that with [her] bird legs and flat chest, although Luke never complained.”¹¹⁴² In return, Taylor thinks about Yvonne “she might be attractive if she didn’t look so country.”¹¹⁴³

In contrast to the previously analysed novels, the reader learns only a little about the protagonists’ (female) relatives in the opening chapters of the book, but discovers more gradually, as the plot of the novel unfolds. Yvonne comes from a conservative family where the visions of her mother of going to college were suppressed; Pam makes a mention of her mother’s “laughable” choices in men and how she “scoffed” at her “grandmother, who was herself married to a self-professed pimp.”¹¹⁴⁴ Taylor’s family background is dealt with below.

¹¹³⁷ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 8.

¹¹³⁸ Harzewski, introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 5.

¹¹³⁹ Namely, it is \$ 3,5 million; the Lyons couple becomes rich because a record company is interested in signing one of Troy’s artists to a recording contract.

¹¹⁴⁰ At the same time, Taylor herself is aware of the fact that “the woman is the one who ends up trapped,” explaining that her pregnancy was in no case an attempt to make Luke get a divorce and establish a family with her: “I’m not one of those women who would try and trap a man with a baby.” Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 11.

¹¹⁴¹ “*What a Sista Should Do*,” Curled Up With a Good Book, accessed June 6, 2013, <http://www.curledup.com/whataasis.htm>.

¹¹⁴² Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 24.

¹¹⁴³ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 60.

¹¹⁴⁴ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 53.

Pam has had more than enough of her husband's dreams whose inability to fulfil them puts her in the position of an involuntary black professional woman. Simultaneously, she shows little support and/or interest in his activities, and therefore she never goes to the clubs to hear him or his protégés play. Centring her life on the church is something that frustrates Troy, for he feels she should be spending more time with him and their two daughters. Meanwhile he is building his music career, she keeps herself busy climbing the corporate ladder and becoming the main breadwinner in the family. Despite being good at what she does, she is tired of having to "do it all" and not getting the same from Troy in return. Both recognise they have been drifting apart, and especially Pam finds little solace when his career does finally take off, causing him to spend more time in his new studio while she wonders where their future lies. The fortune they make solves only part of her problem; she quits her job, spends quality time with the children, tithes at church, and prays with her new girlfriends. Still, even her other pregnancy does not make things better initially; but a car accident Troy becomes part of changes his attitude for good. He accepts faith and is baptised, turning his life over to Christ, too. Even Pam starts showing interest in his music. The priority Troy gives to the birth of their son makes him reschedule the dates of the tour he planned with his artists.

Taylor has never been married, and her son is the result of an affair she had with Luke, who also happens to be a minister and is married to Yvonne. But because she had a son from this illicit union, she does her best to keep a low profile and makes sure no one knows "her business," trying to prevent people from frowning upon her but mainly Joshua. Taylor is well aware of her bitterness, and makes her son the centre of her life. Her inability to cope with her life causes that she carelessly loses her job;¹¹⁴⁵ and is forced by the Welfare Office to reveal who the father of her child is as a result, despite the promise she has given to Luke;¹¹⁴⁶ otherwise, she would have no right for unemployment benefits. Her announcement puts into motion a series of events. When she reconciles with Yvonne, she comes to the conclusion that she is not ready for a relationship yet, being more interested in faith than anything else.

At the beginning of the novel, Yvonne thinks she leads the perfect life, not knowing that her husband has been unfaithful. When she learns about Taylor's child and who the father is, Yvonne immediately aims her hatred at "the mistress" and, at first, believes Luke's lies about his affair. His version is that it "meant nothing" to him and Taylor seduced him, for he "was not the only she was with. The brothers have been passing Taylor around for months."¹¹⁴⁷ What Yvonne finds out progressively is that Taylor lives a solitary life, and she made a mistake when she met Luke, thinking that he was sincere when he told her he was going to leave his wife for good. (Taylor fell in love with Luke and waited patiently for him to get his divorce so they could be married.) Thanks to Pam and the way she takes things in her hands, inviting Taylor and Yvonne for a trip to a Jamaican resort, Yvonne and Taylor know how wrong their presumptions about each other were. Yvonne's quest for self-sufficiency is the most significant of the protagonists,' for she enters the book as a full-time housewife and learns to be responsible for herself.

When it comes to the looks of chick lit books' protagonists in general, an ultimate emphasis is often put on their appearance. As Juliette Wells observes, [w]ith beauty, chick lit writers must toe a fine line. If the heroine is too stunning, readers may resent her; if she is too ordinary looking (let alone unattractive), she gives the readers nothing to admire. If she is utterly obsessed

¹¹⁴⁵ Taylor misses several deadlines resulting from extra assignments; her attitude is not of much help: "How can I possibly concentrate on proposal request when most of my church is talking about me?" Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 31. Cf. also *ibid.*, 45-47.

¹¹⁴⁶ The clerk in the office explains that the country will provide assistance to Taylor only if the father is known; child support, then, will be pursued from him. In addition, it is required by law that she gives the names of all putative fathers before any benefits are processed. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 58.

¹¹⁴⁷ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 72.

with her looks, she risks turning off readers, although the immense popularity of Bridget Jones demonstrates the comic and satiric potential of excessive preoccupation with weight gain and appearance. A heroine who is completely free of care about her looks and happily self-accepting is nowhere to be found in chick-lit, an absence that suggests such a character is too unrealistic to appeal to image-conscious women readers.¹¹⁴⁸

In this particular case, as expected in case of Christian chick lit in general, emphasis on beauty and strict beauty regimes gives way to more important concerns. The way the protagonists look, however, becomes important part of how they judge one another before they get really acquainted and see more than the surface, as implied above.

Warren does not employ the typical chick lit scheme of contrasting one of the central or major figures who is outstanding with another relatively average female who expresses her existence anxiety. What is more, the desperation resulting from Taylor's single status takes a richer variety of forms and changes throughout the course of the novel, and has directly to do with the steps Joshua's father takes.

10.6.2 Men Characters

It cannot be said that male characters are fully dimensional in the novel. Their underdevelopment is naturally related to the lack of narrative space for them, but there is an apparent lack of direct speech by male characters, or—if you will—their participation in the dialogues does not compensate for the lack of attention paid to them in most of the chapters. In addition, Warren does not reverse the literary black male bashing trend that has been upon the African American women writers for decades. Positive male characters could be limited to Jasper, Taylor's potential boyfriend, who is, however, not even given a chance to prove their relationship could function; there is also a small number of minor characters such as Pastor Brown who are not depicted as liars, brutes, and/or womanizers, but these contribute a little to the main plot. Mostly, the women come out as noble victims, which is rather apparent, e.g., in case of Pam and Troy.

The litany of sins committed by black men is personified by Luke Hastings. Similarly, despite Troy's attempts to support his wife, he does not prove to be good enough even though he becomes rich—as a result, the black macho culture depicted in the novel is almost as detrimental as white racism, and the female bonding is presented at the expense of male-bashing. The novel strategically offers, by and large, tales of malignant families, ineffectual and misbegotten individuals, tales of unwholesome and unfulfilling, miasmatic relations between men and women in order to show Christianity as the ultimate remedy for these negative phenomena. What makes it even worse, Warren is familiar with the black characters and conditions about which she writes, showing them as representative of African Americans in general, even though her story is about a small segment of the black American population. For instance, Luke tackles the notorious motif of the black macho when threatening Yvonne to leave her in their discussion about divorce. “You better hurry up and figure out what you want. I'm still vital, and it's plenty of women out there that would jump at the chance to get with me. I can think of a few of your little church friends,” he provokes her.¹¹⁴⁹

Troy Lyons is the only male character in *What a Sista Should Do* who is allowed to express men's need for mutual affection, interest, respect, acceptance, and listening to each other which are so necessary in a relationship, if it is supposed to function. He asks his wife, “Do you even realize how you've neglected me since you decided to be a church lady? You want me to come to church, well, it goes both ways, Pam. ... This is about your supporting the man who is taking care of you. You should want to come to my shows. It shouldn't be about making no deals.”¹¹⁵⁰ His words are a reaction to his wife's critical attitude to

¹¹⁴⁸ Wells, “Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History,” in *Chick Lit*, 49–50.

¹¹⁴⁹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 130.

¹¹⁵⁰ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 176–177.

something she has not enough information about: she is not in favour of the environment of his music shows, “smoke-filled rooms” and “loud rap songs about nothing,”¹¹⁵¹ which hardly gives a precise picture of what he really does.

10.7 Themes

10.7.1 African American Community and New Faith House of Worship

The community life is inseparably connected to the church and also Sister to Sister, a group led by Yvonne which should supposedly be dedicated to both discussing spiritual matters and mutual help to the members of the particular church. Yvonne explains her motives, “[s]o many of the sisters I know are married to no-good, low-down brothers. And the single ones are desperate to find a man. Any man.”¹¹⁵² The group functions as a prayer circle as well as a place of advice both for “saved and unsaved.”¹¹⁵³ The community is naturally governed by the rules of Christianity.

10.7.2 Contemporary Issues

The novel presents real-life problems and struggles of women in the church without leaving Christ out of the equation, confronting realities of life, culture, and family. Topics such as domestic violence, drunk driving, single parenting,¹¹⁵⁴ glass ceiling, marijuana abuse, adultery, job loss, etc. are dealt with in an unpretentious manner. The approach the women protagonists have to them is strongly influenced by their faith; for instance, Taylor is not sure whether to consider her relationship with Luke “illicit lust,” “affair,” or “tryst.”¹¹⁵⁵

Unfaithfulness is one of the most frequently examined motifs in the novel. Luke has been unfaithful to Yvonne for years with two women simultaneously. Before she comes across the evidence of his fatherhood to two illegitimate children, and he attacks her physically, her first reaction is, “[t]he truth is, I’m scared. Not scared that he cheated or he even might be that little boy’s father. I’m afraid that he’s going to say that he doesn’t love me and that he’s leaving. I can handle the rest as long as he stays.”¹¹⁵⁶ Yvonne wants to remain blind,¹¹⁵⁷ and in order to reason out his behaviour, she blames the devil for the problems in her marriage, not Luke who has actually caused them.¹¹⁵⁸ When it comes home to her how things really might be, she comments, “[i]f Joshua is Luke’s son, then he must not know. I can’t imagine my husband as for the cheating, not owning up to his responsibilities. ... as for the cheating, I don’t put that past Luke. I don’t put that past any man. It’s in their sinful natures to cheat. Just like dogs in heat. Most of them have enough to cover their tracks, but even the best of them slip up from time to time.”¹¹⁵⁹ When she senses an admission of guilt from his reaction, which is accompanied by his comment that “a man needs some variety

¹¹⁵¹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 177.

¹¹⁵² Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 16.

¹¹⁵³ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 16.

¹¹⁵⁴ The issue of single parenting extends over two generations, similarly to the other novels. Taylor’s mother “was trying to be husband and wife,” and possibly could not help but passed her bitterness on to her daughter. Considering this makes Taylor want to “be the best mother” that she can; in order to do that, she “need[s] herself to be healed of [her] broken heart.” Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 200–201.

¹¹⁵⁵ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 12.

¹¹⁵⁶ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 68.

¹¹⁵⁷ In Taylor’s opinion, Luke has “fed [Yvonne] some of his sooth lines.” She is “almost certain she doesn’t want to hear [the real],” or she would have confronted Taylor in person. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 76.

¹¹⁵⁸ “It seems like as soon as the Lord answers my prayers for peace in my marriage, here comes the devil, stirring up a mess. He is not going to have the victory, though. Not in my life,” Yvonne argues passionately. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 68–69.

¹¹⁵⁹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 69.

now and then,” her feelings change, and she stops excusing his deeds. “I was hoping that Luke’d deny everything and that we could go back to what we call normal. Now what?”¹¹⁶⁰ When it is proven Luke has fathered Joshua, Yvonne contemplates whether she is supposed to “be all right with a constant reminder” of her husband’s infidelity, and why she should be “the one made to feel uncomfortable.” His cheating on her becomes something she cannot forget, “[i]t’s just going to have to fade. Funny about the mind. It can believe a lot of stuff that you’ve never seen, and deny a whole heap of stuff it has seen with its own two eyes.”¹¹⁶¹

Despite the money her husband has earned, Pam questions music, seeing it not as a proper occupation but something that “glorifie[s] sin.”¹¹⁶² Consequently, her prudish nature and wild imagination make her also doubt those who surround Troy and perform music. Visiting him in the newly bought studio, she suggests, “[a]ll I can imagine is [Aria] leading my husband off to some seedy hotel room and having her way with him.”¹¹⁶³ What is even worse, she admits various times that she is “just hoping to find him in a compromising position.”¹¹⁶⁴

Unemployment is another topical issue the novel deals with. Taylor learns that she has not only lost her job but she has been denied any unemployment benefits by her former employer, which makes her feel as if she were “at the welfare office, and that’s somewhere [she is] not trying to be. Not at all.” Having been raised together with her brothers on “a combination of cash and food stamps” by her mother who “did not have a choice,” as Taylor does, she has promised herself that she would never “be in a predicament where the country would have to take care” of her and her relatives.¹¹⁶⁵ Looking around the crowded area of the Ohio Job and Family Services, she observes, “I’m not like the other women here. ... All the women here look tired, and beat down. Why does the welfare office have to look like a cattle call?”¹¹⁶⁶ Unemployment, of course, is related to the theme of the racial issues presented in the novel and is discussed later. Taylor comes to the conclusion that “[c]ontrary to what the upper crust of society says, [she doesn’t] think any woman would choose to be on public assistance if she could do better. Living month-to-month on a three-hundred-dollar check and some food stamps is not what [she calls] ‘getting over.’ They aren’t using the system. [Her] guess is that they’re slaves to it.”¹¹⁶⁷

10.7.3 Importance of Family and Relationships with Men

Since Christian authorities and bodies view marriage as instituted and ordained by God for a lifelong relationship between one man as a husband and one woman as a wife, they consider it the most intimate of human relationships, a gift from God, and a sacred institution at the same time. It comes as no surprise that the book advocates heterosexual marriage and traditional patriarchal values. (Unexpectedly enough for the reader, though, it is Yvonne’s mother who had “always wanted to go [to college]” but could not, and that Yvonne “was the exact opposite of Mama.” Besides, Yvonne was told by her father she “was pretty enough to get a rich husband.”¹¹⁶⁸) For instance, Yvonne explains that the female members of the New Faith House of Worship “need somebody to tell them how to get a real man of God, how to treat a

¹¹⁶⁰ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 73.

¹¹⁶¹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 99.

¹¹⁶² Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 36.

¹¹⁶³ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 105.

¹¹⁶⁴ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 106.

¹¹⁶⁵ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 46–47.

¹¹⁶⁶ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 56.

¹¹⁶⁷ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 57.

¹¹⁶⁸ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 18.

real man and how to keep him.”¹¹⁶⁹ She is proud of the knowledge she gained from the elderly members of the church. Yvonne boasts that the church mothers imparted a lot of wisdom to me, and I believe that’s why my marriage has lasted this long, when it seems like everybody else is getting separated and divorced. I know what kind of work it takes to keep a marriage together. The sisters taught me how to clean my house until it sparkled. I already knew how to cook, and I made sure that Luke never came home without his dinner waiting on the table.¹¹⁷⁰

Another way marriage is directly advocated throughout the novel is by showing the consequences of a divorce and/or a woman’s unwillingness to tolerate certain phenomena. Yvonne illustrates,

I probably sound like a dumb bunny to one of these new and improved, liberated women. They don’t take no stuff from their men, and they will file for divorce at the drop of a hat. Even though I’m relatively young, I’m old-school all the way. Back then when my mama was growing up, folks just didn’t get divorced. Men had all kinds of kids and women on the side, and their wives just pretended not to know or care. My daddy had plenty of mistresses, but he always took care of home. These women out here think they’re doing something special, getting divorces and raising their children without a daddy. They aren’t doing anything but assisting the adversary. The devil loves seeing a broken home, and most of the time he even doesn’t have to intervene.¹¹⁷¹

The above explained agenda, however, becomes most visible (in a subversive manner, though) when Warren deals with trials resulting from Taylor’s single parenthood. She starts with claiming that she “never, not in a million years thought” she would be “a baby’s mama.” “I need just to accept it, I guess, but I cringe every time I hear it,” she adds.”¹¹⁷² Although she has been forgiven for having an affair, the pressure of raising a child alone—both financially and socially—are proving too much, especially with all the gossipy church women. She is “getting real tired of explaining [herself] to these church folks” who “look down on [her].”¹¹⁷³ Keeping silent about the father’s identity and suffering for a mistake she made for the rest of her life is what worries Taylor most. Despite Joshua’s age and the fact that his “concept of father is not complete,” the child shows a high degree of sensitivity to other families, and his inquisitive mind is able to tell “that something is not right with [their] household.”¹¹⁷⁴ Not unlike Gloria in *Waiting to Exhale*, she summarises her situation with the following words.

As a single mom I’m always on duty. Joshua is always there. I love him to death, but sometimes (and I really hate to admit this) I resent my son. Or maybe I resent the sin that brought him here. ... I can’t help but feel just a little sorrowful. Joshua ... has no idea his life is lacking anything. He’s supposed to be able to roughhouse with his daddy and learn how to use the bathroom from his daddy. He’s supposed to learn from his daddy how to be man too. How in the world am I supposed to teach him that?¹¹⁷⁵

From what Taylor says in other chapters, it becomes obvious that the most difficult period for this protagonist has been her pregnancy. She claims, “[f]or my entire pregnancy I felt as if I was walking in condemnation. There were no congratulations for me, only wagging heads and pitiable glances, as if my child was going to be some type of abomination.” To make things worse, she did not expect “for anyone from church to give [her] a baby shower, but you would think that at least a few of them would have given [her] gifts, especially [her] so-called friends.”¹¹⁷⁶

¹¹⁶⁹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 16.

¹¹⁷⁰ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 20.

¹¹⁷¹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 44.

¹¹⁷² Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 10.

¹¹⁷³ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 29.

¹¹⁷⁴ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 234.

¹¹⁷⁵ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 13–15.

¹¹⁷⁶ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 29.

Taylor wishes for “a good man” and getting married, but the woman’s reasoning¹¹⁷⁷ is led not by her longing for a partner but by being “sure that would make everyone forget [her] indiscretions.” She is fully aware of the fact that “right now Taylor Johnson is nobody’s marriage material.” She calls herself “damaged goods”¹¹⁷⁸ and confesses, “I know I’m cynical when it comes to men, and the only male I want in my bed is Joshua.”¹¹⁷⁹ The effect of self-confirmatory prediction seems to function very well with Taylor who discourages Jasper, a man who shows frank interest in her. She meditates, “I wasn’t even thinking about a man until he popped up out of nowhere. I’ve been doing without, and I can continue. For a while.” She gives up the idea of a relationship completely in advance, which makes her ruin their date. In her prayers, she states maybe she is “not ready to be anyone’s wife or anyone’s girlfriend;” on one hand, she is willing to accept if God wants her to remain alone, on the other hand, Taylor is not sure she can “bear being lonely for the rest of [her] life.”¹¹⁸⁰ In order to give a new sense to her life, Taylor becomes a member of the street evangelism team.¹¹⁸¹

Throughout the novel, single women are stigmatised. Yvonne calls the singles’ committee of the church “nothing but a pack of fornicators anyway who are sure to back the little husband stealer,” referring in particular to Taylor.¹¹⁸² Taylor herself realises Yvonne has probably told the members of the church her story and “had they praying for her,” which is as if she painted a picture of Taylor as “a husband-stealing whore,” Taylor supposes.¹¹⁸³ Even Taylor’s mother shows little understanding to what her daughter has been through: “[m]y mother was devastated when she found out I was pregnant. She just kept saying she failed as a mother.” At Joshua’s age of two years, she “still cries” when they visit her, which makes Taylor think she “will be glad when she gets over this.”¹¹⁸⁴ The fact that the community is reluctant to consider Luke’s behaviour as improper, but keeps on labelling Taylor “a home wrecker” does not prevent her from seeing Joshua’s rights, though.¹¹⁸⁵

In some chick lit novels the protagonist is rewarded with a better-off man, but it is not a rule. Still, mostly, the man is socially and economically superior, and—which is vital to point out—marriage is hardly presented as a reward. Guerrero even claims that this kind of novels “suggests that the marriage is *not* the way for a person to achieve completion.”¹¹⁸⁶ *What a Sista Should Do*, by contrast, succumbs to the traditional expectations for womanhood. It depicts Pam satisfied through the love and protection of a man at the end of the book, meanwhile neither Yvonne’s divorce nor Taylor’s single motherhood make them victorious.

Pam and Troy’s relationship covers a large proportion of the book. Pam admits that when sometimes looking at her husband, she “just can’t stand him,” and even feels “contempt for him leaking out of [her] pores.”¹¹⁸⁷ As stated above, faith and the Church belong to the main reasons for their conflicts. Her reluctance becomes obvious.

Troy looks disappointed, but I don’t care. He knows full well that I spend all day Sunday in church. Why would he schedule a show on Sunday if he wanted me to go to it? ... Why does he always have to throw church up in my face? I’ve got plenty of things to throw right back at him, like his chronic unemployment—or his phantom

¹¹⁷⁷ More than three years after their break-up with Luke, Taylor contemplates, “[i]t would be nice to have a normal relationship, though. One where I don’t have to sneak and meet under the cover of darkness. ... I’m past being over Luke. Maybe this little encounter with Spencer is just a wake-up call for me. It could be time to make myself available again. Especially since my son needs a daddy.” Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 92.

¹¹⁷⁸ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 142.

¹¹⁷⁹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 30.

¹¹⁸⁰ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 173.

¹¹⁸¹ Cf. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 251–253.

¹¹⁸² Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 74.

¹¹⁸³ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 89.

¹¹⁸⁴ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 94.

¹¹⁸⁵ Cf. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 95.

¹¹⁸⁶ Guerrero, “‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White,” in *Chick Lit*, 99.

¹¹⁸⁷ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 34.

music career, for that matter—but I don't. It's true, I do spend a lot of time at church, but so what? It's not like he misses me around here. He's always got company. If I was home, he probably wouldn't even notice me. He should be grateful that I go to church so much. It's the only way I'm able to put up with his sorry behind."¹¹⁸⁸

What also contributes to the discord between them is Pam's jealousy of his protégés, but mainly her feeling that "[s]omewhere along the way, Troy got too comfortable."¹¹⁸⁹ "The scary part" for Pam is that she does not "know how to fix [them]."¹¹⁹⁰ Pam herself is a hypocrite who blames her husband for the deterioration of their relationship, and is aware of the fact that "he's even starting to have a gut,"¹¹⁹¹ but cannot see the same in herself; often her actions belie her stated beliefs.

When Pam got pregnant with their first child, "everything changed" for her. As she states, "Cicely was born, and I grew up right away." When she "gave [her] life to Christ," she and her husband "began to grow apart in the slightest of ways." First, she did not notice that; but the closer she got to God, "the further [she] was from Troy."¹¹⁹² Unfortunately, she is not satisfied even when her husband does have a job, makes them rich, is offered another job in New York, and plans a tour for two singers. The first thing she asks him is to pay the tithes and offerings off.¹¹⁹³ She prays, "now could You work on my husband? ... would You please just make his heart right? All I want is for him to get saved."¹¹⁹⁴ Herself being married to a musician, Pam knows a little about art and/or artists. She comments, "I don't truly grasp how important all this mess is to him. It seems like an obsession. I guess that technically, me being a writer and all, I'm an artist too. But my passion doesn't get in the way of common sense!"¹¹⁹⁵

Yvonne's husband has been cheating on her for years but she rejects to see the obvious, that is, his regular overnight trips twice a month and longer stays, the credit card statements with charges from hotels, etc. "I was naïve when he started leaving, but now I'm just comfortable. I know he's saved, so I'm not worried about him messing around. Besides, after twenty years I could use a vacation or two myself," she claims. Yvonne puts so much emphasis on Luke's love for and faith to God that "even if he didn't care anything about [her], the thought of sinning against God would stop Luke in his tracks." All in all, Yvonne admits, "[e]ven if Luke was cheating on me, I'd probably forgive him. Of course, I'm never going to tell him that, but it's the way I feel."¹¹⁹⁶

From what has been said it results that rigid rules of female morality and piety are emphasised throughout the book. The development of the Lyon's family experience is evidence for this statement. From a discontent professional woman who was originally just "supposed to be helping,"¹¹⁹⁷ Pam transforms into a full-time mother¹¹⁹⁸ whose husband repents and accepts faith at last. In return, Pam becomes interested in his music and learns to appreciate it. The birth of their child at the end of the novel means an ultimate new beginning marked with hope for the future.

¹¹⁸⁸ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 7–9.

¹¹⁸⁹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 35.

¹¹⁹⁰ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 34.

¹¹⁹¹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 37.

¹¹⁹² Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 53.

¹¹⁹³ Cf. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 82–83.

¹¹⁹⁴ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 84.

¹¹⁹⁵ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 227.

¹¹⁹⁶ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 43.

¹¹⁹⁷ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 35.

¹¹⁹⁸ At the beginning, Yvonne contemplates Pam's situation, "She's one of those career women. I told her that she needs to quit that job and stay home with her babies. It isn't natural for a man to just let a woman take care of him, but her husband hasn't had a job in over a year." Paradoxically enough, after a while, Yvonne expresses her gratitude to God, having found out that Pam was promoted, "Well, bless God! We need black in strategic places in these companies. Maybe you can help someone get hired." Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 21.

At the same time, Warren dares to show how dysfunctional some seemingly perfect marriages based on the very same principles can be in fact. Yvonne is the one who seems to have everything, especially her long-term childless marriage¹¹⁹⁹ to Luke, the minister of the church, which makes the impression that the bond is secure. She observes, “I’m not saying that my marriage is perfect. I’d be lying if I did. Me and Luke have had as many problems as anybody else. We just have God in our union, and that’s the difference.”¹²⁰⁰ Gradually, she finds out she has been married to a lying, unfaithful, and even abusive man.¹²⁰¹ What is more, one of his “affairs” happens to be a member of the church, which initially does not make things any better. While cunning husbands get revenged in chick lit generally—as John did by Bernadine in *Waiting to Exhale*—here, Luke is punished by the court, but simultaneously forgiven by Yvonne who is the God-fearing Christian. In conclusion, the romance novel requirement “one woman-one man” is confirmed in this particular Christian chick lit novel, as explained above, and the idea of reinforcement of monogamous matrimonies is what prevails. At the same time, love is not presented as just another commodity,¹²⁰² which cannot be said about many books belonging to the second wave of the chick lit.

When it comes to fatherhood, as depicted in the novel, should there be a critic previously dealing with *What a Sista Should Do*, the book would be labelled male-bashing without any doubt. Luke has “never held or touched Joshua. He hasn’t even seen him up close.” In Taylor’s opinion, Luke has “convinced himself that he’s not the father. Either that or he’s just cruel. Any man that can sit in the same church every Sunday with his own son, and not even look at him, has got some serious issues.”¹²⁰³ Only when Taylor is treated in a matter-of-fact cold manner in the Welfare Office, she realises the absurdity of the whole situation due to the office clerk’s remark about the baby’s father who is “doing all right” financially,¹²⁰⁴ meanwhile he provides no support whatsoever to his child. And only after the court issues the result of the paternity test, and Luke is made to pay for Joshua, he claims his right to see his son, which upsets Taylor. To make things worse, his plan is to petition for full custody, but foolishly enough, Luke does not make his wife any part of it. The existence of Luke’s daughter Amanda is revealed in one of the final chapters of the book. Even though “he’s been like a superhero” her whole life, and at first she “didn’t believe that he could and would hurt anyone, ” she realises she “knew absolutely nothing about the man that raised [her].”¹²⁰⁵ The fact that he has been pretending to be someone else¹²⁰⁶ and lying to his daughter makes her doubt he even loved her.

Pam’s view of Troy changes throughout *What a Sista Should Do*. From what she perceives as a bad husband and a relatively good father, the two swap various times

¹¹⁹⁹ Regretful Yvonne tries to convince herself that to remain childless makes some sense after all: “we were so comfortable and carefree with just the two of us that we weren’t even interested in reproducing.... Maybe God just wanted me to be a help to others in the congregation because He could’ve let me pregnant any old time.” Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 41–42.

¹²⁰⁰ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 16.

¹²⁰¹ The first signals of Luke’s abusive nature appear as soon as a few months after their wedding. Yvonne objected to their unexpected move to Cleveland from the South, but to her threat to divorce him, Luke “let [her] know in no uncertain terms that [she] belonged to him.” Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 18. When he hits her for the first time soon after that, her reaction is “I was to blame for his outburst anyway, and promised myself that I wouldn’t ever push his buttons like that.” *Ibid.*, 19.

¹²⁰² Jessica Jernigan’s critique of the same narrative weight put to love as to fashion codes is expressed for instance in “Slingbacks and Arrows: Chick Lit Comes of Age,” accessed February 20, 2013, http://jessicaleejernigan.typepad.com/jessica_lee_jernigan/2004/07/8220slingbacks_.html.

¹²⁰³ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 47.

¹²⁰⁴ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 59.

¹²⁰⁵ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 262.

¹²⁰⁶ Luke made both his second mistress Angela and their daughter Amanda think he was a travelling salesman, staying with them for the weekends and then travelling for weeks. Cf. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 261.

throughout the novel in her eyes. At the beginning of the novel, she explains her reasons for staying with him. “It’s not like he does a whole lot for his children as it is, but at least he is around.”¹²⁰⁷ When she announces her pregnancy, “there is no joy in his tone, only shock.” Troy points out the bad timing for this baby, for he has “got a ten-city tour planned,”¹²⁰⁸ which makes Pam not very happy. She concludes that “this little tour on the chitlins circuit is more important than witnessing the birth of [their] child,” and her husband is “still treating this like something I did to get back at him.”¹²⁰⁹ For the rest of the pregnancy and up to the final pages of the book, she considers him to be “almost oblivious” to it.¹²¹⁰

10.7.4 Friendship and Sisterhood

Unlike in the other girlfriend novels examined in the dissertation, this book’s protagonists’ real friendship is yet to be found and deserved painfully throughout the book. Among numerous girlfriend (and/or sister-girl) novels written about the bond between female friends, *What a Sista Should Do* presents a rather unusual set of friends, since the friendship among these women is a true testament to the principles of Christianity. In the beginning, the common denominator between the three women is only the church home they share; each of them has her own problems and a unique personality. By the end of the novel, the reader gets a strong sense of the power of the common prayer and its effects over the most difficult circumstances.

Taylor and Yvonne meet when Yvonne invites Taylor to a meeting of Sister to Sister, but because these meetings usually end up as gossip-fests, Taylor leaves abruptly, not wanting to deal with intruders when all she wants to do is pray and meet new friends. Naturally, she also does not want the ladies to find out about her relationship with Luke, although the affair has been over for more than two years.¹²¹¹ Still not knowing who Joshua’s father really is, Yvonne attempts to interfere into Taylor’s life. She speculates, “I don’t know what Pam is thinking, but as her sister in Christ I think it’s my duty to get involved. It’s what the Lord has called me to do. Some of these young women need guidance.”¹²¹² Even after the above mentioned incident in the Sister to Sister group, Yvonne insists, “It’s my guess that Taylor needs my help more than anyone in the church, and I intend on helping.”¹²¹³

Furthermore, unknowingly in her pursuit to reach out to Taylor, Pam gets stuck in the middle, as Yvonne discovers her husband fathered Taylor’s son Joshua, providing Yvonne with comfort on one hand, and hiring Taylor as her personal assistant to help her out on the other one. It is not very likely that Taylor and Yvonne would want to even be in each other’s space, which at first they do not. The three women are united in friendship, though, when Pam who is “the catalyst that brings them together”¹²¹⁴ invites her friends-to-be to a vacation in Jamaica, hoping that Yvonne will learn to forgive Taylor her indiscretions with Luke, and at the same time Taylor will apologize to Yvonne for what she did.¹²¹⁵ Forgiveness and the

¹²⁰⁷ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 37.

¹²⁰⁸ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 139.

¹²⁰⁹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 195–196.

¹²¹⁰ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 265.

¹²¹¹ When Taylor shares the news of her pregnancy, Luke immediately suggests that she has an abortion, which results in their ultimate break-up.

¹²¹² Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 22.

¹²¹³ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 27.

¹²¹⁴ “Review of *What a Sista Should Do*.”

¹²¹⁵ Pam’s decision to put the other two women together on the holiday is also partly motivated by the fact that there has been a lot of pressure on them recently, and both of them “need vacations just as much as” she does. Luke has gone to one of his “sabbaticals” (the expression refers to his long trips), which does not make Yvonne feel any better, and Taylor “could use a little taste of paradise too. She’s so busy holding her life together that she doesn’t know how to relax.” Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 135–136.

overwhelming sense of pray for each other through difficult events create an unusual bond. Taylor explains that it has never been her intention “to hurt Sister Yvonne;” at the same time, “[i]t’s about time he was held responsible for something.”¹²¹⁶

When they come together and share their hearts and hurts, their lives change and joy comes. Taylor’s “open invitation of friendship” surprises Pam who approached her not as a “friend. Just a sister in Christ.” Pam admits that it has “been a long time since [she] had a girlfriend.” She made the same mistake as many women: when she married Troy, she thought he would become her “best friend and confidant.” But now she starts to realise “a woman needs the honest opinion of another woman.”¹²¹⁷ Soon after that, destroyed Yvonne herself “could use a friend right now,” she admits. Again, it is Pam whose help is available and, what is more important for the friendship of the three characters, Pam’s prayer which is aimed both at Yvonne, and also shows Pam feels compassion for Taylor, makes Yvonne realise they both need prayer.¹²¹⁸ Pam and Yvonne even become capable of seeing each other’s side, and express admiration for each other, considering what they have been through, instead of judging each other. Forgiving each other becomes “more than what [Yvonne’s] husband has given to [her].”¹²¹⁹

In their friendship, they listen to, comfort, and learn from one another,¹²²⁰ offer a practical helping hand in need,¹²²¹ as well as exchange advice that paradoxically function for them. Mostly, these concern relationships and decision-making related to them. Pam, who has had problems in her marriage herself, advises Taylor to get her career off the ground “and therefore make herself “an asset to a man, and not a liability.””¹²²² In return, Taylor states, “you aren’t about to lose your salvation going to one of your husband’s shows. ... I’m just saying. It wouldn’t kill you to show a little support. I mean, don’t you think you should help him? Isn’t that what a wife does? ... sometimes you have to make the first move.”¹²²³ Finally, the three protagonists conclude that they not only must admit they “need Him,” but also “each other.”¹²²⁴ As the review says, *What a Sista Should Do* “is a faith-based story of three women who find their strength in God and at the same time learn to find friendships where they least expect to.”¹²²⁵

10.7.5 Faith

There can be no doubt faith functions as a common thread in the novel. As the title as well as the cover of the book imply that Christian obligation is one of the basic themes. And what is suggested is that, despite the fact there are many other things to do, the sisters should pray. Although the three main characters, which the story shifts between, live very different lives, all of them are coming to learn something new about God and about themselves through prayer. The book conveys the following message: when praying, the women must not expect the immediate fulfilment of their petitions or their will; instead, they must accept the will of God who brings hope and is capable of reversing humanly impossible situations.

¹²¹⁶ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 60.

¹²¹⁷ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 107–109.

¹²¹⁸ Cf. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 113.

¹²¹⁹ Cf. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 153–154.

¹²²⁰ Pam states that when she first took interest in Taylor, she thought she had so much to teach her, for instance, “how to be a woman of God, and how to take care of her child.” But “[s]he ended up teaching [her] more than [Pam] ever taught her” about courage and keeping one’s head up. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 245.

¹²²¹ The most important situations when helping hands are offered are related to Troy and Yvonne’s stay at the hospital and their healing, Pam’s birth giving, and the trial with Luke.

¹²²² Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 185.

¹²²³ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 187.

¹²²⁴ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 282.

¹²²⁵ “*What a Sista Should Do*.”

According to *What a Sista Should Do*, faith is the key to eternal happiness; simultaneously, it is the hardest thing to possess in this world, and yet it is faith that proves to be the most important for human beings, leading them to true happiness—the kind which cannot be destroyed by everlastingly changing circumstances and conditions of this world. Also it is presented as something that clashes easily with the common sense of this world and those who do not share the protagonists' views. This friction becomes most visible in the marriage of Pam and Troy; it is Pam's fanatical faith and Troy's atheism¹²²⁶ that make their marriage deteriorate. In her self-righteousness, she finds "it difficult asking the Lord to bless a man whose only purpose in life is to get on [her] nerves."¹²²⁷ She also reveals,

I believe my feeling for Troy started to take a downward spiral when I turned my life over to Christ. I'd always been a churchgoing woman. I was raised in church but decided when I got grown that I needed a taste of the world. I went and found myself a man and married him, but the Lord never left my heart. The day I made up my mind to really surrender to him, there was a change in me, and Troy couldn't help but notice. ... the more I seek God's face, the more I alienate my husband.¹²²⁸

From what has been said it results that faith is represented as an ultimatum in a relationship of two adults. A compromise does not mean a solution in this case; Pam insists on Troy's acceptance of faith and regular visits to the church, which she accomplishes at the end of the novel.

In the book faith is depicted as two-faced in relation to passivity. On one hand, it is faith alone that justifies what is happening, and faith is by nature a passive affair. Therefore (especially in comparison with McMillan's ones), the characters feel comfortable enough with their prayers, instead of acting and taking things into their hands. For example, Taylor claims, "I guess all I can do right about now is trust God and let him do what he does."¹²²⁹ Pam is suspicious of her husband but guesses she "really [doesn't] want to know the answer."¹²²⁹ And as the other girlfriends "can't tell [her] what to do,"¹²³⁰ the only thing they suggest is "let's get in agreement in prayer."¹²³⁰ Their resignation is obvious also from these words: "[t]hree broken-down women. There's nothing we *can* do but pray, is there? And believe the Lord is listening."¹²³¹ On the other hand, through faith in God and Christ the characters are activated to perform good works which mean a person's exterior actions and deeds in the Christian theology. For example, Pam keeps "wondering why the Lord chose [them] to bless with this money. Is there something that He has for me to do?"¹²³²

Last but not least, faith is a way from loneliness when "you feel so lonely for an adult conversation that you just talk to yourself," as in case of Taylor. She comforts herself, "[i]t's all right, though, because I'm pretty much holding it down. Maybe not on my own, but the Lord is with me. He's all the help I need, right?"¹²³³ Moreover, faith functions as a solution to life disappointment and unsatisfactory love life. The same protagonist explains her voyage to faith which began four years before the novel begins.

It didn't take long for me to get tired of my life. The men didn't fulfil me, and neither did the loveless sex. The Sunday morning I walked into New Faith, I was desperate for answers and desperate for love. As soon as I stepped through the doors, I was overwhelmed by presence in the house that was unmistakable. ... I was filled with the Spirit of the Lord. From that day, I was on fire for God. I wanted to spend all day every day just basking in His presence.¹²³⁴

¹²²⁶ The following statement made by Pam explains her attitude better than any other words: "Troy knows that he needs Jesus. He can't say he doesn't, because I told him a million times." Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 188.

¹²²⁷ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 37.

¹²²⁸ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 36–37.

¹²²⁹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 49.

¹²³⁰ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 160.

¹²³¹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 180.

¹²³² Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 102.

¹²³³ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 32–33.

¹²³⁴ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 93.

10.7.6 Journey and Self-growth

The theory of external journey linked to the protagonists' inner development, as suggested in the analysis of *Waiting to Exhale*, is even better applicable on this particular book. The trip to Jamaica Pam takes "her newfound friends" makes Yvonne and Taylor learn each other's motivation for their behaviour, which conditions their reconciliation. For Pam, at the beginning, the "fact that they hate each other is a minor technicality." Generously enough, she understands the trip as "a chance for us all to bond, and for them to get out all the bad blood between them. If Yvonne and Taylor are able to stay bitter and disgruntled in all the sunshine and eighty-degree temperatures, then there is probably no helping either of them."¹²³⁵

Warren proves that in chick lit humiliation and problems function as part of the process of emotional maturation of the protagonist¹²³⁶ whose ability and willingness to learn from bad experiences and her mistakes guide her on her journey to psychic growth. But one should not forget that the individual quest for self-definition in the novel most often becomes suppressed simultaneously, making way for faith and prayer.

In comparison with the other two women protagonists, Yvonne's self-growth is the most apparent and probably also best-depicted one. To start with, she blindly obeys her husband Luke: "I'd end up going mad if he was gone, and I'd literally die from boredom. What would I have to do all day if I wasn't taking care of him?"¹²³⁷ The series of events Taylor starts by revealing Luke's name as Joshua's father even makes Yvonne reconsider her position within the Sister to Sister group. She thinks, "How can I sit up here and even think about giving anybody any advice about anything?"¹²³⁸ When the court announces Luke Hastings is Joshua's father, the novel takes a different course: for the first time Yvonne realises the truth. "For some reason, in the back of my mind I haven't really believed any of this until now. I'd been thinking of Taylor as some kind of lunatic that wanted my husband to be her child's father. When I look at her, all I see is a tired woman. Well, she ain't the only one. ... Taylor looks over at me, sadly and not at all like someone who is walking away victorious."¹²³⁹

Yvonne gradually opens a new chapter of her life, realising "something is going on inside" her. She finds herself fed up with the life she has been living, and-tired of her cheating husband-she has no idea how to live "with this mess;" because, as she states, "not only did this man betray me, he went and got himself a living, breathing souvenir that he wants to bring to my home." She sums up, "[m]en get in the habit of expecting things. ... The submissive-wife thing is all good, as long as you don't have some fool taking advantage of it."¹²⁴⁰ From a woman who previously had no autonomous life outside her matrimony and church, she unexpectedly empowers herself into a different person. In an argument with Luke, she thinks, "I know what he's capable of doing. Although he's never hit me since the first time, the threat has hung over our marriage ever since. The problem is that he doesn't know what I'm capable of doing. Lord, I don't even know." Knowing she is more tired than she thought, she tells Luke, "I can't stop you from doing anything. If you want to leave, go ahead."¹²⁴¹ After the return from Jamaica, Yvonne feels he has not been husband to her for years, and she "no longer respect[s] this man as [her] husband," being unable to

¹²³⁵ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 135.

¹²³⁶ Suggested by Wells, "Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History," in *Chick Lit*, 53.

¹²³⁷ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 44.

¹²³⁸ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 85.

¹²³⁹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 98-99.

¹²⁴⁰ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 127-128.

¹²⁴¹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 129.

“acknowledge his headship.”¹²⁴² She suggests a divorce, which is followed by such a violent reaction that his physical attack makes her recover for weeks.¹²⁴³

Having plenty of time to think about herself, her life, and marriage, Yvonne discovers the reasons behind Luke’s unfaithfulness. She realises adultery is “nothing but intimacy without covenant,” and he “was looking to fulfil his needs for closeness and intimacy without the responsibilities and concerns that come long with the covenant relationship.” Allowing herself to find out that it was not she that should be blamed for his activities, she “experience[s] a newfound sense of freedom.”¹²⁴⁴ The absence of Luke in her life also means Yvonne is forced to find a means to support herself financially. But most of all, she intends to “close this chapter of [her] life and move on.”¹²⁴⁵ To learn this, it becomes necessary for Yvonne to leave the house they have been sharing with Luke for fifteen years, for his “essence is on everything” she touches there.¹²⁴⁶ Only then she can start her quest for selfhood properly. In one of the last chapters of the novel she expresses her wish. “It is my time now ... time to find out who ‘me’ really is. I’ve defined myself for so long as a minister’s wife that I don’t even have a real identity. I’m used to being Sister Hastings. I need to be known as Yvonne.”¹²⁴⁷

Pam’s journey is somewhat different. In the past, she used to write; now she finds herself stuck in a marriage with a man in which she is “tired of supporting his dreams when [hers] are going out of the window.”¹²⁴⁸ With the passing time and her growing anger, she realises her envy and that a lot of “it doesn’t even have to do with [Troy].” “My husband is only part of my problem,” she says. In fact, it angers her “that he’s pursuing his dream and loves what he’s doing. He’s not waking up every morning and going to a place that he detests, working for people that don’t care about him. So while he’s short on dollars, Troy is long on contentment.”¹²⁴⁹ She simply stopped believing both hers and her husband’s dreams; the “only thing [she] cared about was that paycheck every two weeks, and making sure that it kept coming.” Understanding this, Pam returns to her passion (reading books) and also attempting to write them: “But I’m not going to give up on my dream,” she promises herself. “Now I’m back.”¹²⁵⁰ As a matter of fact, Troy shows his interest in her writing, and gives her a gold-embossed journal with her name inscribed on the front as a Christmas gift in order to show his belief in her dream. The importance of the gift lies in the fact that Troy pays attention to what matters to his wife. After some time she becomes apologetic and realises her own mistakes. “Without making even one move in his direction I’ve been waiting for Troy to stop everything and come to me. My prayers are for Troy’s salvation and that he becomes a better husband. It’s funny, though, that when I’m praying, God keeps bringing to mind things about me.”¹²⁵¹

To summarise, Pam herself diagnoses what else than her faith prevents her from coming closer to Troy. She observes, “[s]ometimes it feels like he’s genuinely reaching out to me. Anger keeps me from reaching back. I know this, and yet have no idea how to get around it. I would love to go back being the free spirit I was when I was twenty-two. But I grew up and he didn’t.”¹²⁵² She only prays for the Lord to remind her that she needs “to make room for

¹²⁴² Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 163.

¹²⁴³ Cf. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 164–165.

¹²⁴⁴ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 205.

¹²⁴⁵ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 220.

¹²⁴⁶ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 230.

¹²⁴⁷ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 263.

¹²⁴⁸ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 38.

¹²⁴⁹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 51.

¹²⁵⁰ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 54.

¹²⁵¹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 136.

¹²⁵² Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 116.

him in [her] life,” but what remains in her prayers instead of actively approaching him herself is “above all, draw him to You.”¹²⁵³ The fact that she finishes writing her novel does not contribute any further to her sense of self-development.

Somewhat embittered Taylor “has entirely too much going on in [her] life to be looking for romance.” Besides, she is aware she still has “some men issues” that need to be resolved.¹²⁵⁴ As a matter of fact, she has “never been in a real romance per se.” She explains her experience with men: “That’s not to say that I didn’t have men. I just never made them go through the hoops of winning and dining me. What was the point anyway? It was always just a play to get me on my back. I knew by the end of the first date if I was going to sleep with a man.”¹²⁵⁵ There is no doubt Taylor’s attitude is caused by her low self-esteem, as her mother suggests, with which Taylor only agrees.¹²⁵⁶ The woman admits that sometimes she feels “bound to [her] past and abound to [her] mother’s views of [Taylor] and life in general.”¹²⁵⁷ The problems she has with herself as well as issues with men are solved by her ultimate embrace of faith. “There are unsaved souls out in the world. Get anxious about their salvation,” Minister Graham explains. Her reaction speaks for itself: “This message is really hitting home with me. ... My loneliness has preoccupied me to the point that I don’t even know what God wants me to do.”¹²⁵⁸ Except her learned ability to forgive and be more generous, Taylor remains one of the more static characters of all the analyses.

10.7.7 Sexuality

The novel conveys a strong religious message in which depiction of sexuality plays a seemingly minor part. As a matter of fact, sex is not totally suppressed, but it becomes a subject to tabooisation.¹²⁵⁹ Meanwhile Taylor is silenced by his threats, Luke is unable to take responsibility for the consequences of his affair. The apparent absence of sexuality as far as the everyday protagonists’ lives are concerned precisely shows the restrictive and hypocritical attitude of African American church to the sexuality of its members.

When it comes to sexuality in the novel *What a Sista Should Do*, it is limited to basically four views. First, sexuality is an essential part of marital duties within a Christian marriage. But it is never referred to explicitly.¹²⁶⁰ It is a question, however, whether to view sexuality as a source of pleasure or simply as a part of procreation (as stated in the Bible). If the latter one is true, then Yvonne—who apparently cannot bear children—and Luke’s sex practices become more than just fulfilment of their marital duties but a fulfilment of a carnal pleasure. Yvonne’s initial blind obedience to her husband as well as negation of her own sexuality become obvious from the following words: “And in the bedroom—well, let’s just say that I ain’t never had a headache. ... I know my husband gets everything he needs at home. I’m not bragging either. It just what I know.”¹²⁶¹

Second, sexuality might take a form of indulging oneself but it is never referred to in directly or terms of carnal pleasure in the book either. Taylor and Luke see each other regularly for this purpose before her attention is drawn to her pregnancy; his request to

¹²⁵³ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 116.

¹²⁵⁴ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 90.

¹²⁵⁵ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 93.

¹²⁵⁶ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 93.

¹²⁵⁷ Taylor adds that due to the fact that her mother “had a lot of men come and go” in their lives, she has never known “a man could be permanent.” Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 200.

¹²⁵⁸ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 193.

¹²⁵⁹ Dealing with taboos, it is necessary to point out no character such as a gay male best friend of the protagonist(s) is portrayed in the book, whose presence is typical of other subgenres of chick lit.

¹²⁶⁰ When Taylor discusses Pam and Troy’s sex life with her, she refers to it as “things ... in the bedroom.” Pam’s answer contains the words “that area.” Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 185.

¹²⁶¹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 20.

immediately have an abortion puts a stop to any contact between the two characters.¹²⁶² The only allusion to sex as a pleasurable part of a woman's life is when Taylor's mother, "being her carnal self, had the nerve to ask [her] if [she is] gay or something,"¹²⁶³ when the young woman shows no interest whatsoever in such activities. The mother is simply worried about her daughter's well-being which, in her opinion, is related to finding herself a man. Taylor's prudish reaction reveals how fanatical and narrow-minded she has become: "that one little comment got me longing for a warm body in my bed. That's how easy the devil can steal my focus. I need to hurry up and figure out what God has for me to do."¹²⁶⁴ If sex does not go hand-in-hand with love, as in case of Taylor and several men she dated, it becomes a source of frustration and hopelessness. Taylor contemplates her life: "'One day we're going to have our own family,' I believed him. He had to be telling the truth, or else I was an idiot and this man was just using me for sex. Well, it turns out that I was an idiot."¹²⁶⁵

Third, sexuality is perceived as a source of sin. Only after the sinner is judged and punished (often by the members of the Sister to Sister group operating within the context of the church), repents himself/herself, then he/she can be forgiven and redeemed. Taylor compares herself with Hester Prynne from the *Scarlet Letter*: her son Joshua is stigmatised and frowned upon because he was born out of wedlock, "that he carries some spirit of lust."¹²⁶⁶ Last, enjoying sexuality and the notion of lust is depicted as effectively preventing African American women from finding a partner with commitment in the novel. Hurt by Luke, Taylor is strongly convinced that the only reason why her potential boyfriend Spencer would like to meet and date her is that he wants to have sex with her, which ruins the man's frank interest in her.¹²⁶⁷ Their second date is strongly influenced by Taylor's remorseful and irritable mood after visiting Yvonne in the hospital. She accuses him of coming to her place from Toledo because he is "'going to get some."¹²⁶⁸ Paradoxically enough, Spencer himself is rather strong in his faith.

All in all, meanwhile among typical chick lit novels it is hard to find those with "satisfying—or alternatively ridiculous—sex scenes," Juliette Wells points out the only exception to this statement are the Christian chick lit novels, "whose writers make a point of preserving their heroines' and their readers' purity," and therefore do not see sex as a necessary part of romantic exploration.¹²⁶⁹

10.7.8 Occupation and Career

In contrast with other subgenres of chick lit, the professional world is not presented as the ultimate challenge. On the contrary, Pam—one of the three protagonists—states that compared to her homelife, her "job is actually a walk in the park."¹²⁷⁰ Warren lets Pam succumb to what

¹²⁶² Cf. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 11.

¹²⁶³ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 235. After what has been said so far, it comes as no surprise that any hint at the topic of homosexuality (whether gays or lesbians) is carefully avoided in the whole novel.

¹²⁶⁴ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 235.

¹²⁶⁵ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 11.

¹²⁶⁶ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 29.

¹²⁶⁷ Taylor's own suspicions prevent her from having a relationship with the man. Before he gives her any reason, she speculates, "For all I know, Mr. Spencer Oldman could be a womanizer that wants to make sure he has a booty call in every city. I am not the one." Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 122. Collins dedicates the whole chapter of her book *Black Sexual Politics* to the topic—see chapter five, Booty Call: Sex, Violence, and Images of Black Masculinity, 149–180.

¹²⁶⁸ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 172.

¹²⁶⁹ Wells, "Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History," in *Chick Lit*, 50.

¹²⁷⁰ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 1.

Negra terms “the social fantasy of hometown,”¹²⁷¹ which means to depict a professional urban woman who returns to her hometown, giving up a paid work and ambitions in order to, for instance, take care of elderly or infirm parents. To be more precise, Pam willingly leaves her job even though she has just been promoted, staying at home with the two daughters. Simultaneously, Yvonne undergoes the opposite process, and Taylor is simply forced to work as a single mother.

10.7.9 Beauty and Looks

As detractors of chick lit emphasise, the obsession with appearance becomes a cause for disdain of the genre; on the other hand, chick lit’s focus on beauty “does not necessarily mean that it endorses cultural expectations of women’s beauty.”¹²⁷²

Clothing iconography, as suggested in the analysis of *Waiting to Exhale*, plays certain role in this novel as well. On the cover of the first edition of the book, there are the three protagonists, forming a firm circle, arms wrapped around one another. As regular church goers they wear hats, naturally. The different meaning hats have in McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale* not only reflects the overall difference between the characters’ attitude to fashion but also the very nature of the characters caused by various approaches McMillan and Warren have to writing. When Savannah, Robin, Gloria, and Bernadine organise their night out to celebrate Bernadine’s divorce settlement, they make a deal to wear hats. Bernadine explains the reasons for their self-confidence: “‘Because we’re stepping out, that’s why. And it is time.’”¹²⁷³ Pam, Yvonne, and Taylor, by contrast, hardly feel the need to enjoy what they wear, not to mention to show off. Even though Pam becomes rather well-off, she barely goes shopping for entertainment; when she “was broke,” she was “trying to spend some bill money on a church outfit.”¹²⁷⁴

Reaching inner peace through themselves, their sisterhood, and mainly their faith is accompanied by other pleasant activities whose purpose is to pamper the protagonists—as in chick lit in most cases. Pam can afford to take her friends for a vacation to Jamaica; she regularly indulges herself, having massages, for “[a] grown woman needs to indulge herself sometimes.”¹²⁷⁵ In her opinion, “[m]ore black women need to try this, even if it is a little pricey. We just go around all stressed-out, cussing people out and taking all of our frustration out on our children’s behinds.”¹²⁷⁶ Even Yvonne who attributes little importance to clothes celebrates her newly gained freedom by a shopping spree after leaving Luke, which is part of her makeover process. Speaking about this character, it is important to add that before her marriage is broken, her attitude to beauty and appearance is merely related to the matrimony. She comments,

I keep myself looking good too. Some of these sisters in our church have one or two kids and just let themselves go. They get fat and lazy and then wonder why their husbands are stepping out on the side. I understand putting on a few pounds, but they have no excuse to be walking around nappy-headed. ... I know my husband gets everything he needs at home. I’m not bragging either. It’s just what I know.¹²⁷⁷

At the same time, she initially frowns upon Taylor who has “got enough blonde hair weave on her head to give joy to about twenty ponytail-wearing wannabes. And don’t get me started on

¹²⁷¹ Diane Negra, *What A Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 15.

¹²⁷² Ferris and Young, introduction to *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, 11.

¹²⁷³ McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, 406.

¹²⁷⁴ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 272.

¹²⁷⁵ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 9. Pam explains her reasons for escaping to her contemporary sanctuary, “I can just lie up on that table and pretend that I’m the queen that I was intended to be. I don’t have to think about anyone’s issues or dilemmas.” *Ibid.*, 134.

¹²⁷⁶ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 134.

¹²⁷⁷ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 20.

the makeup. No wonder she was late ... she was at home putting her face on,” Yvonne frowns.¹²⁷⁸

10.7.10 Racial Tensions

While in the previous two analyses the theme of racial tensions in larger African American communities in urban settings was discussed, Warren’s novel is not as fruitful in this respect. There are basically three moments in the novel which have a racial context. The first one is a passage in which Taylor contemplates two notorious themes of African American literature. These are her options when she is suggested to apply at the Ohio Job and Family Services for emergency benefits after losing her job by a clerk, and the American jails with respect to the high rate of imprisoned black men. She observes,

Now, I’m not a racist or anything, but it seems real odd that Mrs. Eckhart immediately threw welfare out there as an option. I wonder, if she was looking at a white girl that could have been her daughter or niece, would she be so quick to recommend the poisonous crutch of government money? I’m not too proud to get help, but how about giving me a list of jobs to apply for, or something like that? I think that black women are sometimes steered toward welfare just the way our fathers, husbands and sons often become permanent fixtures in the justice system.¹²⁷⁹

Similarly to the previously analysed sister-girl novels, in *What a Sista Should Do* Warren debunks the stereotypes of the welfare queen and the criminal black man.

Second, having been accused of fathering Joshua and having been confronted by Yvonne, Luke leaves threatening messages on her answering machine. One day he even pays her a visit and expresses his fury: “Oh, you done put the white man in our business,” referring to the American courts, which means a sort of betrayal from his point of view.¹²⁸⁰ Last, Taylor addresses an issue discussed in the previous chapters of the dissertation many times, and that is the competitive nature of the relationship between black and white women. Watching her superior Glenda at work interact with a man she herself might be interested in, she utters, “I can’t stand the way some white women get around fine black men. It’s sickening.” Her following words show how critical she is of men in general. She continues, “[b]ut the brothers love that ego-building attention. I think that’s the real reason why some of them are crossing over.”¹²⁸¹

10.8 Narrative Strategies and Point of View

The book comprises of fifty-one chapters narrated individually by each of the three women protagonists in the first person.¹²⁸² The personal narrative situation prevails in most of the novel, which means that the reflector-characters give an account of what is happening in the fictional space. From time to time the novel oscillates smoothly between the personal and the first-person narrative situation in which they turn to the reader and transmit some events in words.¹²⁸³ For instance on her way home, Pam is reluctant to enter her home. She says that before she does so, she usually just sits in her driveway listening to the music. She explains, “I’m a professional black woman. It has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it? The only thing is, it’s not

¹²⁷⁸ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 24.

¹²⁷⁹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 49.

¹²⁸⁰ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 77.

¹²⁸¹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 91.

¹²⁸² It is vital to stress that this particular alternate way of storytelling which is used by Terry McMillan in *Waiting to Exhale* (and its sequel) represents her legacy for a large amount of subsequent chick lit novels by many African American women writers who have attached to this pattern.

¹²⁸³ Most of the time, the contact with the narratee is maintained by means of questions and/or tag questions, e.g., “And guess what?” Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 51. Also imperatives can be used to establish contact with the narratee, e.g., when Taylor considers the circumstances of her affair with Luke with respect to faith. “Now, somebody, anybody, tell me how I could be filled with all that power and still fall for Luke?” *Ibid.*, 93.

really all that it's cracked up to be."¹²⁸⁴ Similarly, Yvonne comments, "Don't get me wrong, I love Pastor Brown, but there comes a time when you have to pass on the mantle."¹²⁸⁵ The implied reader is, however, most often addressed by the second person singular.¹²⁸⁶ These shifts which make use of the underlying first-person female point of view help Warren to evoke a confessional mode. It is possible to agree with the statement that chick lit narration is "impressionistic, colloquial, more journalistic narration;" the first-person narration makes impression of semifictional diaries.¹²⁸⁷

The demarcation line for the sequential pattern of the three women characters' accounts are the chapters titled by their first names according to which of them speaks. Unlike in *Waiting to Exhale* and *Getting to Happy*, first, there are no "common" chapters in which their share of the narrative would be equal. Next, Warren's decision to sometimes offer the same pieces of the story to the reader, that is, he/she learns about some events more than once and from various protagonists,¹²⁸⁸ results in somewhat slower pace of the narrative. But most of the time, the respective chapters simultaneously push forward the story for the other protagonists, creating a network of dialogues, conversations, phone calls, etc. The first proper contact of all the three protagonists in the novel occurs in chapter fourteen when Yvonne shares the details of Luke's extramarital activities with Taylor who simultaneously shows up in the church, being in need to talk to Yvonne in person.¹²⁸⁹

Due to the regularly recurring sequential patterns in the succession of basic narrative forms in the novel, it is possible to state that the resulting schematisation visible in the novel is rather the consequence of "creative entropy, that is, of the exhaustion of the creative productivity of the author."¹²⁹⁰ Still, the book is not a mere attempt to imitate what has been popularised by McMillan, which is her ability to give more sides to a story, for this strategy enables Warren to show the common story from various angles and contradictory points of view. This ability is rather visible for instance in Taylor Johnson, a single mother who leaves the audience understanding her struggle, but not easily forgetting her deceit, because Yvonne's account is given, too. It is vital to point out that Taylor's account of events becomes limited toward the end of the novel; the last time she is given the possibility to speak, functioning as a reflector-character is in chapter forty-five.¹²⁹¹

Examples of "strictly perspectival spatial presentation when the reflector-character is "frozen" by being reduced into what Stanzel terms as the camera eye, "in which the narrator limits himself/[herself] to an objective description of the setting of a scene" are found throughout the novel. The technique helps the reader decide what the essential elements of the scene are by means of putting emphasis on them; "in a literary narrative it is precisely the reduction and selection of details which effect their semiotic enhancement. The value of what

¹²⁸⁴ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 1.

¹²⁸⁵ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 18. The same phrase ("Don't get me wrong") is used by Pam, the temporary first-person narrator, on page 51.

¹²⁸⁶ Taylor's inner monologue, for example, contains the following words: "but you would think that." It is necessary to point out that the pronoun might as well be mere part of a general statement which need not be related to the implied reader. In chapter thirty-seven more examples than in any other can be found. Cf. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 215–218.

¹²⁸⁷ Harzewski, introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 5.

¹²⁸⁸ For instance, the reader learns from a dialogue between Yvonne and Pam that the latter one has been promoted at work. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 21.

¹²⁸⁹ Cf. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 86–88.

¹²⁹⁰ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 77.

¹²⁹¹ Warren's decision is apparently influenced by the fact that in the chapter forty-five Taylor's religious mission rounds off the overall message conveyed by this particular character, which unfortunately makes her literally disappear from the final chapters. The few remarks Pam and Yvonne devote to her do not make this gap any better, and make an impression of the author's inability to sustain the pattern kept in the rest of the book.

has been selected increases even more when the choice of details is made by means of immediately experienced persperctivization, that is to say, through the perception of a reflector-character.”¹²⁹² On the whole, Warren’s choice of three reflector-characters combined with first-person narrators together with “the immediate, informative style of chick lit narration” makes the book close to the stream-of-consciousness technique.¹²⁹³ Still, it is too daring to say she “is a brilliant narrator, revealing wild things happen when you turn your life over to God.”¹²⁹⁴

Warren skilfully combines mimetic passages with dialogues, both of which cover approximately the same space. Again, the dialogues not only push the plot forward, giving the reader various angles of looking at the story, but also enable the minor characters to contribute to the storytelling. For example, when talking to Yvonne, Sister Lang who is Joshua’s babysitter reveals that “the girl even didn’t have enough money to buy her baby a winter coat.”¹²⁹⁵ Most of the story is told in the present tenses, which—combined with the prevailing personal and occasional first-person narrative situations—contributes to the effect of immediacy on the reader. For the background knowledge and past events the past tenses are used. Chapter sixteen is written only in present tense, for it depicts Luke’s receiving of the paternity test result. Similarly to McMillan, the use of verbal tenses and alternation between mimetic and dramatic forms is given thematically, i.e., by trying to put emphasis on the more significant passages.

10.9 Plot and Ending

To attract the reader and arouse his/her interest, Warren offers a very dramatic excerpt of one of the chapters on the very first page of the book (that is, even before the copyright information, etc.). The opening three lines are capitalised, and read “AS SOON AS I SEE THE DISTORTED FIGURE LYING ON THE HOSPITAL BED, TEARS START POURING OUT OF MY EYES.” The reader is shown a picture of a badly hurt female character (Yvonne), visited by her church sisters who pray for her. To put even more tension to it, the reflector confesses, “I’m not the first woman Luke cheated with, but somehow our indiscretion seemed a catalyst for the breakdown of their marriage. How can Yvonne not view me this way?”¹²⁹⁶

The plot of the story consists of a more or less predictable sequence of events, following a structured formula containing the following elements in a carefully-planned order. The exposition in the introductory chapters orients the reader to the setting of the story, makes him/her familiar with the characters, and offers various pieces of information about their past as well as immediate circumstances. A series of conflicting forces follows, preventing the three black women protagonists from reaching their goals, which include not only conflicts between them and the society, but also among themselves, and within themselves.¹²⁹⁷ A considerate amount of time is devoted to the complications¹²⁹⁸ that occur within the story, prolonging and developing the central conflict, being followed by three individual climaxes at

¹²⁹² Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 117–18.

¹²⁹³ Wells, “Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History,” in *Chick Lit*, 67.

¹²⁹⁴ “Review of *What a Sista Should Do*.”

¹²⁹⁵ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 22.

¹²⁹⁶ The excerpt forms part of chapter twenty-eight. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 166–169.

¹²⁹⁷ E.g., the same Taylor who loves her child thinks of Luke’s wife before the two women get more acquainted. When Taylor is to reveal Luke’s name, she wants to “handle this without involving his wife.” Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 58. Pam has “no idea how any women can love her man and hate him at the same time. Especially a Christian woman.” *Ibid.*, 34.

¹²⁹⁸ By giving Joshua’s name, Taylor starts a series of events which change the course of the novel: Yvonne opens the envelope which contains the letter informing Luke about the paternity test, the news about whose son Joshua might be, and that Taylor used to be Luke’s mistress spreads across the church, etc.

various points of time, which should be appreciated. The results of the conflicts are revealed in the falling action, leading gradually to the resolution of the story. For Pam, loose ends are tied up through her reconciliation with Troy and the birth of their son; the same cannot be said about Yvonne who finds herself at the beginning of a new kind of life, and Taylor who has been given least attention in the final chapters. One of the rare reviews states that as generally in Warren's other works, the story provides "juicy drama with a generally light tone," although touching on a few serious issues.¹²⁹⁹

Various individual chapters are worth a more detailed discussion. The linearity of the plot is not disrupted in the first two chapters which provide the background knowledge to the reader about the major as well as minor characters (i.e., mainly the family members) by any past events that would be related to the main plotline. In chapters two and three the other protagonists than the respective reflector-characters are mentioned for the first time. The third chapter of the novel deals with the personal history of Yvonne and Luke's relationship, meanwhile the fourth one is a good example of a well-planned combination of the main plot, Taylor's reflections on her son, and the overall observations of her existence. The eighth chapter offers a detailed insight into the Lyons' relationship, breaking the linearity of the plot; similarly, in chapter fifteen the reader learns about Taylor's past and previous experience with men. Chapter seventeen is a breaking point in this sister-girl novel, as Pam and Taylor start approaching each other as more than members of the same church but friends. The only significant surprise to the reader comes when Amanda, Luke's illegitimate child whose existence Yvonne discovers toward the end of the novel shows up for the trial in chapter forty-seven. It is rather beneficial for the novel that Warren supplies the reader with the details of the major and minor characters' past in an unexpected manner also as the book approaches the ending.

From what was said above, it results that the story is also dialogue-driven to a large extent. The episodic structure is typical of the novel, comprising of the chapters with the particular reflector-characters' names, at the end of which either miniclimaxes occur, stimulating the reader's curiosity and willingness to continue reading, or passages reassuring the reader the Lord is with the protagonists, which makes them strong¹³⁰⁰ (before another catastrophe comes), underlying the Christian message of the novel.

As far as the ending is concerned, "the first-person account culminates with neither an engagement nor a marriage."¹³⁰¹ What makes this particular book also different from other chick lit ones is the embellished, grandiose ending: at the church Pam reconciles even with the woman singer she has been jealous of for a long time, or a newcomer to Sister to Sister who has three children with three different men is not judged by the conservative members of the renewed group.¹³⁰² The tendency to avoid ultimately happy endings typical of most of chick lit is unsurprisingly sacrificed to the Christian message of *What a Sista Should Do*.

In particular, as mentioned above, Taylor spreads the glory of God as an evangelist. Luke will be serving a minimum sentence of twelve months for domestic violence; knowing she is safe and independent, Yvonne feels "a surprising sense of freedom that [she] wouldn't trade for anything." Not knowing exactly what to do with this freedom, since she has never lived alone, she enrolls at the community college, "playing [the rest] by ear."¹³⁰³ She confesses

¹²⁹⁹ "Tiffany L. Warren," *Contemporary Authors Online*.

¹³⁰⁰ Cf. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 33, 50, etc. The prayer uttered by Taylor on the way to the airport to Jamaica changes completely Yvonne's view of the woman. Before, she tried "to picture her as some Jezebel who is thinking of nothing else but ways to destroy my family," which makes her "feel guilty for some of the thoughts" she has had of Taylor. As a matter of fact, "With God, anything is possible." *Ibid.*, 150–151.

¹³⁰¹ Harzewski, "Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners," in *Chick Lit*, 42.

¹³⁰² Cf. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 280–282.

¹³⁰³ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 269.

that she owes a lot to the Sister to Sister group at the end, because “helping other sisters was the perfect diversion” she needed for her imperfect home. “Luke’s cheating was more than obvious;” Yvonne just “chose not to see it.”¹³⁰⁴ Troy’s acceptance of faith and his regular visits to the church cause Pam’s outbursts of optimism. Expressing her thanks to Jesus for listening to her, she states: “I couldn’t have written a better conclusion to this little chapter of my life. I know that everything is not perfect, and we’ve still got some issues to work out, but life isn’t interesting without challenge. And I know we’ll make it. With God’s help.”¹³⁰⁵

10.10 Humour

Harsh critics of the chick lit genre insist on the fact that “[o]nly in its deployment of humor can the best of chick lit stand up favorably to the tradition of women’s writing.” But humour “perhaps unfairly, as many have argued—has never been the most valued and respected of literary elements.”¹³⁰⁶ Despite this, when humour lacks in a Christian chick lit novel, it can have serious consequences on its overall tone. The most audible humorous voice (yet a not very loud one) in the novel belongs to Troy, Pam’s husband. His comments based on exaggeration or teasing are in a great contrast with the women’s seriousness. He greets his wife, “The queen is home,” making the whole family laugh, for instance.¹³⁰⁷ Unfortunately, the book does not contain any kind of the protagonists’ self-deprecating humour which is so typical of other subgenres of chick lit, and which could have largely contributed to the authenticity of the characters.

The shift in the protagonist’s relationship from members of the same church toward friendship is also marked by a more frequent use of humour in the book. Interestingly enough, it is a very different kind of humour from the feminine and female ones, as applied by McMillan in the two previously analysed girlfriend novels. Mostly, the humour is based on a mere exaggeration and hyperbole, or mockery at some character’s expense such as when Pam asks Yvonne for a recipe: “So, are you going to give me that corn bread dressing recipe, or am I going to have to beat it out of you?”¹³⁰⁸ Tragicomic situations can prove to be humorous to some extent as well. Pam visits Troy shortly after his car accident at the hospital and describes him as follows. “My husband is an extremely handsome man, but lying in this bed, he’d beat Quasimodo out in an ugly contest.”¹³⁰⁹ Returned home, Troy teases his wife, “A brotha got to have a near-death experience to get a home-cooked meal around here?”¹³¹⁰ Verbal humour occurs not so frequently in the novel, but Yvonne’s ability to describe a shabby lawyer she consults as “Mr. Car Salesman”¹³¹¹ is its example.

10.11 Language

The same call-and-response pattern as in the previous two novels is employed in *What a Sista Should Do*. In this book it seems even more palpable thanks to the first-person narrators who occasionally replace the reflectors, and directly address the reader, as it was explained in the subchapter on narrative strategies. The urgency of their vivid communication with the reader becomes even more intense when talking to God and praying.

¹³⁰⁴ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 270.

¹³⁰⁵ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 279.

¹³⁰⁶ Wells, “Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History,” in *Chick Lit*, 64.

¹³⁰⁷ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 3.

¹³⁰⁸ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 113. Considering the circumstances of the situation, it is Pam’s attempt to cheer Yvonne up just before Christmas shortly after she has learnt Luke is Joshua’s father.

¹³⁰⁹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 215.

¹³¹⁰ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 247.

¹³¹¹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 220.

Syntactically, the length of sentences differs: longer, complex sentences with linking devices prevail in contemplative passages and inner monologues (that is, the mimetic forms), meanwhile the dialogues (the dramatic forms) tend to consist of shorter ones. When talking to God, or praying by themselves, the text is written in italics in order to differentiate it from the rest. Formally, the text contains the following features of the spoken language: there are numerous questions and exclamations;¹³¹² tag, condensed, and echo questions; backchannels, grammatical reduction, follow-ups, low lexical density, response forms (stance and linking adverbials, elliptic replies), fillers, discourse markers, situational and verbal ellipsis, lexical bundles, interjections,¹³¹³ hesitation pauses, repeats (or false starts), morphological variants (ain't), incompletions, vague expressions (kind of, like), repetition, occasional grammatical incorrectness, fronting, avoiding specificity, deictic expressions, response elicitors, double negations,¹³¹⁴ hedges (well), and so on. The use of vocatives varies with the changing relationship among the protagonists; for instance, it is not until chapter seventeen till Pam addresses Taylor "girl."¹³¹⁵ This particular way of addressing is consistently used henceforth in the novel together with "girlfriend." A strict clerk at the Welfare Office addresses Taylor, "Honey, the judges can be real persuasive."¹³¹⁶

The text does not contain hesitations, retreats, unfinished sentences, incompletions interrupted by other speakers, syntactic blends, morphological variants, and so on. The use of full instead of contracted forms in some passages makes the characters sound unnatural. However, which is positive, the language of Troy's protégés as well as teenagers addressed on the street differ to a large extent from that of the women protagonists;¹³¹⁷ examples of the stylistic downgrading of the authorial language cannot be found.

Figurative language which would act upon the reader in a thought-provoking way is not a strong point of the novel. Different layers of meaning or a higher degree of implicitness are not to be encountered frequently in the book. Numerous idioms together with not very frequent similes and metaphors¹³¹⁸ represent the most challenging aspects of language the book provides. Irony is used, too, e.g., "I work in lovely corporate America," Pam states.¹³¹⁹ To put emphasis, Warren often uses repetition of certain expressions and/or phrases, or even grammatical constructions. Taylor shares her feelings about what Luke has done to her: "No, he has never apologized for taking advantage of my stupidity. No, he has not even acknowledged my child's presence. He has not offered one red cent, and he's got plenty."¹³²⁰ Similarly to McMillan, she also employs emphasis in italics.¹³²¹

Expletives and taboo words represent an intriguing area in Christian chick lit in general. This kind of expressions is not avoided completely in the novel. Mostly, they occur in relation to stigmatising single women, Taylor in particular. For example, Luke calls her "[t]hat conniving heifer" and "a worthless whore"¹³²² when Yvonne confronts him, having

¹³¹² "I was floored!" Taylor describes her feelings when Luke request her to have an abortion. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 11.

¹³¹³ Taylor's exclamation "Whew!" expresses amazement. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 13.

¹³¹⁴ "Don't nothing about Luke shock me no more," Yvonne claims. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 262.

¹³¹⁵ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 109.

¹³¹⁶ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 59.

¹³¹⁷ Cf. for example Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 238–240.

¹³¹⁸ As for the metaphors, "at the drop of a hat" can be mentioned, for instance. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 44. The easy language of the novel is enriched with idioms such as "fine as wine," "the chickens have come home to roost," "Spencer is making some long dough," referring to his salary, etc. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 18, 60, and 142.

¹³¹⁹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 1.

¹³²⁰ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 13.

¹³²¹ Cf. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 129.

¹³²² Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 71, 72.

read the letter announcing he is accused of fathering Taylor's child. The only expression close to taboo words (or moderated expletives such as "damn") uttered by Yvonne occurs not when they are having an argument with her husband—as it might be expected from two furious fighting adults—, but in a situation in which she angrily expresses her wish that Luke could replace the old Pastor Brown who should retire, referring to "his old butt."¹³²³ The versatile intensifier "ass" discussed in both previous analyses is replaced by a softer word, "behind" or "down."¹³²⁴ Neither taboo naming expressions nor moderated expletives which would have made the characters sound more natural are used. All things considered, "imaginative use of language, inventive and thought-provoking metaphors, layers of meaning, ..., and innovative handling of conventional structure" is what the majority of chick lit lack;¹³²⁵ the same can be said about this novel.

10.12 Values and Emotions

One of the basic dilemmas of this subgenre is how can possibly be church chick lit's emphasis on consumerism and sexual escapades combined with Christian values. Nanci Milone Hill, a newly responsible reviewer for the Christian fiction column in *Literary Journal*,¹³²⁶ suggests in 2010 that in this type of literature there are "stories of families and friends with the same trials and adversities that characters in the secular fiction face." Unfortunately, what she adds can be hardly agreed with: she sees the books as "gentle reads that [take] place within the framework of the Christian faith without being heavy-handed or preachy."¹³²⁷

Religion in *What a Sista Should Do* does not try to reconcile with the common sense of the secular world, on the contrary, it causes friction. The protagonists' belief in God shows clearly the world beyond this one and suggests there are truths that cannot be discovered in this world. The book indicates and explains otherworldly values that surpass the secular. For the novel's characters faith implies loving God, and accepting that they are children of God they originate from. Having faith means not only believing in what is not visible, such as love and noble ideals, but also being able to base their practical actions upon them regardless of whether it is convenient for them or not.

The ability to forgive represents one of the essential Christian values in the book. Taylor feels sorry that she "allowed the devil to use [her] in coming against [Yvonne's] marriage." Pam sees no reason why the two women should not "come to some sort of truce," despite the fact that it will surely take some time for Yvonne to forgive her husband's former mistress.¹³²⁸ (Still, despite the unconditional love and forgiveness taught at the church, the protagonists do not avoid retributive thinking and certain sense of punishment completely, making sure that the perpetrator has not got away with his/her crimes.¹³²⁹) At last, Taylor is forgiven by Yvonne: "I don't know what that means for us, but I'm not going to hold this

¹³²³ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 18. Still, as explained in chapter eight, this is a kind of expression which can possibly have a positive connotation.

¹³²⁴ The examples might be "to put up with his sorry behind," or "Luke's sorry behind;" "Sit yo' black behind down." Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 9, 93, and 57.

¹³²⁵ Wells, "Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History," in *Chick Lit*, 64.

¹³²⁶ It may be of some interest that Hill explicitly states the importance of taking the readers' opinion, that is, how the books appeal to the readers, into account when writing her reviews of books. She, "thus ... will be taking a more readers' advisory (RA) approach with this column, keeping the reader and not the librarian in mind." The opening paragraph of the Christian fiction column with reviews, Hill, *Library Journal*, 81.

¹³²⁷ Hill, review of *In the Midst of All*, 81.

¹³²⁸ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 108.

¹³²⁹ Visiting Troy in the hospital, Pam brings herself to admit that her "flesh wants punish him for making [her] sick with worry" despite the pain he is suffering from. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 224. Even Yvonne reveals her "carnal nature wants to see Luke suffer." *Ibid.*, 243.

against you. I can't."¹³³⁰ Yvonne goes a step further, becoming thankful to Taylor for what happened. She says that it is a "shame that Luke and Taylor did what they did," but she "ought to be thanking her for giving [Yvonne] a much-needed wake-up call."¹³³¹ As Pastor Brown from the New Faith sums up, "forgiveness is a process. Only the Lord forgives us to the point where the sin is wiped out completely and not even remembered."¹³³² Yvonne has a decision to make: she can "either choose to forgive," or "can choose to walk around with this poison in [her] system."¹³³³ After a painful conversation with God, she comes to the conclusion that because she has been forgiven, it now is her turn to do so, and "there is nothing left for [her] but forgive."¹³³⁴ Yvonne's ability to forgive enables her to come to Luke's sentencing and speak on his behalf, begging the court for leniency.¹³³⁵

Helpfulness, good will, and selflessness are among the most accentuated values in the novel. Pam and Troy's success makes Yvonne "happy for her and her family," since Pam is "a good woman" who deserves it.¹³³⁶ Despite her loyalty to Luke, Yvonne's empathy and ability to look at things in a more open-minded way in the courtroom, waiting for the result of the paternity test, enable her to change her mind about Taylor. She is not the "husband-stealing vixen" who "doesn't have anything to lose" unlike Yvonne and Luke anymore, but Yvonne starts "feeling somewhat apologetic toward her," which is confusing and leads to Yvonne's reflection upon whether to "be sorry about any of this."¹³³⁷

Gradually, Taylor becomes aware of her responsibility and the role she played in the breakdown of Yvonne's marriage. Responsibility is related to Christian acceptance of the good and bad. At a church meeting, young women in the singles' ministry are instructed in the following manner. "Once you get married and the storms come, there is only one person that you can change, and that is you. So make sure you are already as close as you can be to the Bible's standard for a husband or a wife."¹³³⁸

The ability to rethink and repent what one has done is stressed throughout the book. Taylor's conscience dictates her to do the following: "[f]or long I've felt that I don't owe Yvonne anything. ... I can't keep acting like I haven't done anything to wrong her. ... I want to apologize to Yvonne, and I want her to forgive me. It's a lot to ask of Yvonne, and on the real, I don't even know if I could forgive my husband's ex-mistress."¹³³⁹ Gratitude is similarly important: Yvonne is thankful to Pam for "bringing her and Taylor together." (But Pam feels she only played the role of an instrument in God's hands.) She knows for sure she "needed them as much as they needed" her. She adds, "[i]f it wasn't for the two of them, I would've gone crazy over Troy and this baby and everything else not right in my world."¹³⁴⁰

Even though "money doesn't buy happiness,"¹³⁴¹ the strong Christian tone of the novel does not prevent its author from presenting material values as vital in a woman's existence and so typical of chick lit. Before Pam and Troy become rich, she explains her priorities when she met her husband. "I was young enough to still believe that artistry was much more important than cash on hand." More important, her plan is to pass such knowledge on Cicely

¹³³⁰ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 156.

¹³³¹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 179.

¹³³² Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 180.

¹³³³ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 242.

¹³³⁴ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 243.

¹³³⁵ Cf. Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 258–260.

¹³³⁶ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 85.

¹³³⁷ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 100.

¹³³⁸ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 193.

¹³³⁹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 152.

¹³⁴⁰ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 275.

¹³⁴¹ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 133.

and Gretchen, “I’m not going to teach my daughters to be gold diggers, but rest assured they will know how to spot a provider.”¹³⁴²

At the same time, morals are often conveyed in a subversive manner in the novel. Taylor becomes revengeful toward Luke, but rejects to leave the church when she gets pregnant, making the situation even harder for herself, and wanting “Luke to suffer. ... He has to pay by looking at his son every week, knowing that he can never acknowledge him without destroying his perfect little world. I know it gets to him, even if he won’t ever admit it.”¹³⁴³ Greedy Luke threatens Taylor she will never “get a dime out of [him].”¹³⁴⁴ By contrasting the struggling single mother Taylor and Luke’s unscrupulous behaviour, at this occasion, Warren underlines his audacity without obvious moralising.

Warren extensively shows how one’s personal values are vital in influencing actions, motivating behaviour, and determining life-styles on an individual level. The characters’ values are reflected in the judgments they make and the solutions they choose, which makes them more than relevant. In her church lit novel Christians find that their personal values are often different from the values of others and from many societal values, especially in the changing world they inhabit today. In addition, she deals with the consequences of what happens when not all Christian individuals live by them. There are many lessons learnt in *What A Sista Should Do*, and due to the fact that she delivers a dramatic story line through mostly believable characters, some of them will not be easily forgotten by some readers.

Applying Joyce’s Afro-centric triadic parallel according to which black American writers should attempt to reach harmony between the meaning, mode of expression, and ideology, it is necessary to say that, unfortunately, the intended ideology and meaning presented in this book surpass its form. In addition, it results from the analysis that the book hardly falls into the category of open literary works. *What a Sista Should Do* is not a book which would basically allow for innumerable individual responses and/or interpretations for two intertwined groups of reasons. First, presenting the elements of recognition and identification—which itself would not be anything bad in a popular piece of literature—, Warren practically does not avoid incessant moralising, turning the novel into a particularly classifiable book which can hardly surpass the boundaries of the particular chick lit subgenre, that is Christian chick lit (or church lit). The preaching style of the book appears on the surface despite her attempts to hide preaching behind the mantle of subversion. This fact is not helped even by her attempt to combine the aperspective showing style (which appears to be explicit and complete) with the telling one, carried through the perspectives of individual reflectors who give a conspicuously incomplete account of events. Second, the virtues of the novel are overshadowed by the discrepancies and reservations the book has languagewise, especially in combination with the lacking humour and distorted male characters—which is apparently related to the first group of reasons—and affect the credibility of what is presented. That is why—fulfilling the familiar standards of the genre of Christian chick lit, as defined in the first subchapter—the novel hardly comes up with anything new, and therefore it is not possible to say it remarkably shifts, not to mention transcends, the horizon of expectations previously shifted by McMillan as well as other Christian chick lit authors.

¹³⁴² Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 53.

¹³⁴³ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 30. Simultaneously, Taylor is motivated by her courage and activeness. Regretful about her involvement with a married minister, she continues to hold her head up and refuses to leave her church home despite the stares and talk. Her pride is admirable: actively looking for a job when she loses her former one, still “feeling like a beggar,” she refuses to end up as other poor black women. *Ibid.*, 46.

¹³⁴⁴ Warren, *What a Sista Should Do*, 77.

11 *The Other Side of the Game*

I prepared turkey sandwiches, popcorn, and a couple of clod beers. I hope he wasn't expecting a four-course meal because I don't cook for any man. They get way too comfortable with that shit. He will be eating Lunchables while he's dating me unless *he* decides to play Martha Stewart. Asha Mitchell¹³⁴⁵

The analysed novel was written in 2005 at the eve of a kind of war going on with chick lit. (The critical stance toward this genre taken by Elizabeth Merrick, the editor of an anthology titled *This Is Not Chick Lit: Original Stories by America's Best Women Writers*, was dealt with in the chapter on African American popular novel. She reacted to Lauren Baratz-Logsted's *This Is Chick Lit* from the same year.) Although the genre is well-established and accepted by the readers nowadays, it still receives mixed attention from critics and academics.¹³⁴⁶

This attention—or better say its lack, as in case of *The Other Side of The Game*—will only become part of the analysis. Having discussed the author of this novel and her literary activities, the chapter examines the same features as the previous three analyses, that is, the horizon of expectations connected with this subgenre of chick lit at a particular moment of time; further, the discussion will be followed by subchapters on the synopsis of the novel, its form, setting in time and place, male and female characters, themes presented in the book, the storytelling strategies, its plot and ending, humour, language of the book, as well as the values and emotions it evokes to the reader.

11.1 Anita Doreen Diggs: Introductory Information

Anita Doreen Diggs (born 1966) is an American editor, novelist, and lecturer.¹³⁴⁷ She was born as the elder of two children and grew up in New York City where she also attended local public schools in the Hell's Kitchen section of Manhattan. She started her book publishing career in 1989 as Executive Secretary to the CEO of New American Library, which now forms part of Penguin Books USA. Following the job, she worked as a book publicist for Dutton Books for three years before fully engaging in writing. She returned to work in 1997 as Senior Publicist at AOL Time Warner Books, moving on to One World Books, a division of Random House, in August 2000 where she edited both fiction and non-fiction. From 2004 she has been a features editor for the *Savoy Magazine*.¹³⁴⁸ She also works as an editor for AALBC.com's Manuscript Critique Service, leads AALBC.com's OnlineNovel Writing Workshops, and is an AALBC.com Book Reviewer. In addition, her literary activities include

¹³⁴⁵ Anita Doreen Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game* (New York: Thorndike Press, 2007, 2nd edition), 60.

¹³⁴⁶ Rian Montgomery adds, that “[a]nother aspect of chick lit bashing that I have had the misfortune of witnessing is mostly in regards to reviewers, reporters, and columnists. Often you will see a flashy headline to a review or article that belittles chick lit in some way. The writer of such an article enjoys putting an entire genre down just to make the book/author/subject they are writing about sound better” in order to convince the reader to purchase some other book. “What Is Chick Lit,” ChickLitBooks.com, accessed February 10, 2013, <http://chicklitbooks.com/what-is-chick-lit/>.

¹³⁴⁷ Diggs has lectured on the topics of “novel writing, book proposal development, how to get a literary agent, how to get a job in the book publishing industry and the past, present and future of African American literature.” “About Anita,” ContemporaryRomanceWriters.com, accessed June 14, 2013. <http://contemporaryromancewriters.com/Authorinfo.cfm?authorID=3532>.

¹³⁴⁸ “Anita Doreen Diggs,” Shelfari.com, accessed June 13, 2013, <http://www.shelfari.com/authors/a169620/Anita-Doreen-Diggs/>.

working as a writing mentor with the *Creative Nonfiction*¹³⁴⁹ mentoring programme.¹³⁵⁰ Diggs lives in Harlem.¹³⁵¹

As mentioned above, she worked for Random House¹³⁵² until 2002, Time Warner Trade Publishing, and Thunder's Mouth Press, too. *The Chicago Tribune* and *C-Span* have interviewed her;¹³⁵³ she has been profiled also in *The New York Times* and *The New York Daily News*, as well as in numerous television and radio programmes.¹³⁵⁴ *Columbia Journalism Review* placed Diggs on their "The Shapers" list for the year 2000 (which is a list of prominent New Yorkers who shape the national media agenda.)¹³⁵⁵

Diggs is the author of four novels, the first one being *A Mighty Love* (2003); *A Meeting in the Ladies Room* was published a year later. *The Other Side of the Game* (2005) is her third book, followed by *Denzel's Lips* (2006), its sequel.¹³⁵⁶ She also engages in writing self-help books on career advice and resources for black Americans. Among these books there are *Talking Drums: An African-American Quote Collection, Vol. 1*,¹³⁵⁷ *Success at Work: A Guide for African-Americans* (1993), *The African American Resource Guide* (1994),¹³⁵⁸ and in 1998 she published *Staying Married: A Guide for African American Couples*, co-authored with Vera S. Paster and published by Kensington Books.¹³⁵⁹ The book was appreciated as "One of the best books of the past 20 years" by the *Essence* magazine.¹³⁶⁰

11.2 Horizon of Expectations

The answer to what to expect from (black) chick lit is a tricky one due to its legacy of various contradictory genres. In Rian Montgomery's opinion, there is much speculation that chick lit is nothing more than "trash," "fluffy, mind-numbing garbage," "formulaic vapid prose,"¹³⁶¹ and much more.¹³⁶² Reading extensively into the genre, one must necessarily conclude that there are good as well as bad examples. The common features displayed by (black) chick lit (or Sistah lit, as it is also called), as widely known by its readers, are the following ones. Chick lit is a genre comprised of books that are mainly written by women for women; the

¹³⁴⁹ *Creative Nonfiction* is a literary magazine based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, founded by Lee Gutkind in 1993.

¹³⁵⁰ Cf. "Creative Nonfiction Mentors," CreativeNonfiction.com, accessed March 5, 2013, <https://www.creativenonfiction.org/thejournal/mentor/mentor.htm>.

¹³⁵¹ "Anita Doreen Diggs," Kensington Publishing Corp., accessed June 10, 2013, <http://www.kensingtonbooks.com/author.aspx/23966>.

¹³⁵² To this particular publishing house, Diggs was able to bring such authors as Judge Greg Mathis, American Book Award winner Elizabeth Nunez, and NAACP Image Award nominee Ilyasah Shabazz and Time Warner Trade Publishing where she acquired books by comedian Steve Harvey, entrepreneur Terrie Williams, and novelist John Ridley. "About Anita."

¹³⁵³ "Anita Doreen Diggs," AALBC.com, accessed June 15, 2013, <http://aalbc.com/authors/anitadoreendiggs.htm>.

¹³⁵⁴ "Anita Doreen Diggs," Kensington Publishing Corp.

¹³⁵⁵ "Anita Doreen Diggs," AALBC.com.

¹³⁵⁶ "Anita Doreen Diggs," AALBC.com.

¹³⁵⁷ The book's importance lies in the fact that it offers quotes on many subject-matters from a historical African American perspective. It is seen as "one of the most extensive collections of African-American statements to ever appear in book form." "Anita Doreen Diggs," AALBC.com.

¹³⁵⁸ In this particular handbook it is reflected how versatile Diggs in fact is, since it provides information about books, videos, organizations and services of interest to the African-American community. "Anita Doreen Diggs," AALBC.com.

¹³⁵⁹ "Anita Doreen Diggs," AALBC.com.

¹³⁶⁰ "Anita Doreen Diggs," Shelfari.com.

¹³⁶¹ Montgomery, "What is Chick Lit."

¹³⁶² Sarah Crown goes even further, naming the genre "those pastel bonbons that have turned your local Barnes & Noble into a gingerbread house of crap writing." Sarah Crown, "Culture Vulture Blog," *The Guardian*, accessed November 12, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/culturevultureblog+books/chick-lit>.

female character's age ranges approximately from twenty to sixty, attracting various target groups simultaneously.¹³⁶³ Kindred wit as well as no rigid rules of female morality, together with attention paid to the dailiness of women's lives, belong among the basics of the genre. In addition, as Montgomery conveys,

[t]here is usually a personal, light, and humorous tone to the books. Sometimes they are written in first-person narrative; other time they are written from multiple viewpoints. The plots usually consist of women experiencing usual life issues, such as love, marriage, dating, relationships, friendships, roommates, corporate environments, weight issues, addiction, and much more.¹³⁶⁴

It is very important to add that the overall tone is what distinguishes typical chick lit books whose stories are told in a very confiding, personal tone. This strategy serves one plain purpose: to accentuate verisimilitude, making the reader identify with the character(s), feel as if (preferably) she has gone through something similar herself, or at least has become a witness of the events.

What was said in the previous paragraph not only relates both to the earlier novels (i.e., the first wave of chick lit) and the later ones that are excessively light. As this enormously successful genre has evolved, the emerging subgenres described in the fifth chapter of the dissertation have kept shaping the original formula, though. It is the aim of this analysis to discover whether and how in particular *The Other Side of the Game* fits in the ingrained rules of the black chick lit subgenre.

Chick lit is smart, fun fiction for and/or about women of all ages. Story lines often revolve around jobs, children, motherhood, romance, fame, living in the 'big city', friendship, dieting and much more, usually with a touch of humor thrown in. Many of these books are written from a first-person viewpoint, making them a bit more personal and realistic. The plots can range from being very light and fast-paced to being extraordinarily deep, thought-provoking and/or moving.¹³⁶⁵

Regarding critical attention, due to the amount of black chick lit and romance novels and the publishers' effort to sell them, books similar to *The Other Side of the Game* are included in magazines such as *Booklist*, but in this particular case, the review is reduced to a mere description of the plot. In order to keep the reader in suspicion, the account of events presented in the review omits the climax and ending.¹³⁶⁶

11.3 Synopsis of the Novel

Saundra Patterson and Asha Mitchell are step sisters who live very different lives. Twenty-two-year-old Saundra is a yoga-practicing vegan and a mediation fan whose father Phillip Patterson (or Phil, as he is called throughout the novel) she cannot imagine her life without, for she has lived with him since her mother Lola's death, i.e., for six years.¹³⁶⁷ Together with her twenty-four-year-old sister Asha,¹³⁶⁸ Saundra is preparing happily for Saundra's upcoming nuptials. By contrast, materialistic Asha, an accessories buyer, simultaneously engages in various relationships in order to be able to afford designers clothes and her fancy flat. She believes that men can only be a part of her life sexually and financially, having "no

¹³⁶³ Some of the black chick lit novels are not confined only to women of twenty- or thirty-something but also girls, adolescents, and older women, designed to a wide range of generations than women in childbearing years; whereas other representatives fall strictly into the categories of teenage lit, mommy lit, lady lit, church lit, etc.

¹³⁶⁴ Montgomery, "What is Chick Lit."

¹³⁶⁵ Montgomery, "What Is Chick Lit."

¹³⁶⁶ And despite Diggs' impact on the African American community, there are no articles, essays, or even a biography note available in the *Literature Resource Center* database.

¹³⁶⁷ When Lola dies, the social worker says it is not possible for Saundra to stay with her sister because Saundra is still underage. As a matter of fact, she speaks about having had "a wonderful life together" with respect to sharing his house. Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 16–17.

¹³⁶⁸ It may be of some interest that the age protagonists' age is mostly not mentioned directly, but the reader is to calculate from the distance between the depicted events, which can be seen as a sort of challenge, if taking into account the amount of minor characters.

intention of settling down or ever being faithful to any one man,”¹³⁶⁹ whereas Sandra and her high school sweetheart Yero live a holistic lifestyle and support each other’s dreams. Phil is a police detective who has lived with a terrible secret since he was in the first grade. For six years, he has been dating Evelyn, his colleague from the same precinct, who helped him to raise Sandra, but always has an excuse for postponing their engagement. When Sandra discovers her father’s secret of having been a gay for years, it affects the relationship she has with the two most important men in her life, Phil as well as her fiancé. Sandra flees to the only safe place she has at the moment, Asha’s apartment, which reveals how different the sisters are in fact. At the end of the novel, there is a happy reunion at Sandra and Yero’s wedding in which all main characters but Evelyn participate.

11.4 Form

Despite the fact that this novel does not have any pastel cover and items such as handbags on it in any of its editions,¹³⁷⁰ it is immediately recognizable as a piece of women’s prose which inclines to black chick lit, featuring a young, well-dressed, and attractive African American woman. Meanwhile less romance and more realism is generally typical of Sistah lit, the plot leading to a happy ending and other features which will be examined in the analysis could possibly rank the novel partly among the contemporary romance novels.¹³⁷¹ *The Other Side of the Game* is, however, above all a girlfriend (or sister-girl) novel. Paradoxically, even though the two women protagonists are as close as can be in a large part of the novel, they have almost nothing in common, as far as their values, lifestyles, plans, and dreams are concerned. This gives the girlfriend novel a similarly intriguing starting point as to *What a Sista Should Do*.

11.5 Setting in Time and Place

Various hints allow the reader to realise the setting in time at the turn of the 21st century due to the hints to television shows, namely the Jerry Springer, Maury Powich, and Ricki Lake ones. When Asha goes out, she heads for a club where Wesley Snipes, Snoop Dog, or Terrence Dashon Howard party; talking about her bank account, she compares its size to Biggie Smalls, an African American rapper. This novel joins the other analysed books in their contemporary metropolis setting—what happens in the book takes place in Manhattan, New York. Before the death of their mother Lola, the sisters’ childhood was spent in midtown Manhattan. The main plot novel covers approximately a year in the characters’ lives; in their memories, however, they return to different periods of their life, beginning with the childhood.

11.6 Characters

Diggs takes her characters and puts them through a series of mostly realistic ordeals, many that not only women readers can relate to. It is one of the strong points of the novel that both male and female characters display true emotions, thoughts, and behaviour. Among other, it is enabled by the combination of direct and indirect characterisation. For example, the clothes the protagonists wear reflect their personalities; that is why they play an essential role in the

¹³⁶⁹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 14.

¹³⁷⁰ According to Montgomery, some of the covers with embarrassing titles and pictures of legs or shoes or shopping bags are truly masking meaningful, touching, hilarious at times and wonderful chick lit stories,” which is—however—caused by the fact that marketing departments at chick lit publishing companies often package it “as a lot lighter and more daring than it really is.” And, paradoxically enough, “for some reason, some of the lightest, frilliest chick lit is published in hardcover, therefore bringing it to more reading audiences.” “What Is Chick Lit.”

¹³⁷¹ Cf. “About Anita.”

process of characterization in the novel. Asha's taste for expensive clothes is dealt with in various subchapters of this analysis; Saundra's rejection of conventionality is mirrored also by what the young woman wears. On the other hand, the existence of some passages with unnecessary (and sometimes even redundant) portrayals of various characters makes the mosaic of their personalities too obvious and exposed to a larger extent than necessary.¹³⁷²

11.6.1 Women Characters

To start with, generally, in chick lit, the protagonists are "invariably more likeable than the characters around them, usually because of their endearing faults rather than because they are paragons."¹³⁷³ This generally proves to be correct with Asha Mitchell, despite her numerous personality flaws. Also, the differences between the sisters represent a fruitful source of conflicts. In this case, the favourite chick lit pattern of contrasting the major character who is outstanding in some respect with another rather average (usually minor) female character cannot be spoken about. The two sisters represent equally important protagonists with characteristic personal traits. Asha's priorities remain rather down-to-earth throughout the novel, because she is "a fiercely independent career woman and serial dater who has no intention of settling down-or giving up meat of any kind."¹³⁷⁴ Whereas Saundra Patterson represents a character for whom spiritual life and other people's needs are prior to material values. Both share, though, the conflict resulting from their individual's pursuit of self-fulfilment on one hand, and responsibility on the other one. What was said about the previous novel's characters class is also applicable on Asha, an active social ladder climber. Saundra's financial fighting and her idea to quit the college just one semester before the finals is a temporary state caused by her loss of home (and therefore also father's support) when she seeks shelter at her sister's.

Despite the fact that Evelyn Blake appears on the scene much less than the other major women protagonists, she remains one of the most intriguing characters. After the death of Lola Smith, Saundra moves to Phil's house where she is raised by Evelyn, who also shapes her mind. (The book contains also a conversation with the author in which Diggs explains what her inspiration for this particular character was. She says, "I didn't have a specific person in mind. She just represents an updated version of the thousands of black women who have made tremendous sacrifices to finish raising children who were not their own."¹³⁷⁵) Saundra's relationship with her turns out to be vital for her future personal development. Saundra considers this "intelligent, classy, sophisticated woman with a heart of gold" to be not "only a treasure-find for Dad." "If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't be who I am today," she admits.¹³⁷⁶ Another remarkable character is related to her; although a minor one. Evelyn's mother is an experienced, wise African American woman who "keeps moving forward and never looks back."¹³⁷⁷

11.6.2 Men Characters

What makes *The Other Side of the Game* very special among other examples of Sistah lit and girlfriend novels in general is the space provided to male characters. Not only is Phil one of

¹³⁷² Cf. the physical description of Asha, Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 103; or the lengthy account of Yero's school reputation, *ibid.*, 110.

¹³⁷³ Wells, "Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History," in *Chick Lit*, 52.

¹³⁷⁴ "Anita Doreen Diggs," AALBC.com.

¹³⁷⁵ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 327.

¹³⁷⁶ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 71.

¹³⁷⁷ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 119.

the four narrative voices of the book,¹³⁷⁸ but also a relatively large amount of insight into other male characters such as Yero or Hugo, Phil's partner, is offered to the reader—in particular through the dialogues. When in trouble, Sandra does not hesitate and consults her problems with her husband-to-be who responds with patience, and is even capable of suggesting a solution.¹³⁷⁹ Randy, one of Asha's boyfriends and the minor characters, proves many times how caring and unselfish he is. When Lola dies, Phil makes sure Asha and Sandra would “always going to be sisters,” which makes both young women appreciate him.¹³⁸⁰

In the previous analysis it was suggested that male bashing (especially in underdeveloped men characters) can have a similarly harmful effect on the black males as white racism. It is not true that the men in this novel are idealised, on the contrary; but if they behave in a damnable manner, the account of closer circumstances and reasons for such behaviour is given. Or, when Sandra makes the shocking discovery that topples Phil from his pedestal, and shatters her trust in men, it is predominantly the lack of tolerance on her side that prevents her from being able to cope with the mistakes he has made.

11.7 Themes

11.7.1 African American Community

In comparison with the previously analysed novel which is set in a limited place and depicts a close purely black community, the space inhabited by this novel's characters shows a high degree of multiculturalism in which the African Americans naturally socialise with other ethnic groups. Diggs encourages interest in many cultures within the American society rather than in only a mainstream culture; which, however, does not make her compromise neither her nor the characters' racial origin.

Living in midtown Manhattan, the girls were called “Valley Girls.” In order to compensate for their “shameful ‘white’ locale,” they “imitated the cool kids” living in the other boroughs such as Harlem and Queens. At that age they wished desperately to belong to the black community, which made them wear “huge gold door-knocker earrings an MC Lyte mushroom hairdos, ... gold fronts ... and oversize clocks to wear around [their] necks.” Looking good, but “no necessarily because [they] were cool,” the teenage sisters “were accepted into the much coveted ‘in’ crowd.”¹³⁸¹ Their sense of blackness is obviously hurt when they see “those white folks that tour Harlem on buses every weekend, looking for a way of life that has vanished”¹³⁸² as adults.

11.7.2 Contemporary Issues

The novel depicts a wide range of issues not only young people can encounter today; these range from pregnancy, tubal or teenage pregnancy, childbirth, and related issues such as miscarriage, in a variety of different scenarios, to making new friends, dating, recovering from a relationship, disagreeing parents, finding a new place to live, incarceration,¹³⁸³ getting

¹³⁷⁸ These voices belong to Asha, Sandra, Evelyn, and Phil. The narrative weight distribution, however, is not even—see the subchapter on narrative strategies.

¹³⁷⁹ Cf. chapter fourteen, Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 79–81.

¹³⁸⁰ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 301.

¹³⁸¹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 9.

¹³⁸² Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 265.

¹³⁸³ For instance, before Phil acts, he thinks twice whether to throw “a brand new baby into the maws of the criminal justice system,” which is very considerate of him, taking into account the statistics. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 320.

ahead in one's career, lack of parental time, street gangs, thefts, closeted homosexuality, crime, grieving over lost family members and beloved ones, and so on.

Evelyn joins the other black American women characters so far examined in the dissertation who are forced to face the lack of eligible men of the same race. She explains her relationship with Phil, “[b]ut what would have been the point of leaving him? It’s not like there’s a surplus of African-American men who don’t mind being in a relationship with a woman who carries a pistol and studies Eastern philosophy.”¹³⁸⁴ As a matter of fact, Asha is not the only character afraid of commitment. Nick brings a very frank insight into the difference between a wife and a “wifey” who is “‘just a girlfriend you like a lot and you don’t want her to go out there fuckin’ around, so you give her a title and she sticks around forever and ever. ... It’s an insurance policy for a brother who has no intention of actually making any real commitment to his girlfriend but has decided he doesn’t want her messing around with other people while he does whatever he wants.’” Asha is astounded, “‘What kind of sorry-ass woman would agree to an arrangement like that?’” Nick’s answer is “‘The kind that’s in love.’”¹³⁸⁵ When Asha discovers Brent has never loved his white wife, because he “‘just liked how she looked on [his] arm,’” but never “‘stopped loving the sisters,’” Asha respects him even less than before, correcting him immediately, “‘No, you mean you never stopped *fucking* the sisters.’”¹³⁸⁶

11.7.3 Family and Relationships with Men

Similarly to McMillan, Diggs does not intend to write “message novels,” since “they usually bore the hell out of the reader.” But by the time she had finished writing this book, it was clear to her that “its theme had something to do with our inability to see our parents as flawed, three-dimensional people.” Instead, in her opinion, people “prefer to keep them in a romanticized cage called ‘nurturer’ and do not notice any unfulfilled yearnings they have or forgive them the mistakes they have made.”¹³⁸⁷

At the beginning of the novel Asha shares her female relatives’ experience with relationships. She states, “[a]ll my life I’ve witnessed my mother and a host of cousins go through ridiculous, time-consuming, energy-draining mini-dramas with men not even worth speaking to in the first place.” She openly admits that her “father was one of them; he cheated on [her] mother in the seventies and then became a crackhead.”¹³⁸⁸ Asha was born when her mother was only seventeen, but Lola apparently “didn’t learn from that mistake.” A one-night stand with a policeman who lived in the apartment upstairs produced her sister, Sandra. In Asha’s opinion, Phil might have had married her mother, if she “had stopped trying make things work” simultaneously with her father.¹³⁸⁹ (Both her parents are dead when the plotline evolves.)

It is not true that the young woman’s overall attitude to relationships with men would be primarily motivated by being a gold-digger. What causes the emotional distance Asha keeps from men in general is one particular experience she went through at the age of sixteen. With her sister—but without their mother’s consent—they go out to the South Bronx various times. Asha’s teenage adventure with Dante, the most attractive but ruthless peer she could choose, ends up in her pregnancy and subsequent painful abortion. To make things worse, Asha becomes “the subject of a major scandal and the ridicule [at school is] tearing [her]

¹³⁸⁴ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 156.

¹³⁸⁵ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 216–217.

¹³⁸⁶ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 278.

¹³⁸⁷ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 328.

¹³⁸⁸ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 7.

¹³⁸⁹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 8.

apart.”¹³⁹⁰ It is this experience that later turns the protagonist of the Sistah lit novel into a promiscuous men-hunter. Lola herself was not very wise when it came to men, as described above; that, however does not prevent her from an active support of her daughter in need at this occasion.¹³⁹¹ After “crying all night,” the women decide Asha would have an abortion.¹³⁹²

Although Asha makes “a decent living” as an accessories buyer at the Herald Square location of Macy’s department store, she makes “an even better living as a serial dater. Having “no intention of settling down or even being faithful to any one man,” she is a girlfriend to three different men at the moment. Brent Davis is a married man, and his money enables Asha to have a spacious one bedroom apartment in Manhattan.¹³⁹³ In her opinion, any woman “can find a man or even men to pay her rent if she isn’t dog-ugly or too lazy to do the work involved.” Nick Seabrook, by contrast, is “a true romantic”¹³⁹⁴ and “the gorgeous twenty-six years-young playboy heir to a chain of soul food restaurants that his parents built from scratch.”¹³⁹⁵ Randall (or Randy), the last of the set of her boyfriends, shows affection and interest in Asha. Brent occupies a special position in the triangle of three boyfriends, since his marital status gives her an opportunity to treat him as she wishes; by contrast, in Asha’s experience, “single guys always threw it up in your face when you didn’t do something they asked for.”¹³⁹⁶

Unlike Asha, her sister Sandra has a male role model in her life whom she adores, respects, and admires. Her father is a person who makes her think the following. “I feel so blessed to have someone in my life who loves me so much, and I can’t imagine what I would do without him.”¹³⁹⁷ The healthy relationships she has with men enable her to appreciate her fiancé’s honesty, care, and helpfulness.¹³⁹⁸ Sandra’s priorities are clearly defined: “having a man who is loving, balanced, responsible, intellectual, and morally strong is more important than having a man who has money.”¹³⁹⁹ Because the story is also told from Phil’s point of view, the reader learns rather a lot about the sisters’ mother. Phil observes, “[w]ith all respect to the dead, Lola Smith was a weak, indecisive, and chronically depressed female who spent far too much time waiting for Mr. Right to show up on her doorstep. Sandra is the only child I will ever have in this lifetime and I wanted her to be the complete opposite—strong, educated, independent, with clear-cut goals and money of her own.”¹⁴⁰⁰ Despite his plans to let her study at one of more prestigious colleges, he does not object to her decision to study the rag trade and open a boutique, for in his opinion, Sandra has turned out to be an excellent young woman whose future plans involve a job beneficial for the black community.

Phil and Evelyn’s relationship has lasted nearly six years. Except for her frustration resulting from the lack of intimacy and sex with her boyfriend, as well as his reluctance to propose to her, paradoxically enough, Evelyn finds herself happy with the man. She states that

¹³⁹⁰ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 13.

¹³⁹¹ First, Asha thinks it is impossible for her to confide in her mother in this delicate matter; she explains that Mama “always tried to be supportive but I knew she would definitely be disappointed in me. I’d used to rather see my mother’s angry face than her *I-wanted more-for-you* look.” Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 13.

¹³⁹² Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 14.

¹³⁹³ Brent works as an executive at Tiffany’s jewellery store and is married to a white lawyer. They have no children due to his wife’s fertility problems. Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 26. He likes Asha’s adventurous and vivacious nature, meanwhile she slowly becomes tired of his incessant complaints about his wife and work.

¹³⁹⁴ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 26.

¹³⁹⁵ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 49.

¹³⁹⁶ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 76.

¹³⁹⁷ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 16.

¹³⁹⁸ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 21.

¹³⁹⁹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 20.

¹⁴⁰⁰ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 33.

she does not “have to beg him to take [her] out or buy [her] a thoughtful gift.” All in all, he “is a wonderful boyfriend;”¹⁴⁰¹ despite the fact that “sometimes, he takes the abstaining from sex thing too far.”¹⁴⁰² The two make a deal that as soon as Sandra moves out of the house, “it would be [her] time.” Evelyn agrees “to wait for him to handle his business with his daughter,” being “happy with the way things are.” However, her statement “that’s that. Or it should be” plants a seed of doubt for an observant reader. What keeps her motivated to be patient is her feeling that “Phil is one of the last good men left,” and she does not intend to lose him by listening to those who doubt their relationship.¹⁴⁰³ In addition, Evelyn has been married before as very young, and the matrimony turned out not to function at all. Gradually, –despite her trying not to push him just because she has already been waiting for so long– more characters than just Evelyn speculate about the reasons why Phil has not proposed to her yet. Evelyn is constantly reminded of the fact that she still has not been bought an engagement ring by her mother,¹⁴⁰⁴ but mainly by her best friend Josephine.¹⁴⁰⁵ It crosses no one’s mind that Phil might be gay, though. Even when Evelyn confronts him, announcing her wish to have an engagement ring, he lulls her with the same excuse of “march[ing] his daughter down the aisle first.”¹⁴⁰⁶

It is a paradox that Hugo and Evelyn have been friends since their days at the police academy, “the only minorities in the academy that year,”¹⁴⁰⁷ long before Hugo introduced her to Phil. The more it hurts her that Hugo rejects to visit her and apologise for his role in the deceit, even though “the whole Evelyn as decoy thing” was his idea,¹⁴⁰⁸ which contributes to Phil’s decision to break up with him, too. Astonished Evelyn thinks how come he could do something “so brutal and nasty” to her.¹⁴⁰⁹ To make things worse, Phil’s betrayal leaves the approximately forty-year-old woman live with her mother, and give up her planned career. When Phil loses her, he realises he really loves her, “not in that man/woman way she need[s] but like a best friend or beloved sister.” He is missing her, because she was his “rock, [his] foundation.”¹⁴¹⁰

What Sandra finds out, discovering her father’s secret, affects the relationship she has with “the two most important men in her life.”¹⁴¹¹ She does not reject to face her father’s homosexuality, but understands that her family life as well as his relationship with Evelyn–the woman who practically brought Sandra up–were faked. She is forced to change from a

¹⁴⁰¹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 35.

¹⁴⁰² Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 156.

¹⁴⁰³ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 37.

¹⁴⁰⁴ Evelyn is sceptical to her mother’s advice due to the fact that both “Josephine and Mama need to handle the procrastinators in their own lives” first. In particular she means that Mama and the local butcher have been not only “flirting with each other for the past ten years,” but also talking about their personal problems, and sharing their dreams. Still, she “can’t get [him] to commit to simply being her boyfriend.” And Josephine “can’t get her husband to leave her alone long enough” for them to find out whether their idea has merit. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 40. Sandra, is the first character to learn, is bewildered when her father says he is not going to ever marry Evelyn. Cf. *ibid.*, 65–66.

¹⁴⁰⁵ Evelyn makes herself clear with Josephine in one of the tiresome conversations they have on this topic as follows. “Why should I rush this man down the aisle, Josephine? I’ve never been interested in having children. I’m not feeling insecure because I always know where he is, and we’re only going to City Hall when we do tie the knot. We can just jump up and do it anytime.” Josephine, on the other hand, senses “something just isn’t right. ... he must be one of those commitment-phobic men” who she reads about “in this book called *Men Who Can’t Love*.” Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 37.

¹⁴⁰⁶ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 74.

¹⁴⁰⁷ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 120.

¹⁴⁰⁸ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 306.

¹⁴⁰⁹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 233.

¹⁴¹⁰ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 305.

¹⁴¹¹ “Anita Doreen Diggs,” AALBC.com.

daddy's girl who believed that her police detective father is the most infallible man in the world into an adult woman who should be able to learn to tolerate other people's imperfections.

Yero and Evelyn come from "huge families," meanwhile the two sisters have distanced themselves from their mother's relatives; Phil's conservative family has not been in any sort of contact for decades. In the novel, family is depicted as not only a source of help and comfort, but can become a source of bitter disappointment and deep frustration. When planning the wedding ceremony, Saundra thinks of "Mama's family. The clan who had turned their collective backs on Mama long ago because she refused to give up on Asha's drug addicted father."¹⁴¹² For both sisters this part of the family means people they did not know even when their mother was still alive; inviting them for the wedding would be bound to turn into what Saundra describes as "more of a getting-to-know-each-other gathering than an actual reunion."¹⁴¹³ Most of all characters, Asha and Phil cannot imagine socialising with them, and therefore he reproaches Saundra with putting him into "a difficult position," supposed that her engagement party was to take place in his house.¹⁴¹⁴

11.7.4 Importance of Friendship and Sisterhood

As suggested above, the two sisters show very different behaviour, and have different personal traits. Similarly to the previously discussed novel, empathy and the ability to perceive what is happening around them not only from their own perspective are only gradually gained by both. Diggs explains the initial form friendship takes among the novel's characters. "Asha doesn't have any close friends of either gender because she doesn't really trust anyone but herself." Saundra "has Evelyn but she is also one of those women who prefer that their male lover fills the role of confidant." Diggs does not indicate whether this attitude is right or not; "it is simply a lifestyle choice." The author reasons further, "MOTHER is a major unresolved issue" for the two sisters. She questions the idea that a woman in general can have "deep female friendships" if she is angry at her mother.¹⁴¹⁵

The discrepancies between the sisters¹⁴¹⁶ provoke Saundra to tell Asha about her disagreement with what Asha does, because she feels that it is her "duty as a sister;" all she can do, however, is "sit back and watch."¹⁴¹⁷ In return, Asha looks down on Yero, because he only has a high school diploma and works at the post office.¹⁴¹⁸ For the most part, it is rather difficult for Asha to come to terms with Saundra's spiritual transformation into someone very different than she used to be when they grew up together. She is missing the "miniskirt and leather pants-wearing club kid who didn't give a damn about anything except having fun." Now Saundra is "a spiritually conscious vegan with ancient words of wisdom constantly dripping from her lips."¹⁴¹⁹ Asha comes to a harsh but right conclusion that they "are not as close as [they] used to be. This type of shit is the reason why."¹⁴²⁰

No matter how distinct they are, Ash and Saundra know when either of them is troubled. Soon before the Halloween, Saundra knows "Asha would need [her] because it was the one day of the year she found hard to get through. Every trick-or-treater reminded her of

¹⁴¹² Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 56.

¹⁴¹³ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 57.

¹⁴¹⁴ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 63.

¹⁴¹⁵ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 328.

¹⁴¹⁶ Phil perceives Asha as "a spitting image of her mother—physically." But the sisters' "personalities could not [be] different." Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 310.

¹⁴¹⁷ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 20.

¹⁴¹⁸ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 21.

¹⁴¹⁹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 95–96.

¹⁴²⁰ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 101.

the fetus who died six years ago. It was the day her ghosts danced.”¹⁴²¹ Before Asha can say “‘don’t bother,’” her sister rushes to her place, eager to help her come over another depressing abortion.¹⁴²² The fact that Saundra is available for her elder sister in need does not mean she spares her feelings; she pushes Asha to realise the importance of coming to terms with why she is acting as she is in the first place. After her pregnancy and Dante’s reaction, in Saundra’s opinion, Asha has “‘turned into a monster.’” Saundra understands how painful the experience must have been for her sister, but shows her that to make others suffer just because she “has issues” does not contribute to Asha’s healing. On the contrary, it turns her into a “‘selfish, ego-tripping thing.’”¹⁴²³ With her help, Asha frees herself and does not let the bad experience she had dictate her life anymore.¹⁴²⁴

Shaken by what she saw, Saundra flees to the only place that feels safe: Asha’s flat. It is up to Asha to take her in, help her put the pieces of the broken puzzle back together, and become the peacemaker between the sister and the two most important men in her life.¹⁴²⁵ She takes active part in the negotiations, first, putting together the two men. She also makes a deal with Yero they “would share clues and solve the mystery together.”¹⁴²⁶ At the same time, Phil, who is missing Saundra, approaches her through Asha, for his daughter does not seek any contact with him.

But to think that living under the same roof will be easy or automatically bring healing to Saundra would be mistaken. At the beginning of Saundra’s refuge in her sister’s flat, Asha contemplates, “I always admired her bluntness but when she started trying to be someone she wasn’t, things got weird. The funny thing is, she never stopped being up front with me—just with herself.”¹⁴²⁷ Saundra moves in her things, including her pets, and Asha compromises her selfishness. But with Saundra’s growing tendency to preach and comment on her sister’s lifestyle, and her inability to adapt to the new circumstances, teasing each other about their opposing mannerisms gradually changes into cabin fever. Saundra’s self-righteousness reaches its peak when she calls Asha a “fucking two-bit tramp,” which leaves the sisters yelling at each other, and Asha wondering who gave her sister the right to judge her.¹⁴²⁸ The conflict turns out to be more than a “run-of-the-mill sister stuff;” it makes both sisters see that living together “just ain’t working.” (Before the incident Saundra would have said that her moving in with her sister made their bond “stronger than ever;” even Asha would have “grudgingly acknowledged that [she was] relieved” she could be there for her sister “during her dark night of the soul.”¹⁴²⁹) Consequently, Saundra sees quitting school and finding her own place to live “even if it is just a room no bigger than a cell” as a solution to her situation. Only Saundra’s upcoming nuptials enable the two young women to find a common ground; Asha is determined not to let the consequences of Saundra’s “stumb[ing] on a secret”¹⁴³⁰ ruin her life; she wants to “put this wedding back to track” for her sister’s sake.¹⁴³¹ The two women agree they “are too different to live under one roof and make it work”¹⁴³² at the same

¹⁴²¹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 102.

¹⁴²² Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 105–107.

¹⁴²³ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 166.

¹⁴²⁴ Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 170–177.

¹⁴²⁵ However, seeing Saundra shocked like never before, revenge comes to Asha’s mind in the first place. Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 222.

¹⁴²⁶ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 257.

¹⁴²⁷ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 243.

¹⁴²⁸ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 297–299.

¹⁴²⁹ Asha sums up her dilemma: “How do you get rid of a younger sister who is driving you crazy but doesn’t deserve to be thrown out?” Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 300–302.

¹⁴³⁰ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 253.

¹⁴³¹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 312.

¹⁴³² Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 314.

time. In the end, Sandra cannot help herself and thinks “Asha is the greatest sister in the world” at the wedding.¹⁴³³

When Evelyn and Phil break up, Sandra loses the motherly figure, and—vice versa—Evelyn loses “the daughter that [she] will never have.”¹⁴³⁴ Despite this kind of closeness, Evelyn utterly withdraws from Sandra’s life. Before that, she makes the young woman promise her that she will at least reconsider her decision not to marry him.¹⁴³⁵ Phil knows how much he has hurt Evelyn; still, he asks her to “help [Sandra] through this.”¹⁴³⁶ All taken into account, although scenes of female bonding and friendship communities are the backbone of chick lit and sistah lit in general, Harzewski makes a relevant point, adding that “the genre[s are], at present, homosocial and not lesbian.”¹⁴³⁷ It should be added that there is no gay male best friend, which is one of the general recurring motifs of chick lit.

11.7.5 Self-growth

Asha is fully aware of the serious consequences her mother’s life have had on her.¹⁴³⁸ She remembers too well “having to stretch [her] quivering little arm around [her] mother’s broad shoulders many times to comfort her after [her] dad disappointed [them]. Again.” This makes Asha guess psychiatrists would say she herself has “serious issues concerning relationships” because of her childhood. What is more, she supposes “they’re right ... after all the stupid shit [she has] seen in [her] twenty-four years.”¹⁴³⁹ In addition, the abortion experience she has at the age of sixteen alters the course of her psychic development for years. Asha explicates that when her “problem had been solved,” and her “baby was dead, a new Asha Mitchell was born. She wasn’t taking no shit from *any* man.”¹⁴⁴⁰ Eight years after “this mess,” the young woman is not capable of commitment or attaching emotionally to a single man. Evelyn pinpoints what Asha feels: according to her, she “lives in fear of everything. Commitment. Forgiveness. True intimacy.”¹⁴⁴¹

But it is also her mother’s education that has deliberately shaped the young woman. “Deathly afraid” than one or both of her daughters “would turn out like her,” Lola was always preaching to them in the following way: “Go to college, get established in a profession before you get married, don’t depend on the state, relatives or anyone else for money, and never have a baby until your act is together and the foundation of your life is strong.”¹⁴⁴² As Sandra states, “Mama worried so much, ate so much, drank so much that she finally keeled over from a stroke before we had a chance to figure out a path for our lives.”¹⁴⁴³

In comparison with other characters, Asha’s journey is the most compelling. The young woman gradually changes from what her sister calls “a walking karma time bomb”¹⁴⁴⁴ into a much more considerate person. Her statement “I’d rather die a tragic death than go

¹⁴³³ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 323.

¹⁴³⁴ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 155.

¹⁴³⁵ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 249.

¹⁴³⁶ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 234.

¹⁴³⁷ Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 146.

¹⁴³⁸ She is not the person who realises how hard her youth must have been. Talking to Sandra, Phil tries to explain his daughter the reasons for her sister’s behaviour. “Asha has always had it harder than you. I used to tell Lola that she leaned on Asha too much ... always confiding in that girl about her troubles ... it isn’t right to burden a young person with adult problems that they don’t know how to solve.” Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 66.

¹⁴³⁹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 8–9.

¹⁴⁴⁰ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 14.

¹⁴⁴¹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 57.

¹⁴⁴² Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 102–103.

¹⁴⁴³ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 291.

¹⁴⁴⁴ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 98.

round whining over some sorry-ass man. Life's too short for that shit"¹⁴⁴⁵ opens the novel. To start with, Nick is simply, "one of the rich guys [she's] been sleeping with for the past year"¹⁴⁴⁶ who spends most of his time travelling cross-country on business. When Asha questions him why he keeps a condominium in New York even though he stays in her place all the time, he answers that he intends to live in it after he marries her one day. In her opinion, he is "only teasing about that, but it doesn't matter." Anyway, for the time being, she envisions she is "not marrying anybody. Ever," for she loves her life "just the way it is."¹⁴⁴⁷ When she discovers some of her feelings for Nick, she tries hard to suppress them. "What the hell was wrong with me lately? Probably too much Nick Seabrook. Spending time with him always made it hard for me to enjoy the company of other men. This, of course, is what happens to all women. A man gets under their skin and they stop handling their business."¹⁴⁴⁸

Approximately at the same time, Randy wants Asha to spend Thanksgiving with him and his family. When he is "sending [her] flowers because of a cold," she thinks their relationship is "getting way out of hand;" something has to be "done and fast" so that the man can "heal in time for Christmas."¹⁴⁴⁹ His words "I love you" are the last straw for her; her heart aches as he utters "those dreadful words," and Asha wants him out of her life as soon as possible.¹⁴⁵⁰ The unfortunate way she chooses to do so leads to a major overturn in her life. Asha uses the tragic car accident death of Tracy, Randy's former girlfriend, as an excuse for breaking up with him. She explains him she is not ready for a relationship, and feels "like [she] has taken her place of [is] competing with a ghost," and, moreover, has "never indicated at any time that [she] even wanted to be loved. All [she] wanted was to have a good time and have some company."¹⁴⁵¹ Unable to face the break-up, Randy keeps on contacting Asha for weeks; what, however, makes her furious is that he gets in touch with her sister whose nature makes her interfere. Accidentally, Asha learns he has been found dead in his flat and died of a heart attack.

Asha's ruthless behaviour comes back to her in two ways. Not only is she deeply remorseful, realising her part in the unfortunate event, but she is also consistently bothered and threatened by Randy's sister who blames her for his death. Both become an impulse for her to finally re-evaluate herself and "'clean the worms out of the pot that is [her] shallow little mind,'" as Saundra puts it abruptly.¹⁴⁵² To the reader's surprise, Asha feels her condemnation is "necessary" this time, for she "deserve[s] every bit of her tongue-lashing."¹⁴⁵³ Asha's belated period proves to be another wake-up call, since she does not know for sure whose child it might be.¹⁴⁵⁴

The different course her life is starting to take is reflected in her behaviour and willingness to do things she found ridiculous before. For instance, she joins Saundra and Yero for a tea party dressed in dashiki instead of her usual designers clothes which "probably cost more than Phil makes] in a month."¹⁴⁵⁵ There she admires the way various ethnic groups socialise, she discovers the appealing beauty of several pieces of African American art (mostly paintings and sculptures); also, she learns about Yero's artistic talents as well as their

¹⁴⁴⁵ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 7.

¹⁴⁴⁶ Asha's apartment, apparently, seems to be not enough for her; Nick has promised to buy her "a home on the beach" so that she might be able "to escape the city on weekends." Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 14.

¹⁴⁴⁷ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 49.

¹⁴⁴⁸ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 77.

¹⁴⁴⁹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 125.

¹⁴⁵⁰ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 128.

¹⁴⁵¹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 144–145.

¹⁴⁵² Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 165.

¹⁴⁵³ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 166.

¹⁴⁵⁴ Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 176–178.

¹⁴⁵⁵ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 309.

interest in literature, especially poetry, which makes her feel “so ordinary” amongst all the gifted people.¹⁴⁵⁶ The changes in her life are accelerated by Nick’s statement that he is her boyfriend—despite their deal to allow each other to date other people simultaneously.¹⁴⁵⁷ Emotionally exhausted, she asks Nick to do “the right thing,” and be fair to his other girlfriend, because Asha does not feel “comfortable knowing [the other woman] is pinning her hopes on an illusion. If she still wants to roll with [him] after the talk, then that’s on her.” His reaction makes a breaking point in the novel: he offers that he will not see other women if Asha gives him “a real chance.” Finally, taken the pros and cons into account, she is able to tell him, “I’m your woman,” which not only makes her feel better than for a long time before,¹⁴⁵⁸ but mainly means she is ready to try to overcome her commitment phobia.

As explained above, Evelyn plays an enormous role in two aspects of Saundra’s life. She both performs the role of her mother, and shapes her mind intellectually. Saundra illustrates, “[s]ince Evelyn came into my life, I have become a faithful student of Asian and African philosophy. With an extensive library of books on both subjects.”¹⁴⁵⁹ (That is why the fact that Asha takes more from her lovers than she is willing to give does not escape her sister’s attention.¹⁴⁶⁰ The more they engage in exchanges of opinions on the topic and the more critical Saundra’s stance becomes, the less Asha listens to her.¹⁴⁶¹) Asha’s initial insecurities about love and personal fulfilment, in combination with her self-esteem based on male attention, lead to her addiction on consumerism. Saundra who shows no interest whatsoever in shopping and fashion (unless it has to do with producing clothes herself) is more than critical to her sister’s attitudes. “I guess anything is possible when you’ll throw your legs in the air to get a promotion. I think it’s such a shame when a person bases their self-worth on the size of their behind and the roundness of their breasts.” Saundra also rightly wonders “what will become of her” sister when “she no longer has a youthful body to flash around and she’s forced to face whatever demon terrorizes her.” She thinks it is “pitiful that she hides her lack of self-confidence behind an ego so big it seems to be an entity unto itself.”¹⁴⁶²

Saundra’s real quest for self-definition actually starts in the second third of the book, and is reinforced on her from the outside. Much about who the protagonist used to be has been said above (mainly from Asha’s point of view.) It must be made clear at this point that it is not her father’s homosexuality that puts the gap between the two, but the reason is she finds herself caught in a web of lies. For instance, she has been told by Phil that he is an orphan, which is a lie he “never bothered to correct” with his daughter.¹⁴⁶³ Saundra comprehends her situation after some time. “I realized that although the truth about Phil’s sexuality had stunned me beyond belief, it wasn’t what hurt the most. Being gay goes against the laws of nature but isn’t evil. What really hurt was the way he and Hugo had deceived both me and Evelyn for all

¹⁴⁵⁶ Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 192–199.

¹⁴⁵⁷ In fact, Asha is even more confused by his announcement, as he was supposed to have a girlfriend in Houston. Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 211.

¹⁴⁵⁸ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 284–288.

¹⁴⁵⁹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 17.

¹⁴⁶⁰ Saundra scolds her sister, “Have you no conscience at all?” Asha objects, “No, I don’t rob or steal. They like giving me things.” Saundra disagrees fiercely, “They’re giving you those things in the hope of a commitment.” Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 98.

¹⁴⁶¹ Asha expresses her disgust, “[s]he’s always trying to give me some fucking moral lessons every time I do something that she doesn’t agree with. Her job is to be my sister, not a therapist nor a counsellor; if I need either, I have the goddamn yellow pages.” Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 142.

¹⁴⁶² Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 18. To illustrate, after having a bath, getting dressed, and ready to apply her make-up, Asha for example sums up how proud her body makes her. “Boy, I’m one great package and it is no wonder that every man who isn’t gay or retarded wants to be with me.” *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁴⁶³ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 153.

these years.”¹⁴⁶⁴ In addition, Sandra’s emotions are aroused when catching her father red-handed (having sex with Hugo), by a serious argument with Yero which preceded this incident. Both seriously shake her existence and belief in men; what is more, she does not want to get married in such circumstances. Instead, she needs “a whole lot of space right now. No relationship. No wedding. Nothing but space.”¹⁴⁶⁵

It should be said that Sandra remains the only deliberately static protagonist. Her prolonged reluctance to forgive her father makes Asha think of her as a hypocrite. “She’s supposed to be Miss Peace and Love!” her sister presumes.¹⁴⁶⁶ The fact that she is unable to cope with people’s vices and weaknesses makes her feel she is “going to pieces.” Her fiancé does not try to contact her, her father is a closet homosexual, Evelyn will never be her step-mother, she has no income of her own, and discontent with the way her sister lives, Sandra feels she has “no foundation, no anchor.”¹⁴⁶⁷ She openly expresses her fear of any kind of changes, including those concerning her sister’s psychic development, which becomes very apparent when the two are supposed to share Asha’s flat.¹⁴⁶⁸

Finally, after six months Phil finds an envelope which contains an invitation to Sandra and Yero’s wedding, which means he will have “another chance to be the honest, courageous man that [his]daughter [has always] believed [him] to be.” It does not mean an ultimate victory; “the door might not be open, but it had cracked a little” and the man is “willing to work long and hard to get it all the way open.”¹⁴⁶⁹ Moved by the wedding, Sandra is happy to see him, and forgives him, for it is “hard to erase all the good” that he has done. There are many things he should have done in a different way, but “on the issue of good fathering, there was no question that Phil was the best.”¹⁴⁷⁰

11.7.6 Love

Depiction of serial dating is one of the typical features of (black) chick lit. Asha, one of the women protagonists, “believes that men can only be a part of her life sexually and financially.”¹⁴⁷¹ But in this novel, the romance novel requirement of depicting one woman protagonist in a relationship with one particular man at the end of the novel is respected. It is true that Asha announces Nick is to marry her the next year; still, not many illusions in marriage are what she would express. Her existence anxiety is admitted by her before; still, there is no desperation resulting from the protagonist’s single status which takes a richer variety of forms, and changes throughout the course of chick lit novels in general. Meanwhile most of chick lit negates the existence of “Prince Charming” or “Mr. Right,” replacing him with “Mr. Maybe,” Asha primarily contemplates her freedom, despite the fact that Nick is socially and economically superior to her.¹⁴⁷² (In this context, A. Rochelle Mabry rightly refers to “the anxieties of many modern women considering marriage or other long-term commitments after years of social, financial, and emotional independence.”¹⁴⁷³) Marriage is, by contrast, perceived as a lifetime reward by Sandra.

¹⁴⁶⁴ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 246.

¹⁴⁶⁵ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 239.

¹⁴⁶⁶ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 312.

¹⁴⁶⁷ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 281.

¹⁴⁶⁸ Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 303.

¹⁴⁶⁹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 322.

¹⁴⁷⁰ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 324.

¹⁴⁷¹ Lillian Lewis, review of *The Other Side of the Game*, by Anita Doreen Diggs, *Booklist*, October 1, 2005, 33.

¹⁴⁷² Jessica Jernigan comes up with the abbreviation “PR” which stands for “prospective husband in her sharp objections to the second wave of chick lit (“catalogue of vanities”) and the superficiality it promotes. “Slingbacks and Arrows: Chick Lit Comes of Age.”

¹⁴⁷³ Mabry, “About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary ‘Chick’ Culture,” in *Chick Lit*, 203.

The obsession with choosing a mate, as depicted in this particular novel, has to do with a crucial point applicable to most chick lit Laura Miller makes in the review of *Fear of Flying*. She says about the protagonist that, the “impression is less that her quandary will be resolved by settling on the right man and more that she needs to get over her romantic belief that the right man is the answer. Contemporary chick lit heroines sometimes try to tell themselves that they need to avoid hinging their lives on a man, but the genre makes them do it anyway,”¹⁴⁷⁴ which—in fact—is the opposite of what the pioneering chick lit novels advocated for.

11.7.7 Sexuality

As far as sexuality is concerned, *The Other Side of the Game* offers a much more varied and complex way of depicting this theme than the previously analysed book. Sexuality and sex practices are examined in an explicit manner,¹⁴⁷⁵ and are never referred to as duties but mostly in terms of pleasure, and even as sources of spiritual growth as in case of Sandra and her gentle but passionate husband-to-be.¹⁴⁷⁶ What is more, all protagonists are sexually active, and the discussion of their sexual experiences proves to be more than frank even when it comes to homosexuality. Fundamentally, attention is paid to the sensual aspect of love-making in the novel. Simultaneously, unfulfilled longing for sex turns into a source of frustration; Evelyn comments about her boyfriend at her birthday party, “[s]ometimes, he takes the abstaining from sex thing too far. Tonight is an example. There are certain days of the year that no woman should have to ask for what she needs.”¹⁴⁷⁷

Similarly to the previous analysis, unapproved sexual activity of a child can become a reason for turning him/her into an outcast of a family. Joanne, Yero’s brother’s girlfriend, is thrown out by her strict Haitian family even though she loses the fetus due to miscarriage.¹⁴⁷⁸ Phil’s secret of being sexually attracted to other boys results in his father’s threat not to “ever set a foot on his property again,”¹⁴⁷⁹ and his mother’s constant refusal of any attempt Phil makes to contact them for years. The female body is also depicted as a trap and source of trick, anxiety, and humiliation. (Asha’s ongoing post-abortion trauma has been discussed above.) Yero describes her as it follows: “I don’t dislike her. But if Asha liked herself, she wouldn’t be hitting the sheets with every man that crosses her path.”¹⁴⁸⁰ Asha attempts to use her body as a strategic weapon, evoking efficiently the feeling of power and control over men in her. Such attitude lies in her inability to attach emotionally to any man, an emotional issue she herself calls “a commitment phobia.” Having overcome her fear of being Nick’s woman, “something owned. Someone who [is] going to be betrayed,”¹⁴⁸¹ she is the character who experiences the largest emotional and psychic growth, metamorphosing herself into a much more balanced person.

11.7.8 Consumerism

In chick lit (and Sistah lit makes no exception whatsoever to that), protagonists “cheer themselves up by buying expensive lingerie, indulging in pricey spa treatments, and adding to

¹⁴⁷⁴ Qtd. in Mazza, “Who’s Laughing Now? A Short History of Chick Lit and the Perversion of a Genre,” in *Chick Lit*, 25.

¹⁴⁷⁵ Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 50–54, 219–220.

¹⁴⁷⁶ Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 82–84. It becomes more than obvious how happy Sandra is about their sex life when comparing Yero with her previous lovers. *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁴⁷⁷ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 56.

¹⁴⁷⁸ The family simply refuses to accept “a sexually active unmarried daughter.” Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 181.

¹⁴⁷⁹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 227.

¹⁴⁸⁰ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 230.

¹⁴⁸¹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 300.

their often already impressive collections of shoes, handbags, and outfits.”¹⁴⁸² A strong interplay with advertising and commodity culture can be traced in this novel as well. Asha’s sense of interest in designers clothes and shoes she could not afford to buy herself (if it were not for her rich lovers) is even intensified by her occupation, a department-store buyer of accessories. This protagonist often experiences self-esteem through commodities,¹⁴⁸³ which only results in a rather ephemeral kind of enthusiasm, as her consumption is virtually never satisfied, leading to an addiction. At worst, the consequences of heavy spending are rarely acknowledged in chick lit and can include deeper emotional frustration, anxiety-based restlessness, marital issues, etc. “Shopping and subsidiary elements of the chick lit lifestyle may be a defensive mechanism for the stress of the urban jungle” with its fast pace and lack of space for self-reflection.¹⁴⁸⁴ Unlike in the discussed novels by McMillan in which the reader is to judge by himself/herself, Diggs lets Sandra speak directly, disapproving of her sister’s attitude to material items.

There are basically two ways of getting whatever Asha wants. Either she uses the money provided to her by the boyfriends, or she lets them purchase clothes, jewellery, shoes, etc. for her as a favour in return for sex. In a particular situation, before it comes to sex, Nick tells Asha he has brought her a present, on which she comments, “music to my ears.”¹⁴⁸⁵ The following lines (written in a rather exaggerated manner, though) speak volumes about the young woman’s real situation: “I couldn’t take my own game anymore. The heat in the room reached a thousand degrees and I was on my knees unzipping his pants before he had time to make another move.”¹⁴⁸⁶ At this point Asha still does not realise she is on her knees both literally, but has been putting herself into this position also symbolically, which is to say that sex has become just another commodity article for her, a reward she provides her male partners with in exchange for what has been listed above.¹⁴⁸⁷ In fact, Randy “is the only poor man” Asha sleeps with, “but he makes up for that between the sheets. Big time.”¹⁴⁸⁸ By contrast, Sandra shows her concern about Asha’s “taste for expensive clothes and shoes that she can’t afford, and she uses men to get them.”¹⁴⁸⁹ When men are used and objectified, Harzewski uses the term “yuppie feminism” in which the “self-conscious use of the female form as a type of currency is offered as a material ethos.”¹⁴⁹⁰

Valorisation of “the pink,” beauty industry, a positive attitude focused on having fun and pampering oneself has also a rather important function, though. As Harzewski diagnoses, the characters’ reflections function as metacommentaries on the role of commodities in their lives and therefore examines chick lit as “an overlooked source of sociocultural commentary.”¹⁴⁹¹ Still, the playfulness of this kind of genre and the genuine importance attributed to these issues tends to slip to the superficial, and advocated indirectly for what feminists have been fighting for decades.

¹⁴⁸² Wells, “Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History,” in *Chick Lit*, 62.

¹⁴⁸³ Particular brands and their products are referred to by Asha, e.g., Clinique, Chloe, Prada, Rochas, Burberry, etc.; Asha wears a Dolce and Gabbana snakeskin bag, uses the Samsung A670 mobile phone, and so on.

¹⁴⁸⁴ Harzewski, introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 13.

¹⁴⁸⁵ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 53. The present is a diamond necklace; in the past, Asha was given a Cadillac by the same man. *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸⁶ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 54.

¹⁴⁸⁷ The following sentences belong to those most appalling comments Asha makes on sex in the whole novel. “So, I would screw him, grab this month’s check and be home in time to watch Jay Leno, but dressing up for the occasion was simply out this time. I just couldn’t summon up that much enthusiasm.” Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 76–77.

¹⁴⁸⁸ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 60.

¹⁴⁸⁹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 20.

¹⁴⁹⁰ Harzewski, “Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners,” in *Chick Lit*, 40.

¹⁴⁹¹ Harzewski, introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 13–14.

11.7.9 Beauty and Looks

The emphasis put on women's appearance, especially weight (but not in connection to health matters as in *Getting to Happy*, for instance), underlies a basic fact. Alison Umminger demonstrates rightly that it is primarily an ongoing battle with themselves in which the protagonists are engaged; and the quest for a partner becomes secondary.¹⁴⁹² In Asha's character, a detailed examination of beauty regimen is described. In fact, standards of beauty dictate her behaviour and insistence on the importance of grooming. Juliette Wells speaks about "beautification" of characters, that is the great interest in how beauty is created and maintained, by which the chick lit novels ally themselves to women's magazines.¹⁴⁹³ In the never-ending pursuit of beauty, the heroines "frankly admit to the drain of energy and resources demanded by this pursuit, even as they persist in it."¹⁴⁹⁴ Brent, one of Asha's boyfriends, expresses his impatience, trying to make Asha accelerate the process of her preparation before the two go clubbing. He teases her, "I don't want to grow old waiting for [you]" to get it together.¹⁴⁹⁵

Wells explains that "[m]any chick-lit authors handle the beauty issue by providing their essentially good-looking though anxious heroine with a more gorgeous foil who is also much more irritating on the subject of beauty maintenance and makes the heroine seem appealingly normal by contrast."¹⁴⁹⁶ The same cannot be said about *The Other Side of the Game* due to the existence of two similarly attractive and beautiful sisters whose basic discrepancy lies in the different degree of importance they attribute to beauty. Therefore, Saundra does not (and cannot) function as her sister's competitor in matters of mating. Still, Asha and Saundra serve as what Richards terms "effective foils to each other's first-person narration,"¹⁴⁹⁷ when she discusses this topic in relation to Robin and Savannah in *Waiting to Exhale*.

To some extent the novel analysed in this chapter accentuates—but is by no means obsessed with—youth. The explanation may be that postfeminism, and therefore also chick lit, are "fundamentally uncomfortable with female adulthood itself, casting all women as girls to some extent," which results in confusion between girlhood and womanhood, where female adulthood is represented as a state of oscillating between pleasure and panic.¹⁴⁹⁸ At their age, the sisters are flawed in a different way than physically, and in terms of appearance, but in terms of personal traits. In case of Evelyn (juxtaposed effectively to them), however, the question of aging becomes more than relevant. For her age, she appears "extremely well-groomed and attractive;"¹⁴⁹⁹ still, her single status (when she is left by Phil and condemned to live with her mother) raises the reader's concern.

11.7.10 Career

As suggested in chapter five, numerous chick lit authors work as media professionals, and the protagonists themselves are not distant from this area either. As Montgomery adds, "[a] lot of hard-cover chick lit is based on women with glamorous careers and in the fashion and

¹⁴⁹² Umminger, "Supersizing Bridget Jones: What's Really Eating the Women in Chick Lit," in *Chick Lit*, 239–252.

¹⁴⁹³ Wells, "Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History," in *Chick Lit*, 61.

¹⁴⁹⁴ Wells, "Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History," in *Chick Lit*, 61.

¹⁴⁹⁵ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 23–24.

¹⁴⁹⁶ In addition, Wells approaches the idea of "being beautiful but not too beautiful" and rather witty as a legacy of Jane Austen's novels. "Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History," in *Chick Lit*, 59.

¹⁴⁹⁷ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 107.

¹⁴⁹⁸ Diane Negra, *What A Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 12–14.

¹⁴⁹⁹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 17.

magazine industry.”¹⁵⁰⁰ Both sisters’ occupations are related to fashion industry; again, however, these are opposed. Asha works for Macy’s and has an associate’s degree in Fashion Buying and Merchandising, whereas Saundra should graduate next semester with a Fashion Design bachelor’s one. In comparison with McMillan’s novels where the protagonists’ workday experiences are vital to the texture of the novels and central to the plot, providing them with independence and financial freedom, and Warren’s novel in which having a job is a mere question of necessity, Asha’s job in this novel functions as what Ann Rosalind Jones terms “cosmetically,” which means it bridges the protagonist’s existence and a total commitment to a man.¹⁵⁰¹ By contrast, for Saundra, her future job means a source of self-worth, self-respect, and self-esteem, as well as a way of making her dreams come true.¹⁵⁰² Evelyn also has her dreams workwise: together with her best friend Josephine, Evelyn plans to quit the police force and open a weekend spiritual retreat for women in upstate New York. (However, every time they get ready to file for incorporation and move forward, Josephine’s husband convinces her to wait. This makes Evelyn think she should eventually start the business herself, but—since the two women have been friends since high school—Evelyn does not want to “alienate her.”¹⁵⁰³) Because the retreat for women would satisfy Evelyn’s soul, but her “paycheck would be a lot smaller,” she depends on Phil. For all women protagonists of *The Other Side of the Game*, however, the professional world is not presented as the ultimate challenge and/or the focal point of the novel.

11.7.11 Blackness and Racial Issues

The book opens with Asha’s discussion of how harmful it is for the African American families to solve their marital and other relationship problems in general in public, in particular in television shows. She observes, “[w]hy do black women have to embarrass themselves by showing the world how desperate they are.” Some of them “won’t let go their men no matter what they’ve done.” Watching “the loudest, most ignorant sisters they could find” who confront “a scruffy-looking deadbeat dad” makes her conclude that if “aliens were to find the tapes” of such contemporary television shows, “they would think black women were a bunch of neck-swiveling, man-hungry idiots with low self-esteem.”¹⁵⁰⁴ The protagonist tries hard not to be one of these women who would depend on their boyfriends, spouses, not to mention the welfare system, or any other authority. She promises herself: “That won’t happen to me. I will not end up as an elderly, destitute black woman.”¹⁵⁰⁵

Blackness apparently plays a significant role in Saundra’s life. Her dream to open her own boutique or a little shop where she would sell her “Afro-centric clothing at cost to poor women who can’t afford the high prices charges elsewhere” clearly mirrors her racial pride and consciousness. She admires Yero’s “strong African features and thick locks” which “have the same commanding majesty of the warriors,” and his expression has “the same pride and

¹⁵⁰⁰ Montgomery, “What Is Chick Lit.”

¹⁵⁰¹ Ann Rosalind Jones, “Mills and Boon Meets Feminism,” in *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, ed. Joan Radford (London: Routledge, 1986), 207.

¹⁵⁰² She is a student at the Fashion Institute of technology who is to graduate soon with a bachelor’s degree in Fashion Design. Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 18.

¹⁵⁰³ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 40–41.

¹⁵⁰⁴ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 7. It would be simplifying to say Asha feels only contempt for the people who perform in such shows, because she disagrees with the way particular stories are presented as if they were representative of the whole African American community. Asha perceives the stories of the people especially humiliating, seeing the audience on the television screen “hoot, scream, and egg the dumb duo.” *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁵⁰⁵ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 59. Asha states that her “savings account was fatter than Biggie Smalls and steadily growing” which should make her sure she “wouldn’t end up broke and ill like Mama.” *Ibid.*, 76.

contentment as the sisters,” comparing his looks to the collection of African tribesmen and other statuettes in her bedroom.¹⁵⁰⁶

Diggs does not avoid a rather sensitive topic of racism within the black community. Joanne is automatically expected by her Haitian family to “be a lawyer, marry a Haitian man from a good family and live happily ever after.” When she announces she is in love with Yero, an African American man of Jamaican origin, the parents say they “want nothing to do with her.” This incident brings back Sandra’s high school memories of the “stupid ‘Island Wars,’” and what Phil taught her about narrow-mindedness within the black community: “we are all black people who may have come on different ships but are still in the same boat.”¹⁵⁰⁷

The discussion of racial issue in the novel would be incomplete without mentioning that at work Phil and Hugo encounter various minorities living in New York. Mostly, they deal with the Hispanic people; as a matter of fact, Hugo himself is one of them. Phil describes what kind of behaviour his working with Hugo, with whom he has been a partner for many years, tends to provoke: “we’ve been through this scene many, many times. Black suspects talk to me like he isn’t in the room and Hispanics talk to him in Spanish, which totally leaves me out of the loop.”¹⁵⁰⁸

11.8 Narrative Strategies and Point of View

Similarly to *What a Sista Should Do* as well as other books belonging to the (black) chick lit genre, the particular chapters¹⁵⁰⁹ take names after the corresponding first person narrators who alter one another with a somewhat regular pattern.¹⁵¹⁰ What is more interesting, despite the fact that the novel is a women-centred one, Diggs offers her readers a completely different perspective, using a male voice as one of those giving account of the storyline. Subsequently, the novel becomes not simply more complex but even multi-layered and therefore also more convincing. The same confessional mode—due to both the first-person male and female narrative voices—as in the previous novels characterises this one. The employment of the reflector-character (in personal narrative situations) reveals the four characters’ consciousness—“[i]t is an experienced description of a piece of the outer world which becomes the mirror of the hero’s inner world.”¹⁵¹¹ Simultaneously, the same strategy as in *What a Sista Should Do* is employed: the temporary shifts of reflector-characters into respective first-person narrators who are aware of telling the story, addressing an implied reader, occur at various points.¹⁵¹² The skilfully drawn combination of the showing and telling style can be seen as one of the best formal features of *The Other Side of the Game*.

The two sisters are equal at the first sight due to the number and even distribution of the chapters in which they function as reflector-characters. Asha’s voice is stronger, though, for two reasons basically. It is her account of the past events that opens the novel, providing the reader with the necessary preliminary information about more members of the family simultaneously; also, she is not as naïve as her sister, and lacks the tendency to present herself

¹⁵⁰⁶ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 21–22.

¹⁵⁰⁷ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 181–182.

¹⁵⁰⁸ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 31.

¹⁵⁰⁹ The length of the chapters differs from time to time; shortest ones even do not reach two full pages, e.g., twenty-three.

¹⁵¹⁰ Mostly Asha and Sandra take turns, being altered by the sequence of Phil and Evelyn’s chapters which directly follow each other five times; Evelyn gives account of the story in chapter thirty-six (which is also her last chapter), but is not preceded by Phil’s account. Toward the final chapters Evelyn withdraws completely from the book, and is not included in the ending. Altogether, she narrates six chapters, and he does seven out of the fifty-four chapters of varying length the book contains.

¹⁵¹¹ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 74. Asha’s credibility is also enabled by her reflections on herself and the inner workings of her mind. Cf., for example, Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 123–124.

¹⁵¹² Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 14, 76, and 268.

better than she actually is. This frankness (underlined also by her colloquial speech¹⁵¹³) makes her more bound to be identified with by the female reader.

Inner monologues cover a significant proportion of the chapters.¹⁵¹⁴ Harzewski claims that “through standard features of mainstream fiction—plot, setting, general linearity—which appear in these popular works, many novels approach the monologue form. The frequency of the *I* pronoun facilitates the heroine’s development, or, as critics have claimed, produces a juvenile solipsism.”¹⁵¹⁵ The chapters told sympathetically from a male point of view are equally concerned with the same kind of small-scale personal dramas. Similarly to McMillan’s selected novels, first, the reflector-characters unwind not only their particular parts of the story but also the overall common one.¹⁵¹⁶ Second, many of the dialogues take place not in person but as telephone conversations. The potentially weaker rhythm that might have resulted from Diggs’ decision to employ consistently the four protagonists’ voices is eliminated not only by the above mentioned transitions between the personal and first-person narrative situations but also the thought-provoking male point of view, embodied by Phil’s contribution to the narrative.

The use of verbal tenses differs from the previously discussed novels as well as within the novel in some respects. In the first chapter Asha uses present simple and continuous to evoke the effect of immediacy, describing both what is happening at the moment of speech and when giving general statements, also in direct speech (in the dialogues). The present tenses are combined with various past tenses when she refers to the past events. In the rest of the novel, present tenses are used only to express general truths and characters’ judgements,¹⁵¹⁷ meanwhile the action of the novel (the plot, in other words) is consistently enacted in past tenses. Future forms inform the reader about the protagonist’s plans and intentions throughout the whole book. As for the proportion of the mimetic-narrative and dramatic forms in the novel, it varies and is determined thematically again.¹⁵¹⁸

11.9 Plot and Ending

The unexpected twists of the plot effectively prevent it from being largely predictable. Enough entertaining passages are provided to keep the story intriguing; at the same time, the more serious moments do not lack in the novel, making the plot deeper and more meaningful.¹⁵¹⁹ Despite that, there occur some discrepancies which spoil the overall impression from the otherwise well-planned plot. One of the most apparent ones is the way Hugo and Phil communicate before the real nature of their relationship is revealed in chapters twenty and twenty-four which carry Phil’s name, and is therefore told from his point of view. The two men approach each other as if they were mere old friends, but certainly not two long-term lovers. Also, Asha’s story omits the depiction of how her relationship with Brent continues, even though he is the one who still pays her “monthly rent, phone, cable, and

¹⁵¹³ For example, Asha expresses her dissatisfaction with Brent, “What a priggish fucking fuddy-duddy!” Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 24.

¹⁵¹⁴ Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 163.

¹⁵¹⁵ Harzewski, “Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners,” in *Chick Lit*, 38.

¹⁵¹⁶ Warren does the same, however, not as often as McMillan and Diggs, which—as it was stated in the previous analysis—slows down the pace of her novel.

¹⁵¹⁷ These mostly include physical description of various characters as well as description of their personal traits, Asha’s ironic or satirical comments on life and relationships, etc.

¹⁵¹⁸ E.g., the mimetic passages prevail in chapter twenty-two, meanwhile chapter forty-two comprises of mimetic forms only; chapter twenty-eight contains approximately the same amount of both, etc.

¹⁵¹⁹ The parallel Sandra draws between the way people respond to a homeless man on the street and the way most people respond to the truth, that is, “they just don’t want to see it,” is an example of deeper, more thought-provoking passages related to the numerous subplots. Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 182–183.

utility bills,”¹⁵²⁰ (He is not even hinted at until she comes across the man in a restaurant she dines in with Sandra. Such a gap could have been avoided, if taking into account how much attention is given to the other two boyfriends. Brent’s reappearance on the scene proves to be motivated only by the fact that he forms a part of one of the numerous subplots which add a sense of danger and tension to the main plot.¹⁵²¹)

The initial chapters contain much background information whose purpose is to shed some light on the circumstances of the characters’ lives. The amount of such information, naturally, becomes smaller, as the narration proceeds.¹⁵²² Still, the details various characters add to the network of events and relationships by degrees enrich the main plotline.¹⁵²³ It should be added, however, that even towards the end of the novel refreshingly new pieces of the complex puzzle appear, surprising the reader to some extent, which is a very effective and challenging strategy. For example, Phil’s chapters (number thirty-one and forty-nine) deal with the emotional impact and epic journey related to the history of his sexual orientation.¹⁵²⁴

The same attention-drawing miniclimaxes appear in all the four analysed novels that keep the reader in suspicion and mark the ends of selected chapters. For instance, when Phil contemplates his daughter’s future in the fourth chapter, he says that as soon as she establishes her business (with his help in the form of the start-up money) and gets married to Yero, he is “going to sit her down, tell her a truth that has always needed telling and live the life that will make [him] happy.” What the truth means is to be found out only twenty-five chapters later. In the meantime, Diggs alludes to “the secret;” in chapter eleven (narrated by Phil), he finds himself on a rather thin ice with his daughter. Having a suspicion she might actually know about his homosexuality, he contemplates: “I couldn’t determine whether she looked angry or triumphant. I had known this day would come but it wasn’t supposed to be like this—the revelation was to have been mine to control. How was I supposed to explain the years of dishonesty?”¹⁵²⁵

Apparently, careful planning with all the interruptions, plot twists, and episodic structure of the novel belongs to Diggs’ basic strategies. Between chapters fifty-one and fifty-two, there is a pause of several months in which Sandra and Yero get back together before their wedding takes place.¹⁵²⁶ In the interview which is available as the last part of *The Other Side of the Game*, Diggs strategically unveils what the sequel is going to be about.¹⁵²⁷ Her intention is to allure the reader with several hints and make him/her take interest in *Denzel’s Lips*.

Wells calculates that few, if any, chick lit ends with the heroine’s wedding. What is more common, however, are “mutual declarations of love after a long and tumultuous period of misunderstandings, with future marriage likely but not guaranteed.” Wells continues,

¹⁵²⁰ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 27.

¹⁵²¹ In particular, Asha unexpectedly meets Brent in a restaurant, and after she exchanges some phrases with him, she is threatened by his other competitive mistress who turns out to be the former private eye hired by his wife Amanda that tells Asha about this in person. Asha uses the information about Brent who had no idea who his mistress actually is. Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 265–267, 268–276.

¹⁵²² Chapter nineteen deals with the history of Yero and Sandra’s relationship, for example. Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 108–112.

¹⁵²³ For instance, Lola’s past and way of life is expounded by Asha and Sandra, of course; but Phil’s point of view of an adult and Lola’s temporary partner adds multiple layers to the storytelling. Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 69–70. Moreover, the sisters speculate about whether Lola would approve of their behaviour, symbolically extending the novel. Cf. *ibid.*, 103.

¹⁵²⁴ Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 225–228.

¹⁵²⁵ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 68–69.

¹⁵²⁶ In the break Phil finds a new partner, “a good white cop ... with ten years under his belt.” Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 319.

¹⁵²⁷ Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 328–329.

“although a chick lit heroine rarely aims to be wedded by the final page, one of her female relatives or friends is likely to think of little else, a preoccupation that the novelist generally satirizes.”¹⁵²⁸ The ending presented in *The Other Side of the Game* is precisely what makes the novel grow apart from the other chick (Sistah) lit and evokes its romance novel heritage. Not only Saundra and Yero get married after prolonged complications, but also Asha has been given an engagement ring, and announces “Nick and I are getting married next summer.”¹⁵²⁹ Her sister’s matrimony does not become the object of Asha’s mockery, but turns into a common goal. On the other hand, Harzewski points out “inevitable happy endings”¹⁵³⁰ as one of the basic features of chick lit. In any case, the touch of romantic tension resulting from the complications of Saundra and Yero’s upcoming wedding is followed by an unnecessarily imposed happy ending for Asha and Nick.

11.10 Humour

The protagonists’ self-deprecating humour as well as female and/or feminist humour give way to satire, exaggeration and hyperbole, or other kinds of humour in this particular book. The sisters often like to tease each other. Asha puts on a pair of tight-fitting boot cut jeans, on which Saundra comments, “‘Did you put those jeans on with a spray gun?’”¹⁵³¹ Asha returns her sister’s remarks when they start discussing Saundra’s wedding dress which she would prefer to create herself. “‘It’s gonna be made of recycled burlap, a mosquito net for a veil and you’ll carry a broccoli stalk bouquet?’”¹⁵³² Description of other people’s appearance is also a frequent source of comic situations. Asha describes a woman’s hair: “‘It was a ghetto [do] before the blonde dye and sparkles; now it’s alive.’”¹⁵³³

Black humour is the prerogative of some characters. Out of the precinct on the road, Hugo and Phil play their routine game when things go wrong. Asking why they “have become cops,” considering how dangerous the occupation is, they agree it is “‘to protect the good people from the bad people.’” Among the bad ones, there are the “‘rapists, burglars, murderers, and drug dealers,’” but the question remains how to tell the difference. Phil answers, “‘We can’t. So fuck it. Let’s lock everybody up and figure it out later.’”¹⁵³⁴ Even gallows humour appears. Evelyn, a healthy lifestyle devotee, is worried about Hugo and his health. “‘So, I have to watch you keel over with a massive heart attack? That’s not my idea of fun, Hugo.’” He replies wittily, “‘What if I promise not to collapse until you’re back home? My living room is huge. Plenty of room for me to lie facedown until the medics arrive.’”¹⁵³⁵

11.11 Language

The novel consistently employs a wide range of the features of spoken language, which results in its authenticity, light tone, and a higher degree of immediacy than in, e.g., the previously analysed novel. Frequent exclamations express excitement,¹⁵³⁶ the characters use interjections (such as “ooh” or “aah”) when they speak, there are numerous verbless or echo questions. Personal pronouns can be omitted if it is clear from the verbal or situational context

¹⁵²⁸ Wells, “Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History,” in *Chick Lit*, 50.

¹⁵²⁹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 325.

¹⁵³⁰ Stephanie Harzewski uses Grescoe’s term applied on the genre of popular romance in her discussion of chick lit. “Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners,” in *Chick Lit*, 36–37.

¹⁵³¹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 96.

¹⁵³² Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 100.

¹⁵³³ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 140.

¹⁵³⁴ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 115.

¹⁵³⁵ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 118.

¹⁵³⁶ Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 157.

who the speaker/addressee is;¹⁵³⁷ phonetic spelling adds to the credibility of certain passages.¹⁵³⁸ Among these features there are also numerous idioms,¹⁵³⁹ unfinished sentences, hesitation pauses,¹⁵⁴⁰ grammatical reduction, implicitness, discourse markers and fillers, hedges which express degree of assertiveness, lexical bundles, local repetition, pauses filled with “uh” or “um,” false starts, a range of vernacular expressions such as “damn” or “bloody;” attention signals, response elicitors, polite speech acts as well as vocatives, elliptic and other exclamations, morphological variants (ain’t), fixed expressions, deliberative questions, stance markers, vague expressions, preface or two-step questions, etc. Words in italics are emphasised, but—simultaneously—, the italicised expressions successfully manipulate with the reader, providing connotative meaning or attempting to make the narration more topical. As an example, the very first sentence of the book is italicised, conveying a strong message of Asha’s disapproval of some black women’s behaviour in American television shows.¹⁵⁴¹

When Diggs’ characters speak, the way they do so varies according to the social factors, depending on their (mutual) background knowledge, social distance, topic, mode of expression, age, mood, personality, etc.¹⁵⁴² Hugo’s utterances are seasoned with “chica,” or “Ay dios.”¹⁵⁴³ The most colloquial and informal voice is that of Asha. Her sharp satirical comments are aimed at numerous kinds of objects and topics. The most entertaining ones have to do with her boyfriends, e.g., when she complains about how hard it has become to spend time with Brent, she suggests: “[h]e talked about the exact same things at the exact same moment every single time. I’d heard all his jokes and the punch lines weren’t going to change.”¹⁵⁴⁴ She shares her knowledge of the advantages of a relationship with married men: “[m]arried men went along with anything that would keep you from asking them to leave their wives.”¹⁵⁴⁵ She says to Sandra about Phil that her father ““ is not the type to change without a kick in the ass. ... He’s a stereotypical cop, content with coffee and donuts.””¹⁵⁴⁶ Observing a chubby child Randy addresses his “uncle’s princess,” she utters, “[s]imply looking at that child should be enough reason for condom usage.”¹⁵⁴⁷

Meanwhile expletives and any kind of taboo words are carefully avoided in *What a Sista Should Do* most of the time, the opposite is true in this novel. Asha is the rather frequent user of expletives; when Phil talks to Hugo, or is handling a case in which rougher language is

¹⁵³⁷ “Pour the water. Fill in the wineglasses. Load up our plates with calamari and antipasto,” Asha describes her dinner with Nick, for instance. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 52.

¹⁵³⁸ For instance, “lemme” which stands for “let me,” Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 100. The most exemplary passage can be found in chapter twenty-two in which Asha pretends to have a cold in order to avoid seeing Randy—cf. *ibid.*, 126, 127.

¹⁵³⁹ Sandra says, “all I can do is sit back and watch the chips fall,” for example. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 18.

¹⁵⁴⁰ Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 231. Phil has difficulties explaining Evelyn the real reasons for the fact that he cannot marry her, and is a gay.

¹⁵⁴¹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 7.

¹⁵⁴² For example, when reading chapter twenty-two, the reader surely notices the different ways in which Asha communicates with Evelyn and later with her sister on the phone. Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 128–131.

¹⁵⁴³ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 43, 46

¹⁵⁴⁴ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 76.

¹⁵⁴⁵ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 76.

¹⁵⁴⁶ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 99.

¹⁵⁴⁷ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 134.

needed, he does not avoid them either;¹⁵⁴⁸ Sandra and Evelyn, by contrast, economise on them.

As for layers of meaning, figurative language is not foreign to the book. Metaphors are used throughout the book. “I poured another cup of courage,” Phil describes the necessity to pour another glass of whiskey during a conversation with Sandra that makes him nervous.¹⁵⁴⁹ “[J]ust what the doctor ordered” is Sandra’s visit to her disturbed sister.¹⁵⁵⁰ Devastated Sandra burst into sobs that are “so heartrending” that Asha “would have given up all [her] jewelry to make her stop.”¹⁵⁵¹ In the process of her self-growth, Asha speaks about her “deceit cup” which has run over.¹⁵⁵² Connotative meanings challenge the reader’s understanding of the text. “We couldn’t risk telling her because she might say ‘no’ and *everybody* was going to be there,” Asha explains the circumstances of their forbidden trips to South Bronx when they were teenagers. “*Everybody*” not only refers to the amount of people, but also implies that all people whose presence matter to Asha and Sandra would participate. The party they visit continues in a very different way than the sisters planned, so they decide “it was time to leave. *Now*.” Instead of saying something like “immediately,” Asha (the reflector) makes the drama more intense for the reader by presenting it closer than it is in terms of deixis by using the time adverb “now.”¹⁵⁵³ Effective contrasts are, for example, created by juxtaposition of words with the opposite meaning: “I remember having to stretch my quivering little arm around my mother’s broad shoulders many times.”¹⁵⁵⁴

In some chapters of the novel Diggs unfortunately does not avoid the use of sentimental language, especially when it comes to the depiction of sex or physical contact. Kissing Yero, Sandra feels the following sensations: “Actually, it felt like an embrace from a supernatural being and I was in a trance. ... After our lips separated and we sat there examining each other with love-filled eyes, I stroked his dark brown face and was unable to speak. But that was all right, the silence said what I could not.”¹⁵⁵⁵ The otherwise carefully designed language of the book turns into its ultimate weakness in the passages like this: when Sandra flees her father’s house, he grieves, “The whole thing became enormously plain. I had lost her forever. Ma Sandra...”¹⁵⁵⁶ These occasional flaws, however, do not prevent Diggs from developing the narrative space as a space of liberation for the protagonists.

11.12 Values and Emotions

Sandra and Evelyn are probably the most high-principled characters of *The Other Side of the Game* as far the fundamental beliefs are concerned. Through their mouths and deeds, Diggs supplies the novel with values of different kinds mostly without sounding preachy. (The judgements Sandra imposes on her sister, however, are definitely part of Diggs’ subversive strategy.) Obviously, the women’s lives are intertwined: the education Evelyn has provided her with is reflected in Sandra’s values and behaviour. The young woman says, But what is more rewarding than merely reading the literature is its application. When I think of who I was before, I wince. My sphere of awareness was almost mechanical and I worshipped the major gods of this society:

¹⁵⁴⁸ It mostly occurs in situations when Asha is angry or in some kind of danger; the word is not a mere filler. Cf., for example, Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 7, 14, 105, 171, etc. Similarly, stressed Phil uses expletives to let some steam off in his police office—cf. *ibid.*, 151. “Shit” is uttered plentifully by Asha in general.

¹⁵⁴⁹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 68.

¹⁵⁵⁰ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 173.

¹⁵⁵¹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 221.

¹⁵⁵² Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 238.

¹⁵⁵³ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 10–12.

¹⁵⁵⁴ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 8.

¹⁵⁵⁵ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 22. A similar passage can be found in chapter fifty-one, see *ibid.*, 317–318.

¹⁵⁵⁶ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 224.

excuses, materialism, selfishness, and linear thought. These are deities I no longer wish to serve. Now I'm free of crippling limitations and I can fully concentrate on my goals.¹⁵⁵⁷

Asha's ruthless behaviour in many areas makes the reader judge for himself/herself. "To make sure that I will never catch the fatal 'money doesn't matter, happiness is what is truly important in life' disease," she generally avoids people (with exception of Sandra because she is her sister) "who already have it."¹⁵⁵⁸ But most of all, her lack of scruples is reflected in her behaviour to men, Randy in particular. Although she knows his financial situation, and she herself has more than enough, she makes him spend more money than he can afford. She comments: "... we exchanged numbers and the rest is history. Since then he has maxed his credit cards: there's been a weekend in the Bahamas, exotic restaurants, orchids, Godiva chocolates and cellar wines. CHA-CHING!"¹⁵⁵⁹ What surprises the reader even more (and simultaneously put subversive emphasis how unwholesome her behaviour is) is the matter-of-fact way of her storytelling. She states, "[b]ut what the hell, he's a good listener, enjoys sex, and is trying to get some more credit cards to keep me happy. I just hope all his future tokens of affection will be inanimate," Asha reasons, having received a puppy of a golden retriever from Randy.¹⁵⁶⁰ The way Asha neglects the animal also says something about her egoism; she gets rid of the animal and "promptly erase[s] him from [her] brain."¹⁵⁶¹ Again, the sisters are very different: Sandra's concern about others and her rejection of living at the expense of someone else become visible when she purchases things not only for herself but also for her father and fiancé, helping Asha overcome her Halloween depression on a shopping spree. Sandra insists that her sister uses her own credit card and not Nick's Master Card whose authorised user Asha is.¹⁵⁶²

It would be unfair to ignore Asha's strong sides and core values which are the guiding principles that dictate her behaviour and action. These help her to determine if she is on the right path and fulfilling her goals, creating an unwavering and unchanging guide. Despite their differences and conflicts, she remains loyal to her sister; besides the cold-blood treatment Randy receives, she expresses her admiration for him and who he has become, considering his origin.¹⁵⁶³ She believes that family is of fundamental importance, and honesty is the best policy; trust, in her opinion, must be earned. On many occasions, she proves to be dependable, reliable, consistent, motivated, courageous, and flexible. She gives evidence of her good will and generosity, paying for everything except the rings and the place where the wedding is held. Moved by the solemn occasion, Asha has "a lump in [her]throat" during the couple's first dance because "this day had come so close to not happening. That would have been a tragedy because they love each other so very, very much."¹⁵⁶⁴

Responsibility for one's decisions is accentuated throughout the novel. Phil knows too well that due to financial reasons, Evelyn can start her business only when they have got married; hence his share given to her. It replaces the share she needed from Josephine so that she can start by herself without demanding to become her business partner.¹⁵⁶⁵ Particularly, Diggs underlines responsibility for one's children. Sandra works as a volunteer for the community centre which also organises projects for them. She points at the lack of time and attention of their parents: "I feel so sorry for some of those kids; most of their parents just sit them in front of the Cartoon Network and let Bugs and Daffy raise them. Or worse, they sit

¹⁵⁵⁷ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 17.

¹⁵⁵⁸ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 59–60.

¹⁵⁵⁹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 60.

¹⁵⁶⁰ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 62.

¹⁵⁶¹ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 160.

¹⁵⁶² Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 106–107.

¹⁵⁶³ Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 132.

¹⁵⁶⁴ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 326.

¹⁵⁶⁵ Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 230.

them in front of music videos, complete with materialistic players and self-proclaimed superfreaks.”¹⁵⁶⁶ Yero has the same attitude, which explains his seemingly strange reaction when his brother Khari and his girlfriend Joanne announce her pregnancy. Giving them a cold shoulder, Yero reminds them they first need jobs to be able to provide for the child. Once the child comes, “Mama will have to do all the work. She raised her kids already, it’s not fair to her.” Yero simply does not want their mother to “end up fixing his messes” as usual.¹⁵⁶⁷

Both Sandra and Evelyn display a high degree of selflessness and altruism. Their practice of concern for the welfare of others is tested in two particular situations both of which are related to Sandra and Yero’s wedding. Evelyn offers a helping hand with its planning when Sandra needs it, knowing she should have been the one proposed after years of a relationship with a man. Paradoxically, at the same time, Sandra is inclined to asking her sister for help.¹⁵⁶⁸ Due to the course that the plot in the novel takes, however, Evelyn does not participate at the ceremony.

Last but not least, after Sandra’s discovery, attempts at reconciliation with Phil and forgiveness seem futile. It is clear that “[i]t will take a lot of honesty and forgiving”¹⁵⁶⁹ for Sandra to keep her relationships not only with both men but also her sister. When Evelyn sees Sandra for the last time, saying “a good-bye without [her] having to say so,” she urges Sandra to forgive Phil—no matter what he has done to both of them—for her own “peace of mind.”¹⁵⁷⁰

The close connection between (black) chick lit and other contemporary popular fiction forms, mainly the romance novel, as suggested in chapter five of the dissertation, has been practically demonstrated in the analysis of *The Other Side of the Game*. Namely, the novel is well-plotted, set in a contemporary urban place, and offers elements of adventure, simultaneously keeping the light tone typical of chick lit. Despite the happy ending to most of the book’s characters, it is not accurate to say the book would deliberately undermine the women’s movement, though. The personal and first-person narrative situations combined together give the reader a better sense of identification with the protagonists, including Phil, the only male who is given the chance to narrate in all the examined novels. Besides identification with the colourful characters, the novel offers identification with their daily existence, evoking emotions of various kinds. At the same time, entertainment is accompanied by deeper thoughts. All in all, the book’s proximity to conventions of mass fiction such as verisimilitude, chapter demarcations, commodity inclination, etc. does not reduce its quality.

Cris Mazza suggests that chick lit, that is, “these new novels of manners, typically opt for transparency and humor over nuance and irony. As with most popular fiction, high readability is part of the formula and an impediment when evaluating chick lit as literary.” While it offers “a remedy to relatively humorless feminist polemics, the genre is nearly oblivious to social concerns beyond the protagonist’s rather narrow world.”¹⁵⁷¹ But this particular novel shows qualities such as non-linear plot, sensitive use of language, humour,

¹⁵⁶⁶ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 84.

¹⁵⁶⁷ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 87. Yero’s opinion is also based on the fact that Mama already had to pay for Joanne to get the first abortion, which comes as a shock to Sandra. Ibid.

¹⁵⁶⁸ Sandra thinks for herself, “I knew that what Evelyn really wanted was an invitation to help me with every detail of my upcoming nuptials, but it was something I really wanted to do with Asha and I didn’t know how to say so without hurting her feelings.” Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 56.

¹⁵⁶⁹ Lewis, “Review of *The Other Side of the Game*,” 33.

¹⁵⁷⁰ Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 248.

¹⁵⁷¹ An email conversation with Mazza, qtd. in “Who’s Laughing Now? A Short History of Chick Lit and the Perversion of a Genre,” in *Chick Lit*, 26.

and authenticity which “is frequently missing from women’s fiction of the past.”¹⁵⁷² Wells explains that in terms of language, “chick lit’s greatest achievement is its satiric employment, and sometimes invention of contemporary slang and lingo.” Readers are regularly supplied with “amusing, evocative, and occasionally useful terms. Aside from these words and phrases, though, the language of chick lit novels is unremarkable, in a literary sense. Richly descriptive or poetic passages, the very bread and butter of literary novels, both historical and contemporary, are virtually nonexistent in chick lit.”¹⁵⁷³

It can be concluded that on one hand, “booksellers and publishers agree that the market has been flooded with formulaic titles that lack quality and originality ... and the market is [somewhat] oversaturated”—something certain critics call “the curse of the pink cover.” On the other hand, not only in terms of language, the analysed book apparently brings more than what is expected from this kind of literature. Mallory Young asserts that “[c]hick lit is proving to be surprisingly adaptable.” And the idea that “[i]nstead of continuing to get that very same Bridget Jones clone again and again, we’re getting some different versions”¹⁵⁷⁴ are undeniable facts.

¹⁵⁷² Chick lit author Jennifer Werner qtd. in Heather Cabot, “‘Chick Lit’ Fuels Publishing Industry.” abc News, accessed November 15, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/story?id=129475&page=1#.Uas2YUBM-So>.

¹⁵⁷³ Wells, “Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History,” in *Chick Lit*, 64–65.

¹⁵⁷⁴ Qtd. in Carol Memmott, “Chick lit, for better or worse, is here to stay,” USAtoday.com, accessed May 10, 2013, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2006-06-20-chick-lit_x.htm.

12 African American Popular Literature and (Black) Chick Lit: “Independently Indebted”

Chick lit ... responds to upheavals in the dating and mating order through a mixed strategy of dramatization, farce, and satire. ... in their degree of sexual autonomy and professional choices, stand as direct beneficiaries of the women’s liberation movement. Stephanie Harzewski¹⁵⁷⁵

First, I have to care, and I don’t waste my time writing about folks I don’t care about. Once I’ve done this, I hope by delivering an exciting and convincing story with a satisfying ending, I can exhale, and think what itch I must scratch next.” Terry McMillan¹⁵⁷⁶

In the methodological chapter it was stated that the dissertation aims to avoid hasty generalisations. It would be very unwise to try to come to any universal and conclusive ideas based merely on the four different analyses of different girlfriend novels for various reasons. These, for instance, include that chick lit has gradually developed into an enormously popular and diverse kind of literature, further differentiated into numerous subgenres which can partially overlap. The rough classification of the first and second wave of chick lit does not say much about any particular turning points which would help categorise individual books either. Many novels by women writers about women characters and aimed at women readers are not chick lit, even though they are labelled so. There are chick lit books of quality as well as bad attempts which take the merit of their predecessors, etc. And the reasoning could go on. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to take into consideration the dissertation author’s knowledge of the genre and what the theorists as well as critics of chick lit suggest, and contrast it with the findings which result from the analyses of *Waiting to Exhale* and *Getting to Happy* by Terry McMillan, *What a Sista Should Do* by Tiffany L. Warren, and *The Other Side of the Game* by Anita Doreen Diggs, saying what the books can offer to the reader as well as where their weaknesses lie.

The novels analysed in the dissertation all focus on women’s experiences and take into account stories told by female voices. The novels borrow the conventions and themes of earlier women-centred works, but “only to turn them into something unmistakably contemporary and arguably feminist” to various extents. Still, “[w]omen’s writing and storytelling literally act as a central point of the program.”¹⁵⁷⁷

12.1 (Black) Chick Lit Today

Ten years ago, the journalist Anna Weinberg expressed her hopes for chick lit to be “the bright light of postfeminist writing.”¹⁵⁷⁸ Several years later, this originally avant-garde literary movement dated back to the mid-1990s turns into “an unabashedly bourgeois, commercial medium, with its formula of urban consumerist fantasy, perhaps most accurately perceived as postmodernists’ *fin de siècle*” according to Stephanie Harzewski.¹⁵⁷⁹ These days, having migrated from experimental fiction to the mainstream one for good, it has been an established light-hearted form of fiction with features of romantic comedy and social satire for women regardless of their race; it is also often interconnected with the television and film such as in case of McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale* as well as *Getting to Happy*, and *How Stella Got Her*

¹⁵⁷⁵ Harzewski, “Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners,” in *Chick Lit*, 37.

¹⁵⁷⁶ McMillan, introduction to *Breaking Ice*, xxiv.

¹⁵⁷⁷ Mabry, “About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary ‘Chick’ Culture,” in *Chick Lit*, 198.

¹⁵⁷⁸ Anna Weinberg, “She’s Come Undone,” *Book*, July/August 2003, 47–49.

¹⁵⁷⁹ Harzewski, introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 16.

Groove Back; Bridget Jones' Diary, Sex and the City, The Devil Wears Prada, Confessions of a Shopaholic by Sophie Kinsella, and other books adapted as rather successful films with A-list casts.¹⁵⁸⁰

Considering what number of chick lit end up silencing the strong female voices, when they submit their stories to masculine control, the critics as well as other authors must be disturbed, for this is exactly what sets them apart from earlier texts such as *Waiting to Exhale*. At the same time, becoming as conservative in portrayals of women's concerns as other previous works, these novels represent something McMillan logically rejects to be associated with. All in all, even these novels (some of which have extensively happy endings), as Mabry observes, provide significant new visions of "women's new voices, communities, and experiences as sexual beings." Although they are not "perfect visions by any means," they represent a step beyond earlier women's texts which were even more tightly bound by traditional notions of "true womanhood" and the behaviour which should result from it.¹⁵⁸¹

McMillan's reluctance toward being grouped among the chick lit authors is understandable, especially if taking into consideration what Elizabeth Merrick says. "To limit our narrative about women in the twenty-first century to one ur-myth of a young and fashionable urban quest for a husband isn't simply untrue to the complexity of women's lives today, it's dull after awhile: the stakes are so low."¹⁵⁸² But despite the fact that McMillan herself rejects the label of a chick lit author, some of the formal qualities her works display show something different, and it is for sure that it is not in her power to put a stop to the avalanche of popular literature her enormous success has started. As Harzewski explains, meanwhile the Harlequin romance boomed in the early 1970s and coexisted—although antagonistically—with the Second Wave feminism, chick lit "established itself as a commercial genre by the late 1990s and worked in tandem with postfeminism."¹⁵⁸³ It has been demonstrated that the term postfeminism has a wide scale of different meanings among popular and scholarly discourses. Although it was first used in connection to literature, recently it has been utilized predominantly to "signify temporal economies suggesting the completion, suspension, or warning purpose of earlier feminism as well as futuristic sense of going beyond it."¹⁵⁸⁴

Unlike McMillan, chick lit novels often depict feminism as ultimately outdated style and even misread it as "a bilious monolith," its strident tendencies seen as "embarrassing and not fully compatible with chick lit's ties to the values of romance fiction and its embrace of commodities, especially beauty and fashion culture." It is not entirely antifeminist but functions as a sharp and very implicit commentary of feminism's gains and deficiencies: it offers "a utopian amalgamation of different strands of feminisms fused." Commercial postfeminism even presents feminism as "a bad or embarrassing mother," positioning itself to earlier waves of feminism through very inexact oppositions (for example "private pleasure/grassroots politics; humor/ dour seriousness; a stylish, polished appearance/dowdiness; desire for marriage and security/mistrust of the male gender."). In chick lit, "the personal is political" often changes into "it's just personal," which is seen as one of the drawbacks of the genre according to Harzewski.¹⁵⁸⁵ Much more than in the other analysed novels, in McMillan's books, inhabited by strong and resourceful characters, the

¹⁵⁸⁰ For a more detailed list of examples, see Harzewski, introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 16–17.

¹⁵⁸¹ Mabry, "About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary 'Chick' Culture," in *Chick Lit*, 203.

¹⁵⁸² Merrick, "This Is Not Chick Lit: What's in a Title?"

¹⁵⁸³ Harzewski, "Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners," in *Chick Lit*, 37.

¹⁵⁸⁴ Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 155.

¹⁵⁸⁵ Harzewski, introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 20–22.

personal and political blur, for the good of the black community is a matter of everyday mutual support and basic human values such as solidarity, tolerance, and unselfishness.

McMillan's works cannot be labelled as pure chick lit for several reasons. Simultaneously, there is much she and the chick lit genre have in common. She precedes the genre, establishing her novels which serve as an African American postfeminist alternative to the Harlequin and as a displacement of the popular romance novel. They modify both kinds of literature by means of using a greater realism, but do not accentuate a picaresque relation to money and a vast diminishment of men (the male hero, if you wish) as chick lit does. They present a rather disembellished picture of single life, dating, and courting, or depicting sometimes unrealistic expectations, which often leads to a significant dissolution of romantic ideals.

It results from the analysis of the selected novels that McMillan has shifted the horizon of expectations for African American popular literature. Her followers connect to her works basically in two directions. Namely, first, "Sistah lit has spawned a new wave of African-American women writers who are confronting the *Sex and the City* syndrome, a version of popular ethnocentrism that assumes that women of color don't exist in urban world of glamour."¹⁵⁸⁶ It is needless to say that black women in comparison with their white sisters have come much further, having to fight for a recognition of their womanhood after a long period of time when they were actually denied their affiliation with it (which has never been expected of white women), and their images were distorted on a national scale. Second, for the past fifteen years black authors of popular fiction have been producing books aimed at African American readers which is usually generally referred to "variously as ghetto or urban or street literature."¹⁵⁸⁷ None of it makes Terry McMillan happy,"¹⁵⁸⁸ again. That is because this kind of literature is "exploiting women and ... glorifying things that happen in our communities that shouldn't be glorified.... How much we can get away with it is seen as something to be applauded almost." The books convey messages of crime and sexual depravity.¹⁵⁸⁹

Original chick lit books often stand in a sharp contrast with many of their later followers. The latter ones unfortunately tend to reduce the complexity of the colourful human experience, not helping to increase the reader's awareness of other than existing perspectives (verisimilitude) or expanding on reality. The original chick lit novels—*Waiting to Exhale* among them—remain exceptional with its treatment of middle- and upper-middle-class problems at the time of its release, bringing a breath of fresh air to the African American historicising culture of complaint. It is also possible to see them as a reasonable compromise or "intermediary between the pure escapism of the Harlequin and the compulsory progressiveness of feminism polemics."¹⁵⁹⁰

Booksquare expresses a lucid warning against the uniformity of the second wave of chick lit in 2004 which might, as a matter of fact, turn out to be off-putting for some readers.

We enjoyed early chicklit because it offered something different (we never could relate to the cowboys, babies, and brides phenomenon that's swept romance publishing for the past twenty years). Yet the very thing that drew readers—voice, situation, plot—is the marketing hook we're seeing time and again. We love our friends and have been known to indulge in drinking and carousing. More than once. But where it could be celebration of choices made by today's women, chicklit has become about finding a man. Like other entertainment industries,

¹⁵⁸⁶ Guerrero, "'Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves': Chick Lit in Black and White," in *Chick Lit*, 100.

¹⁵⁸⁷ Thug lit can be seen as a specific kind of urban literature which—unlike the Sistah lit or girlfriend novels—focuses outward, onto the neighbourhoods, streets, and external problems that face the inner-city black community.

¹⁵⁸⁸ "Publishing Company Called Out over 'Ghetto Lit.'"

¹⁵⁸⁹ McMillan, "Publishing Company Called Out over 'Ghetto Lit.'"

¹⁵⁹⁰ Harzewski, introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 7.

publishing likes to take a fresh concept and keep repeating it until it becomes a cultural joke. Chick lit might be coming of age—but until the publishers catch on to the fact, the revolution may escape the average reader.¹⁵⁹¹

As for chick lit characters, they are young enough to have reached a higher status on the social ladder due to, e.g., the position they occupy at work, but too old to possess innocence. In comparison with the heroines of romance novels, chick lit characters understand sexual desire and knowledge in this area does not entail any guilt. A chick lit protagonist deliberately engages in sexual adventures, arousing the male often by means of spunky and whimsical behaviour. She is not placed in the circumstances where she would respond to males' sexual desires and yet not be held responsible for the consequences—after all, she is not a child anymore. What is more, she makes strategic choices in terms of eligible men, negotiating and attempting to climb the social ladder. The characters reach the state of self-transcendence instead of self-betrayal and/or self-forgetfulness promised by ideology of love as suggested in, e.g., romance novels. Although women protagonists' lust and falling in love often leads to an increased emotional vulnerability, unlike in romances, most of the major characters in chick lit tend to be rather fearful; they tend to be depicted as “brave, resourceful, and self-reliant” until they fall in love, after which they become excessively helpless and unable to cope with stress or difficulty.¹⁵⁹²

12.2 Summary of the Analyses Findings

It is known that chick lit makes use of popular forms, literary forms—which is its bildungsroman and novel of manners heritage—, and media discourse. All three have been traced in the examined girlfriend (or sister-girl) novels, primarily because their authors celebrate female bonding. Both novels by McMillan can be regarded as spiritual biographies; *What a Sista Should Do* is an example of Christian chick lit (or church lit), and Sista lit has been represented by Diggs' novel.

All four analysed novels are set in contemporary urban areas; what, however, differs is the explicitness of particular spatio-temporal details of the novels and the role the settings play in them. Phoenix in McMillan's novels has to do with her stay in Arizona, when working on her third novel (*Waiting to Exhale*), and where else could the sequel possibly be set than in the same state. Meanwhile the church in Cleveland from Warren's novel could be any church in the Eastern part of the United States, the multicultural atmosphere which is so typical of New York proves to be irreplaceable for *The Other Side of the Game*.

Taking into account that a girlfriend novel must be “a character-driven form,” as Richards suggests, at least to some extent, it is obvious how much weight is put on the characters and to which extent the books' quality depends on them. Dodd suggests that in the first analysed novel “these are women just bursting with life, with talents and opinions all their own.”¹⁵⁹³ What Richards says about McMillan's third novel is recognisable in all the examined books in the analyses:

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 society. Consequently, the four-woman form enables the author to reach a broad audience. If a woman does not see herself in the book, she probably knows someone who is like one of the characters. Even men may recognize aspects of women they know in the characters. In order to realize the strengths of this form, the author must be able to create engaging characters who are believable not only as individuals, but also in their intimate relationships with the other characters. *Waiting to Exhale* succeeds because McMillan skilfully creates a group of characters that a broad spectrum of readers can embrace as intimate friends.¹⁵⁹⁴

¹⁵⁹¹ “All Grown Up and Ready to Rumble,” Booksquare, accessed January 15, 2013, <http://booksquare.com/all-grown-up-and-ready-to-rumble/>.

¹⁵⁹² Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, 70.

¹⁵⁹³ Dodd, “Women, Sisters and Friends,” 11.

¹⁵⁹⁴ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 124.

None of the protagonist can be ranked among the (mostly second-wave) chick lit “career girls looking for love.”¹⁵⁹⁵ Reaching a high position at work and/or having a well-paid job do not prevent the women from contemplating a stable relationship and longing for a supportive partner. Also Phil, the only male protagonist and voice (from *The Other Side of the Game*), is both personally strong and emotionally thirsty; as a matter of fact, some of the strongest women characters tend to attract men who even make use of them financially, and vice versa. Meanwhile romance novels and a large number of chick lit present the intersection of heterosexuality and economic value as the new century sexual politics, McMillan’s protagonists are not slaves to this system. Men are depicted as sources of pleasure and enable them “to exhale,” still, the protagonists can live without them and manage financially. Social mobility, by contrast, is facilitated by men in *What a Sista Should Do*; a successful negotiation of marriage with economic concerns is the case of the last analysed novel by Diggs.

The ways in which particular characters approach and face problems differ, too. McMillan’s and Diggs’ ones reflect a worldview and philosophy of living “that are consonant with the blues aesthetic.” As a result, “the blues testimonial form does not require the performer to solve problems. Rather, the function of the blues testimonial is to acknowledge” them.¹⁵⁹⁶ These novels do not intend to answer the protagonists’—and readers’—call to what obscures their lives but, instead it urges them to familiarise with themselves, as they are, that is, their souls with profundities, shallows, vanities, and generousities. This however, is not to say that the novels are populist, giving their readers only what they want to hear. In church lit in general (in this dissertation represented by Warren’s novel), the almighty God provides the characters with answers, and offers a helping hand, which indirectly encourages their passivity. It can be definitely stated that the natural cause and effect logic—as used by McMillan and Diggs—together with not very frequently applied critical reactions of particular protagonists’ friends and sisters who disapprove of their behaviour and the choices they make, prove to be much a more effective strategy than the direct preaching and condemnation of the frowning protagonists of *What a Sista Should Do*.

According to Richards, McMillan together with her contemporaries rejoin “the reformist goals of spiritual feminism” which has been embraced by African American women writers since the 19th century. As a starting point for this opinion, she uses Deborah E. McDowell’s idea that “one of the most popular arguments ... held that only the elevation of the spirit would obliterate racism and other ‘earthly’ injustices.”¹⁵⁹⁷ Spiritual redemption leading to the achievement of personal liberty is realised in different ways by the three novelists. Because the urban settings provide the protagonists with little opportunity to come closer to the natural forces, their personal growth occurs in domestic spaces. Meanwhile McMillan works “within a blues cosmology,”¹⁵⁹⁸ representing her characters’ spiritual experience, Warren’s novels openly embrace Christianity and Christian morality; Diggs depicts Eastern philosophy followers contrasted with agnostics.

The characters of the selected novels have “all the pulls and tugs of feminism versus the feminine that a modern black woman who’s read Walker and Shange is supposed to have.”¹⁵⁹⁹ Not only McMillan’s characters—every single one of them—“is drawn with authenticity and empathy, and McMillan pulls no punches about their collective bad judgment

¹⁵⁹⁵ Mazza, “Who’s Laughing Now? A Short History of Chick Lit and the Perversion of a Genre,” in *Chick Lit*, 21.

¹⁵⁹⁶ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 114.

¹⁵⁹⁷ Deborah E. McDowell, introduction to *Four Girls at Cottage City*, Emma D. Kelley-Hawkins (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), xxix. The book was first published in 1898. Qtd. in Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 125.

¹⁵⁹⁸ Richards, *Terry McMillan: A Critical Companion*, 125.

¹⁵⁹⁹ Davis, “Don’t Worry, Be Buppie: Black Novelists Head for the Mainstream.”

in choosing partners for romance.”¹⁶⁰⁰ As for their racial authenticity in particular, “they are as they are; like other folk heroes, they don’t change much, or drag skeletons out of the closet, and they learn their lessons the hard way. They’ve been created by years of past mythologizing, drawn their images from popular culture, black and white. They are black, sho’ nuff.” The last thing that should be said about McMillan’s people is that they are not just black; in fact, they are,

black in big, bold strokes. And that means her work will continue to raise questions among African Americans about the fuzzy line between realism and popular misconception. And at the same time, McMillan is, as she said, less race-conscious. She confines herself to the day-to-day life struggle, as told from behind the mask Claude McKay so poignantly described. McMillan uses, almost exclusively, the performance side of black character, emphasizing the most public, most familiar aspects of us. If you smell a little song and dance in the self-sufficient ribaldry, it’s there.¹⁶⁰¹

The same performative and even also subversive sort of behaviour cannot be observed in all the other characters. In *What a Sista Should Do*, Christianity functions as a moral imperative which leads to the need to correct the defects in the protagonists’ characters and forces them to repent their vices. Then only McMillan and Diggs are largely in concord with the postfeminist fiction which “does not conform to a set of beliefs about the way women are or should be. Indeed, the very writing that goes by this name resists the kind of certainty, conclusiveness and clear-cut meaning that definition demands.” The characters in postfeminist fiction might be “seen as confident, independent, even outrageous women taking responsibility for who they are, or as women who have unconsciously internalized and are acting out the encoded norms of our society.”¹⁶⁰²

The protagonists of chick lit are expected to gain the reader’s sympathy in a step-by-step manner; whether she is “actually incompetent or merely perceived to be so, she inevitably learns to appreciate herself for who she is, an endeavor generally aided by her eventual partner’s approbation—although, commonly, he was earlier the occasion, or at least the witness, of some of her most embarrassing gaffes.”¹⁶⁰³ But in McMillan’s selected novels, the most significant (and lifetime) partners turn out to be nobody but the girlfriends. Astrid Henry correctly notes, “[t]he women’s relationships with each other—both as a group and individually—are continually depicted as these characters’ primary community and family, their source of love and care.”¹⁶⁰⁴ The various romantic entanglements and misfortunes are overshadowed by their healing relationship, and the positive experiences they have is shared too, becoming even more intense. Warren and Diggs rather place the relationships with the other females at the same level as man-woman partnership.

Mixed reviews and criticism of McMillan’s “limited character profiles of males”¹⁶⁰⁵ appear to be wrongful in comparison with the stereotypes presented in *What a Sista Should Do* in which one-dimensional bad and not quite convincing male characters prevail, especially in comparison with the richly-drawn women. By contrast, in *The Other Side of The Game*, one out of four narrative voices which tell the story is a male one, which gives the sister-girl novel a specific quality. Still, the books have in common a generally smaller amount of attention paid to the motivations of the male characters.

As Harzewski observes, in black chick lit serious topics such as African American economic underclass, environmental problems, international politics, Third World problems,

¹⁶⁰⁰ Review of *Waiting to Exhale*, *Publishers Weekly*.

¹⁶⁰¹ Davis, “Don’t Worry, Be Buppie: Black Novelists Head for the Mainstream.”

¹⁶⁰² Pamela Caughie qtd. in Mazza, “Who’s Laughing Now? A Short History of Chick Lit and the Perversion of a Genre,” in *Chick Lit*, 20–21.

¹⁶⁰³ Wells, “Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History,” in *Chick Lit*, 52.

¹⁶⁰⁴ Astrid Henry qtd. in Mabry, “About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary ‘Chick’ Culture,” in *Chick Lit*, 203.

¹⁶⁰⁵ Broden, “Terry McMillan: Overview.”

etc. remain merely tackled in the form of episodic hints. Despite their ambitions and careers, there is “a strong domestic fiction component.”¹⁶⁰⁶ Chick lit—and of course also girlfriend novels—focus inward, onto creating family, relationships, and their maintaining. What the selected novels have in common from the viewpoint of themes is their interest in relationships among people—men and women, children and parents, girlfriends, and so on. All the books are preoccupied with the question of African American women. In particular, within the rarely supportive larger world, they form units, friendships in which they heal one another instead of viewing themselves and other women as enemies. Second, it deals with the theme of women and work—their search of meaningful work and the ability to assess certain jobs and have resources. Third, the negotiation between women and men is one of the topics. The negotiation can take numerous forms—mating, dating, but also distrust to fathers and males in general.

The general running theme of McMillan’s works is emotional fulfillment and stability achieved through committed love relationships.¹⁶⁰⁷ All four novels depict the African American urban community, contemporary issues which affect it, and racial issues, despite the fact that the critics ignore their presence in the books. Among other common themes, there are love, sexuality, friendship and sisterhood (often related to the self-growth of the protagonists), journey, and freedom. Health and beauty, as well as the (fake) empowerment connected with consumerism are dealt with in all novels but *What a Sista Should Do*.

As for family, the selected novels hardly portray the black family as an unquestionable and ultimate source of support to the protagonists, with three exceptions, that is, Bernadine and John Harris as well as Gloria and Marvin in both novels by McMillan, and Phil Patterson in *The Other Side of the Game*. Despite the families’ positive impact on their members, even these core units of the African American larger communities can unintentionally harm or neglect their members. Tensions, conflicts, and misunderstandings mark the communication within other families examined in the four girlfriend novels; sometimes their families prove to be unable to respond to their needs. But due to the affection their members usually share, these discrepancies are likely to be overcome in a more or less successful way. Parents also prove to lay expectations on their offspring—in terms of finding a mate, education, having a stable job, etc.

Although it is to be read between the lines, girlfriends assume top status in the hierarchy of important relationships for women, being a constant emotional support to one another both in *Waiting to Exhale* and *Getting to Happy*. The women protagonists regardless of their age provide solace to one another in a way that family members, husbands, and boyfriends fail, partying, crying, and, recovering together ultimately. But in the latter book, these women also face all kinds of contemporary challenges resulting from the existence of elderly relatives, growing up children (and/or even grandchildren), and a changing job market. This, however, does not prevent the women protagonists from socialising together and with one another. In *What a Sista Should Do*, the essential role of friendship is not accentuated to this extent, especially in comparison with faith in God and heterosexual marriage. Bonding with women of the same church is presented rather as a means than an end. In *The Other Side of the Game* the spectrum of friends is wider due to the role Phil and Evelyn play in the sister’s lives. Asha and Sandra become able to overcome their fatal differences due to the fact that they are *both* sisters *and* friends.

Traditionally, the journeys taken by the women protagonists in space have to do with their personal and spiritual growth. Two conditions have proven to be necessary also for the modern protagonists to reach wholeness: the African American community’s reciprocal

¹⁶⁰⁶ Harzewski, introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 22.

¹⁶⁰⁷ Esselman, “Terry McMillan: Overview.”

healing role in the form of sisterhood is irreplaceable, and they must be willing to draw a thick line between their past misfortunes and injuries in order to move on simultaneously. It is rather vital to point out that none of the protagonists, however, enters the books with a fractured psyche, as in case of their predecessors. There are no isolated victimized women, but rejected in the childhood, tormented by tyrannical mother or father figure/relative, and suffering in a world that is all men's and trapped in thinking that all men are selfish. When Yvonne in *What a Sista Should Do* is physically attacked, she takes the necessary measures, unwilling to remain in such marriage. The central topic of all the four novels is the personal growth and development of the women protagonists; in addition, "the insights and emotions they reveal through interior monologue and dialogue are McMillan's most powerful tools for presenting them as distinct characters."¹⁶⁰⁸

The goal of the Second Wave of feminism was to destroy the limiting images of feminine beauty and the whole idea of beauty standards; many chick lit titles which pay an enormous attention to them perversely help to re-establish the limiting beauty standards as a part of the self-empowerment language. Meanwhile some pieces of chick lit present likeable heroines that are not likely to be satirised, their authors shamefully claim kinship with, for instance, Jane Austen who satirised flawless protagonists to a large extent. The likeable heroines are then identified with and looked up to by the readers who internalise their values, and the books sell well, which destroys also the Third Wave feminist intention to undermine the limiting beauty standards. McMillan and Diggs create protagonists who are lovely and radiant, and even explore in depth the psychological costs of cultivating body rather than mind and soul. Inner beauty is accentuated in the four books selected for analyses in this dissertation.

In the novels the protagonists show no signs of what Naomi Wolf describes as "a secret 'underlife' poisoning [their] freedom; infused with notions of beauty, it is dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control."¹⁶⁰⁹ If these obsessions are lurking in the minds of any of the (single) women's minds, it is merely for the time being. None of them displays what Umminger terms "self-imposed and culturally sanctioned tyranny of hating" of their own body.¹⁶¹⁰ None of the analysed novels is a manifesto of commodity culture, for which the genre of chick lit is so often frowned upon. No predatory or obsessive shoppers are depicted but temporarily hopeless women, who are bored, or have a low self-esteem, attempt to pamper themselves only to find out they must find other ways of self-empowerment. The role fashion plays in the novels differs. In McMillan's novels and in case of Sandra as well as Evelyn in *The Other Side of the Game*, fashion provides African American women with an affordable means of expressing identity and/or individuality. By contrast, for Asha from the same novel and Robin in *Waiting to Exhale*, fashion proves to be debilitating, "buying [them] in' to a degrading and obsessive consumer culture."¹⁶¹¹ Both McMillan and Diggs are effectively exposing the limitations of the consumerist worldview, showing simultaneously pleasures of a reasonable engagement in such activities and dangers of consumerism. Warren carefully avoids the theme of fashion: Yvonne's swift shopping spree only symbolises her newly gained freedom, but not a change of her indifference toward fashion.

Sexuality and depiction of bodily matters result to be one of the most intriguing themes of the contemporary chick and Sista lit books. There is no struggling within and against heterosexuality—no "traditionally defined heterosexual women as either mothers or

¹⁶⁰⁸ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 110.

¹⁶⁰⁹ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 10.

¹⁶¹⁰ Umminger, "Supersizing Bridget Jones: What's Really Eating Women in Chick Lit?," in *Chick Lit*, 240.

¹⁶¹¹ Ferris and Young, introduction to *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, 11.

whores”¹⁶¹² inhabit the space of the selected novels. Representations of sexuality in them are predominantly heterosexual, with three exceptions: Bernadine’s daughter Olivia, Philip (Gloria’s partner in *Oasis*), and Phil. McMillan’s tolerant attitude toward homosexuality makes her not suggest that David, Tarik’s father, and other men characters could have made husbands for the protagonists if it were not for their sexual orientation. Juliette Wells explains, “these plots are exclusively heterosexual, although a very distant whiff of lesbianism occasionally provides titillation.”¹⁶¹³

Yet, there is a critical perspective: the need for more sharing and considerateness when it comes to sex is advocated for. Treating men as sexual objects is not a solution. Naomi Wolf suggests in *The Beauty Myth* that “[w]omen could probably be trained quite easily to see men first as sexual.”¹⁶¹⁴ Nothing can be further from the truth in case of most of the protagonists of the analysed novels. Neither the inversion of gendered sexual practice nor objectifying men is of any good, for—especially the latter one—is based on a value system that feminism originally intended to reject as dehumanizing. On one hand, the characters of McMillan’s and Diggs’ novels actively seek pleasure in sex; on the other one, vulnerability goes hand-in-hand with this attitude: these explorers of sexual landscape end up emotionally attached to their lovers despite their initial resolutions, thinking they could possibly put the two apart. And it is equally demanding not to succumb fully to what starts as a non-binding flirt, as well as to keep the image of a liberated sex-goddesses. All women characters of the analysed novels are aware of the fact that it is up to them and nobody else to suffer the consequences. The singletons are portrayed as intrigued by “the normal life,” simultaneously, they often have to try hard to sustain it (especially in *Getting to Happy*) or they simply cannot fully relate to that. Kiernan precisely understands the dilemma: “Attempting to invert existent sexual norms in favor of the feminine here seems to risk annihilation. But the possibility of adopting the stereotypically masculine approach to sex ... doesn’t signify liberation, rather it seems to suggest a resigned view toward revising feminist sexual politics.”¹⁶¹⁵ The fake rhetoric of empowerment where sexual subordination of a woman is eroticised is encountered only occasionally in Asha’s behaviour.¹⁶¹⁶

In general, chick lit sex scenes are not very extensive or graphic, and “they are narrated matter-of-factly rather than in purple prose, factors that distinguish the genre from pornography, erotica, and romance novels.”¹⁶¹⁷ In *Waiting to Exhale* they can even have a comic effect on the reader. In comparison with the selected representative of church lit, the other three novels pay much more attention to the issues of love of various kinds and sex is often explicitly displayed or discussed as a strong motif with a great variety, which can be generally said about numerous Sistah lit novels.

As Kiernan sums up effectively, chick lit can be seen as “a relatively new form of romance” and it “offers a more sophisticated insight into the lives, loves, and aspirations of the women it speaks for and to: ‘anticipating pleasure’ has largely been superseded by actively seeking and experiencing pleasure. And sex ... has heralded a new phase of women’s fiction—one that raises questions about how feminine desire is constructed, articulated, and

¹⁶¹² Willis, “Black women writers: taking a critical perspective,” in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, 233.

¹⁶¹³ Wells, “Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History,” in *Chick Lit*, 59.

¹⁶¹⁴ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 154.

¹⁶¹⁵ Kiernan, “No Satisfaction: *Sex and the City*, *Run Catch Kiss*, and the Conflict of Desires in Chick Lit’s New Heroines,” in *Chick Lit*, 215.

¹⁶¹⁶ A more sensitive reader, however, immediately recognizes how naïve her account of the situation is. Cf. Diggs, *The Other Side of the Game*, 54.

¹⁶¹⁷ Wells, “Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History,” in *Chick Lit*, 50.

received beyond fiction.”¹⁶¹⁸ It is tempting to expect that in such atmosphere a feminist triumph is signalled; still, however, the protagonists cannot have it all, for their thirst for independence is often discordant with their occasional wanting of a “knight in a shining armour.” By giving the female protagonist a number of sexual partners and experiences, McMillan and Diggs let the story of the women’s growth and experiences stand on [their] own, rather than simply making it part of a larger romantic narrative.” Moreover, these more experienced heroines “are also easier for their intended readers to relate to, as it is not only accepted but also accepted in contemporary culture that young women will have had at least some sexual experience before settling into a serious long-term relationship or marriage.”¹⁶¹⁹ Suppressed sexuality, as presented in *What a Sista Should Do* and demonstrated in the analysis, has rather serious consequences.

As suggested above, most of the characters of the selected novels—similarly to many other real women of their generation—consider the search for sexual fulfilment as a “valid human endeavour.” Moreover, McMillan “demonstrates her awareness that her audience shares this attitude” when providing a comic description of sex acts. In Richard’s opinion, the novel “struck a chord similar to that of other forms of popular women’s fiction, such as romance novels, which also invite women readers into a dialogue about new roles women can play in intimate relationships,” which women readers consider to be vitally important, the reason being the changing mores that have “radically altered the way men and women try to relate to each other in romantic partnership.”¹⁶²⁰

McMillan’s primary interest in black American women as subjects makes Joyce state correctly that in McMillan’s works, racial issues are “not totally absent,” but “put in the background in terms of their importance in the story.” What is more, her execution of the novels, the way she shapes her subjects “reflects a difference between the way Black men and women respond to the environment, particularly to racism.”¹⁶²¹ Warren’s depiction of racial tensions has to do with debunking the stereotypes traditionally associated with the unemployment of African Americans and their criminality, instead of showing whether or how racism shapes their lives. Diggs even points at the racism within the black community, but simultaneously shows the importance of blackness for some of her characters. Because the whites exist only on the fringe of the stories, there is no set contrast between the outer (represented by the white society) and inner (the black community) frames—as a result, there is hardly any need to satisfy any criteria for aesthetic beauty and beauty standards to be challenged.

A very different attitude to work can be found in the selected novels. Some characters are anxious to show their abilities, and their professional identity is rather important to themselves (for instance, Savannah and Bernadine, or Sandra). For Pam and Savannah, their career can serve as a source of conflicts with their husbands, but also help within their communities. Robin has a “love-hate relationship with work,”¹⁶²² but is rather well-paid; Taylor finds herself “languish[ing] unappreciated in low-level position” for the time being.¹⁶²³

For McMillan’s characters marriage is not “that *one* thing that will let [them] know [their] life is finally complete.” The same cannot be said about other chick and Sistah lit protagonists who are still “inextricably bound to the shadow of the ‘Cult of True

¹⁶¹⁸ Kiernan, “No Satisfaction: *Sex and the City*, *Run Catch Kiss*, and the Conflict of Desires in Chick Lit’s New Heroines,” in *Chick Lit*, 208.

¹⁶¹⁹ Mabry, “About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary ‘Chick’ Culture,” in *Chick Lit*, 202.

¹⁶²⁰ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 118.

¹⁶²¹ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurors and Priests*, 224.

¹⁶²² Wells, “Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History,” in *Chick Lit*, 54.

¹⁶²³ Wells, “Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History,” in *Chick Lit*, 54.

Womanhood,' a nineteenth-century construction that positioned white women as the moral center of families who reigned exclusively in the domestic sphere as a near-sacred calling."¹⁶²⁴ Winning or losing the game of love does represent the central element of Diggs' story line in *The Other Side of the Game*; that, however, does not lessen the impact of what her characters learn about themselves. Warren's Christian chick lit novel advocates for heterosexual traditional marriage. If the marriage is harmful for the character (namely for Yvonne), it is necessary to leave the bond, though.

As far as the narrative strategies used by the three authors are concerned, what they have in common is the presence of various voices who contribute to the narrative, alternating in individual chapters. While McMillan combines two personal and two authorial narrative situations in both books,¹⁶²⁵ Warren's three and Diggs' four protagonists function mostly as reflectors. Phil's voice in *The Other Side of the Game* is a refreshing formal innovation of the girlfriend novel. The subtler variations within the chapters in shifts of narrative situations as well as the varying proportion of mimetic-dramatic and narrative forms¹⁶²⁶ give the four novels specific cadence. Another formal shift which implies the rhythm of the novels lies in the usage of various verbal tenses. It can be concluded that the variations are mostly determined thematically. Besides the above explained narrative situations, the authors (in particular, more McMillan and Diggs than Warren) occasionally employ what Jauss terms "the impersonal narrative form."¹⁶²⁷ The reasons for doing so are obvious: similarly to blues used by African American authors in literature, a smooth transition from one point of view to another makes the reader (or hearer) to perceive things in a different manner and/or even forces him/her "into an alienating insecurity" about his/her own judgement. Consequently, such a literary work can raise implicitly new questions of life, values, education, habits, etc., or re-open long-closed questions of public morals. The showing and telling styles are combined. It can exclusively happen in the personal narrative situations that the simple past tense "loses its past meaning," and the *in actu* impression "is reinforced by the progressive form of the verb."¹⁶²⁸ And any variation between the third- and first person in the rendering of consciousness is then unmarked,¹⁶²⁹ which is rather apparent in *The Other Side of the Game*.

At the beginning of the novels, the mode of transmission of the characters' stories are manifested most distinctly. With the first words of the novels the reader's imagination is

¹⁶²⁴ Guerrero, "'Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves': Chick Lit in Black and White," in *Chick Lit*, 92–93.

¹⁶²⁵ Surprisingly, the authorial voice used by McMillan in numerous chapters neither distances the reader from the characters; nor it diminishes the sense of intimacy that make McMillan's novels such successful portraits of female friendship. The illusion of immediacy on the part of the reflector-characters does not imply that McMillan "does not apply strategy or rhetoric in constructing the narrative." Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 147.

¹⁶²⁶ As explained in the analysis of *Waiting to Exhale*, even the dialogues can—and it these books do—have a narrative function.

¹⁶²⁷ In particular, McMillan combines the "impersonal (or uninvolved) narration" especially in the chapters where the authorial voice tells the respective parts of the common story in conjunction with "the erlebte Rebe" which means impersonal direct speech. An impersonal distance is put between the character and himself/herself and the events. Jauss explains this device as the passages of the character/narrator which "are not an objective determination of the narrator, which the reader can believe, but a subjective opinion of a person" characterized by his/her feelings. This device consists of revealing the inner thoughts of a particular character without the signals of direct statement (or direct speech). Importantly, it is up to the reader "to decide for himself[herself]" whether to accept this passage as "a true statement or as an opinion characteristic of this person." Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," 35–36.

¹⁶²⁸ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 170. Warren's novel is the only book which makes a consistent use of only present tenses in the description of the main plot events in order to reach the effect of immediacy; McMillan and Diggs skilfully combine different kinds of verbal tenses.

¹⁶²⁹ Cf. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 170.

attuned to the circumstances of the existence of the particular protagonists as well as the minor characters.¹⁶³⁰ Similarly to the authorial narrative situation, the reflector-characters function as transmitters of the story, and present what they consider vital, using the principle “first things first,” which also include details from the past. This strategy, however, does not mean the linearity of the plot is often not disrupted by additional pieces of information which shed some light at the events of the main plot. Provided that the reflectors do not include the basic pieces of information about themselves immediately, the more keen the reader becomes to learn or find out more about him/her as the narration proceeds. By contrast, the opening of the novels is “less conspicuous in an authorial narrative situation,”¹⁶³¹ as in case of Gloria and Bernadine.

Apparently, attempting to abolish the personal union between the reflector-character and narrator who is situated outside of the fictional world of the characters by means of transposing the first-person and third-person narrative causes significant problems.¹⁶³² Doing so would mean decisive changes in the narrative statements, for these two signify structurally opposite forms of the rendering of mediacy in a narrative. The real difference between the first- and third-person narration, as Stanzel puts it, does not lie in “the aspect of credibility or in the degree of certainty of the respective narrative form,” but by the first-person narrator’s “physical and existential presence in the fictional world.” He/she is “embodied” in the world of the characters, meanwhile the third-person narrator is “embodied neither inside nor outside the fictional world.” This “corporeality” becomes part of his/her very existence as an experiencing subject and leads to existential relevance of what is being told.¹⁶³³

When the various characters speak, the authors offer different speech rhythms and words, balancing them as groups in the four novels. McMillan combines two reflector-character and two authorial narrative voices which alter regularly, in addition, this is most visible in the three chapters which use the authorial narrative voice in order to blend the story of the protagonists together. The continuous way the characters perceive one another provides a more balanced portrait of each of them. Doing so, as Richards states correctly, the female characters—and of course McMillan—“turns the same critical light on her female protagonists that they themselves turn on the men in their lives.”¹⁶³⁴ Warren and Diggs weave the story of their reflector-characters without any special chapters but throughout the whole books. The more perceptive characters (such as Savannah, Taylor, or Asha) serve as effective counterparts to one another’s first-person narration.

Most of the stories do not happen within a central romance as in case of the romance novel; there is a whole network of the heroines’ own experiences and relationships (both platonic and sexual) with other characters. Having broken the “ideal romance” rule which consists of focusing solely on the female protagonist’s developing relationship with the “right” man,¹⁶³⁵ chick lit often portrays women who engage in “one or more sexual relationships (with varying degrees of success and pleasure)” before she possibly happens to

¹⁶³⁰ It becomes even more apparent in the first chapters how effective McMillan’s decision to open the book with Savannah’s account is. Her first-person confession about her difficulties with finding a partner draws the reader immediately into the circle of friends. What she says is so frank as if she were talking to Bernadine. As Richards observes, Savannah’s honesty “enables her to see and speak the truth about herself as well as about the other characters—judgements that might sound too preachy coming from a third-person narrator.” Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 106.

¹⁶³¹ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 156.

¹⁶³² Cf. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 56–58.

¹⁶³³ Stanzel and Helmut Winter qtd. in Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 89–90. The summary of the characteristic features of both categories are given in a contrastive chart on page 169 and 170.

¹⁶³⁴ Richards, *Terry McMillan: A Critical Companion*, 111.

¹⁶³⁵ Cf. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991, revised edition).

settle with a stable partner. Especially in comparison with the romance novel, chick lit novels enable the women characters to explore their own identity and express their own desires rather than merely become part of a single romance narrative that puts emphasis on traditional gender roles.¹⁶³⁶ It has been shown that the same cannot be said about the fourth analysed church lit novel, *What a Sista Should Do*.

As for the plot and ending, the so often proclaimed linearity of popular novels is not something typical of any of the analysed ones. Even Warren whose novel is the worst-plotted out of the four, shows a relatively high degree of resourcefulness in this respect, despite certain predictability of the development of the plot. A central love plot appears in *The Other Side of the Game*, meanwhile the other three novels place friendship and/or sisterhood at their center. Miniclimaxes and episodic structure of the chapters have been found in all four novels. When it comes to the ending, chick lit's—and especially Christian chick lit's—critique of heterosexual institutions sometimes dissolves in a romantic ending. The story of the protagonist finding her mate despite of numerous misunderstandings and obstacles which reminds the reader of a modern fairy-tale is what is offered by Diggs in her bittersweet story about modern professional women in a pursuit of partners. Warren's characters ultimately embrace traditional values, education, faith and God. McMillan's novels portray female bonding also at the end: in *Waiting to Exhale*, the women comfort one another during an uncertain time at the hospital, some of them “happily paired off but not married,”¹⁶³⁷ meanwhile *Getting to Happy* is closed with a joyful dance scene.

Humor has two important aspects in the analysed novels. First, it is a means of questioning and undermining the existing rules within any society by pointing at them in a non-preaching manner. Simultaneously, the characters can ridicule themselves and their missions. Second, humour mirrors changes in women's lives at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries and their attitudes to these changes. Nancy A. Walker suggests that to involve fantasy as a part of humour in women's writing means to imagine a different set of rules as opposed to the existing frames.¹⁶³⁸ None of the selected books displays this feature. But even “while trapped in dependent, trivializing circumstances, women use the subtle methods of the minority group to subvert the power of the majority.”¹⁶³⁹ To reach the comic effect, they use hyperbole, puns, satire, mockery of human faults, etc. Walker sums up, women's humour

challenges the basic assumptions about women that have justified their public and private subordination. Instead of passive, emotional beings, women in their humorous writing show themselves to be assertive and insightful, alert to the absurdities that affect not only their lives but the values of American culture in a larger sense. The tradition of women's humor is a record of women's conscious denial of inferiority and subordination and a testament to their spirit of survival in a sexist culture.¹⁶⁴⁰

Warren's book lacks the light tone of the other novels which is partly enabled by their authors' frequent use of humour; McMillan and Diggs depict confidential characters who have the ability to both deal with obstacles in their lives and laugh at them, mostly looking on the bright side. Humour relates to a wide range of topics in the four novels, for instance, the human search for perfection, parents, partners, relationships, people's looks, hardships of life, or work, etc.

Using standard English grammar and vocabulary in combination with various basic communicative modes typical of vernacular black English—especially the call-and-response pattern—makes the three African American women authors' works approachable for readers of

¹⁶³⁶ Mabry, “About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary ‘Chick’ Culture,” in *Chick Lit*, 200.

¹⁶³⁷ Wells, “Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History,” in *Chick Lit*, 50.

¹⁶³⁸ Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 151.

¹⁶³⁹ Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 156.

¹⁶⁴⁰ Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 183.

any linguistic background to affirm the characters' experience and enjoy the process of reading without the necessity to compromise their blackness. What is more, the authors' storytelling and employment of orality features engender new aesthetic possibilities and new forms of consciousness. Chick lit tends to be criticised for the descriptive language, limited vocabulary, and the overall lack of invention in terms of the language used. The analysis shows something else: different degrees of paying attention to various layers of the meaning of words has been encountered, together with varying frequency of metaphors and figurative language, similes, idioms, irony, connotative meanings of words, expletives, as well as various features of the spoken English. McMillan and Diggs' characters speak in a natural way which results from their socioeconomic background as well as other factors such as their authors' considerate use of normal non-fluency and informality features (lexically, syntactically, etc.), Warren's novel is written in a somewhat less authentic manner. The same colloquial style that characterises the two first-person voices McMillan developed for *Disappearing Acts* is, as a matter of fact, applicable on her and Diggs' writing. It is a "brassy, up-front, I'm-gon'-tell-you-exactly style."¹⁶⁴¹ Then it is possible to say with justification that the language does not constitute but reflect reality, as suggested by Joyce in relation to African languages.¹⁶⁴² In none of the books the device of intentional stylistic downgrading of the authorial language has been found.

The recurring values in the four novels could be summed as mostly having to do with empathy, activeness, and stamina. The importance of inner beauty and friendship are accentuated, too. Somewhat different values in *What a Sista Should Do* are related to the genre of the novel, that is, Christian chick lit. The wide range of values presented in the four novels have the effect of the reader's sympathising with characters and imagining oneself in their place. The frequently used dialogues (as well as monologues) not only have a narrative function but they also help the authors convey messages to their readers pragmatically. In these two forms, the characters express their own emotions in a natural way, which has an effect on the reader and his/her emotions. Even though the reader's narrative experience is basically simulated in the process of reading, and much of what he/she feels when reading is connected with a mere anticipation of the further development of the story, such anticipation is not less authentic than his/her true feelings.

12.3 Readability

One of the dilemmas raised throughout the analyses has been the question of the degree of readability in relation the popular novels' success. The dissertation insists on the undeniable importance of the reader, since it is for him/her the books have always been aimed at. It should be stressed that the chick lit genre has indeed never aimed high, claiming "to be literary rather than popular fiction."¹⁶⁴³ Fredric Jameson demonstrates how mass culture attempts to create the impression of newness, or even uniqueness, and originality through the production of various genres, forms, and styles. Doing so, he defines the contradictory function of repetition: on the one hand, it brings about the notion of endlessly reproducible and degraded commodity form. On the other one, what makes repetition contradictory is that through subsequent consuming and perceiving of the item (which originally was perceived as a serial commodity), the audience seeks it out, making it "part of the existential fabric" of their lives.¹⁶⁴⁴ Still, the rather uniform covers of the chick lit books—which are not the case in neither of the analysed novels—hide various books which are rich inside.

¹⁶⁴¹ Davis, "Don't Worry, Be Buppie: Black Novelists Head for the Mainstream."

¹⁶⁴² Cf. Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurors and Priests: Defining African-centered Literary Criticism*, 19.

¹⁶⁴³ Wells, "Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History," in *Chick Lit*, 64.

¹⁶⁴⁴ Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text I* (Winter 1979): 138.

Discussing readability, McMillan endeavours to reach the impression of objectivity and autonomy of her characters in the two novels. She does it basically in two ways. First, she openly speaks about the characters of her novels as animate beings who claim their position in her books. Second, more important, she makes careful plans and choices in terms of narrative devices, combining different narrative voices. She actively lessens the amount of “mediacy as a generic characteristic which distinguishes narration from other forms of literary art.” Next to the indirect form, narration, she juxtaposes the direct form, drama.¹⁶⁴⁵ (And it is, as a matter of fact, one of the features of the popular novel in which rendering mediacy minimally works as a rule,¹⁶⁴⁶ which turns it—and McMillan’s works in particular—into targets of critics.¹⁶⁴⁷ But as Stanzel explains, “the range, extent or degree of creative energy required by the several types of literary production is difficult—if not impossible—to measure.”¹⁶⁴⁸)

Without imposing any positive or negative evaluation of the idea of readability (perceived as the ease in which texts can be understood), what in particular contributes to the popularity of the novels among the readers are the following features. The alternation in voices leads to multiplicity and fluidity of the reader’s possible identification with the books’ characters and the text itself. A private form of expression is used by the women protagonists to document their own experience and express their identity in their own voices. The sense of intimacy is established by means of personal—or even intimate—first-person accounts of the protagonists’ life stories; the reader is immediately drawn to the plot in a *medias res* manner, introduced to the varied struggles in which the protagonists are engaged, many of which might hypothetically be shared by the reader. The typical chick lit protagonist is not perfect but flawed, as Ferris and Young state, “eliciting reader’s compassion and identification simultaneously. Heroines deploy self-deprecating humor that not only entertains but leads readers to believe they are fallible—like them.”¹⁶⁴⁹ It is true that the readers reach for books in which they, on the one hand, encounter elements of recognition and identification, wanting to see themselves represented in what they read, read about familiar places, phenomena, events, etc. in order to be able to identify with the books, the reason being probably their affiliation with once “historically excluded population.”¹⁶⁵⁰ Simultaneously, they demand innovative stories, rich plotlines, dynamic characters, and formal innovations in order to keep their attention alert.

It has proven to be not very easy to grasp the three authors’ and other works often perceived as chick lit representatives due to chick lit’s ambiguous relation to feminism, namely due to its fetishization of the commodity culture and consumerism, as well as its protagonists’ complicated identities as independent human beings and subjects of mostly heterosexual exchange who are not solely defined in terms of race anymore. Whether reading (black) chick lit as a successor or permutation of the novel of manners, sentimental novel, or other genres, it is not only a piece of literary work with its qualities and drawbacks but also a

¹⁶⁴⁵ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 4.

¹⁶⁴⁶ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 6.

¹⁶⁴⁷ By contrast, Darryl Pinckney praises McMillan’s third novel as it follows. “But *Waiting to Exhale* never winks at the reader. It comes at you with a completely straight face, with such intensity about its own convictions that the sincerity is irresistible. If the women characters are sentimental about love, then they are fierce about being sentimental; if they are conventional in their expectations, then they are defiantly prepared to be identified as such. The novel is at the same time hilarious, to the verge of camp, but the thoughts and feelings it captures are too much like life for it not to make a striking impression. There’s nothing self-aggrandizing or moralizing about it.” Pinckney, “The Best of Everything.”

¹⁶⁴⁸ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 7.

¹⁶⁴⁹ Ferris and Young, introduction to *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, 4. Jessica Jernigan adds, “[t]he heroine of these books can be rude, shallow, overtly compulsive, neurotic, insecure, bold, ambitious, witty or surprisingly all of the above – but we love them anyway!” “Slingbacks and Arrows: Chick Lit Comes of Age.”

¹⁶⁵⁰ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 168.

kind of social document. Together with other kinds of popular literature it conveys a message about contemporary cultural values and functions as accessible portals into contemporary gender politics and reflects cultural values. As in any other literary genre, there are lightweight and profound novels, highbrow and lowbrow ones, funny and poignant.

13 Conclusion: Ice Broken

...the best thing we can do for ourselves and our country, the best contract we can make with America, is exactly to deromanticize it. Given all the crises we face, not to do this is to take out a contract on America. Ann duCille¹⁶⁵¹

In spite of and because of marginal status, a powerful, indigenous vernacular tradition has survived, not unbroken, but unbowed a magnet, a focused energy, something with its own logic, rules, and integrity connecting current developments to the past. An articulate, syncretizing force our best artists have drawn upon, a force sustaining both individual talent and tradition. John Edgar Wideman¹⁶⁵²

The dissertation worked with the basic premise that what women prefer to read and/or write has historically been received with less respect than what men produce and consume. There is a big but, though. As Wells warns, “[t]hat women’s reading and writing have for centuries been trivialized does not mean, however, that any genre currently favored by women writers and readers necessarily [and automatically] deserves literary regard.” McMillan’s and of course chick lit’s appeal to contemporary women readers across the racial spectrum can be admired, together with the financial success it has brought to them. Still, the less thorough approach many of the known authors take to the fiction they create makes numerous scholars think these should do more than benefit from changes in social and economic mores. At the same time, whether good or bad, women’s writings have functioned and are likely to keep doing so as records of social history, “a record of the female religious, economic and political experience that we can’t get from political treatises or war stories.”¹⁶⁵³ Namely in this dissertation, the difference between the white Third Wave feminists and postfeminists depicted in fiction who—themselves being daughters of the Second Wave feminist mothers—take some of their rights more or less for granted becomes obvious in comparison with the family backgrounds of the four African American protagonists of the four selected novels. Their mothers fighting for a basic recognition and depending on the welfare system seem to show how belated and less advanced they were in their quest for a meaningful existence within the U.S. society.

It would be pointless to conclude this dissertation with a resounding denunciation of popular novels and their readers, an attitude so often presented in numerous studies of this kind of fiction. Instead, first, it should be said that the dissertation attempted to comprehend the social conditions that gave rise to chick lit and other genres of popular novels; only then the reasons for the continued or even increased attention to the popular novel could be summed up. One thing popular novels cannot be denied is an infectious quality which lies in their whimsicality; in other words, the readers receive copies of themselves, their vices and virtues. Unfortunately, the massive commercial appeal of some of these novels to the audience help perpetuate negative gender stereotypes shown by male and feminist critics as well as the authors’ male counterparts, particularly that women are dreamy and silly.

Second, the aim of the dissertation was not to denounce “amatory fiction,” romance fiction, chick lit, and writing by women in general as being of superficial interest and merit, but to state why it might be perceived like that. According to what has been found out, chick lit and other popular genres have been publicly condemned by established women writers and respected women journalists perhaps also in order to avoid being associated with commercial

¹⁶⁵¹ duCille, *Skin Trade*, 173.

¹⁶⁵² Wideman, preface to *Breaking Ice*, vii.

¹⁶⁵³ Traister, “Women’s studies.”

writing themselves. As Harzewski explains, there are basically two reasons for that. Chick lit will be taken as a representative of women's writing, and—probably more important—it will “disqualify aspiring and younger women writers from social recognition.”¹⁶⁵⁴ Despite that, chick lit has an undeniable potential, and it offers possibilities to young women writers as well as women writers of colour in the male-dominated publishing industry. Even if chick lit's popularity was to diminish, the attention paid to it in the last ten years has raised crucial questions about gender, race, class, sexuality, identity, and subjectivity, not to mention women's writing and literature in general.

Considering whether and how popular literature for women has actually changed in the last three decades, in two respects it has remained rather the same. The first one, as Modleski puts it, has to do with its reception in the literary world. She says, “[t]he double standard according to which women's entertainment is judged to be trivial compared to men's pursuits continues to prevail. Second, women are still writing novels “that point to their discontents, some of them explicit, ... and some implicit, existing in the gap between what is and what ought to be.”¹⁶⁵⁵ Mabry's summary is in agreement with what the dissertation has found out: “Beyond similar marketing strategies and textual devices, perhaps the most important connection—as well as the most significant point of departure—between emerging chick lit culture and the women's genres that preceded it is that the primary focus of each of these texts is not simply on the women but on the woman's place in the world in general and in sexual relationships in particular.”¹⁶⁵⁶ What, however, has changed is—the black audience and cross-race audience.

The complexity of African American literary criticism in the last decades of the 20th century as well as at the beginning of the 21st is much more apparent. Still, it compromises the black literature to some extent. Before the 1970s—and often also mostly even later—the African American authors themselves “made racism an essential element of their fiction.” Today, the situation is different: meanwhile the novels written by black male authors often “emphasize their own relationship to the white world,” for the most part, the novels written by their female counterparts concentrate on the black “woman's psyche and her activities within the community.”¹⁶⁵⁷ This tendency is reflected in their works' themes: in addition to the black male-female and mother-daughter relationships, they depict for instance the difficulties of growing up, the importance of education, and career, and so on. It is questionable, however, to say that the contemporary African American literary criticism is aware of this, or it still keeps the perspective of a purely racial focus. Considering that black women write for other black women, they naturally tend to put less emphasis on the complexities of the white world and its particular effects on black lives. As Joyce poignantly suggests, to ignore or denigrate a novel solely because “it fail to accentuate racial issues” is to “truncate [African American] lives.”¹⁶⁵⁸

Diminution of racism in contemporary black pieces of art should not be mistaken with ignoring important issues that directly relate to the well-being of the African American community. McMillan's somewhat too generous statement that today many black authors

¹⁶⁵⁴ Harzewski, introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 2.

¹⁶⁵⁵ In this respect, Modleski rightfully recalls Richard Dryer's remark about the utopian nature of mass culture, for—similarly to capitalism—it promises to deliver but often does not or even cannot. Introduction to *Loving with a Vengeance*, xxvi–xxvii.

¹⁶⁵⁶ Mabry, “About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary ‘Chick’ Culture,” in *Chick Lit*, 200.

¹⁶⁵⁷ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 218.

¹⁶⁵⁸ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 238.

produce stories “that have nothing to do with race”¹⁶⁵⁹ result in the African American critics’ judgement that she and other popular writers automatically fail to be concerned with racial issues. As showed in the analyses, they do so, but in a non-prescriptive way, rejecting to be a part of the culture of complaint that prevailed in African American writers’ works for decades. Also, as Richards states, criticism that McMillan’s works do not address racial issues, political, and economic problems “ignores the context out of which her fiction grows.” On the contrary, her books depict them as “realities that affect intimate relationships in the lives of her characters in the same way that they affect intimate relationships in the lives of her readers.”¹⁶⁶⁰ In addition, her characters draw from the successes of the black people in a celebratory manner in order to enable them to take other steps forward. It is unfortunate that some critics and scholars overlook the power of emotional and psychic transformation of the stories’ protagonists. As Joyce, an Afrocentric scholar, correctly states, although “it is imperative and urgent that both African-American writers and critics continue to use their art to engage social issues and to oppose racial oppression, it is equally important that we do not define our role as writers/critics too narrowly.” Such debates reflect the ongoing “tumultuous intra- and inter-racial political battle, excited by years of racial oppression.”¹⁶⁶¹

bell hooks sees the necessity to come to terms with the situation and “the impact of postmodernism for black experience,” particularly as it changes the black people’s sense of identity, which means they “must and can rearticulate the basis for collective bonding.”¹⁶⁶² And the most crucial area in which black Americans need to do so is in relationships between men and women. These ideas are still valid even after twenty years, for—as it is possible to see from the later novels—the battle has been going on. As Joyce points out, McMillan “creates a vision of this relationship that should motivate every Black reader to evaluate his or her emotional instability and to analyze how this instability hinders healthy interaction and bonding.”¹⁶⁶³ As for critics, instead of castigating the novelists for what is omitted in their works and exploiting what divides black men and women, they had better appreciate the non-didactic path they take, noticing the craft and value of what is presented. And if the authors do not provide solutions—as the blues mode has not ever provided—then the alternative patterns they suggest do matter. Paradoxically enough, some critics themselves show a stereotypical (and thus superficial), male-bashing, insensitive, and unsympathetic reading of the characters, cheapening the relationships among them and not being able to identify, or confront what in reality troubles them.

Therefore, it is possible to be in agreement with Joyce who rather generously states that it is “equally important for Black writers and critics [to see] that *all* African-American novels contribute to the making of a comprehensive African-American worldview. The African-American community desperately needs creative writers to fashion visions that can inspire harmony and hope.”¹⁶⁶⁴ If nothing else, some people—across the race—who have been reluctant to read an African American book might read one now. Having read a book advertised in the popular novel on the web site of the publisher, he/she might as well reach for a book by a more acclaimed author, if it is for instance shelved next to a Sistah lit novel. The

¹⁶⁵⁹ McMillan describes how the work of African American authors has changed from the 1970s: “There’s a lot of diversity. We’ve got gays, male and female. We’ve got science-fiction writers out here, people who want to write erotica, humor and serious stuff, too. And our voices have changed. *We’re not writing defensively* now. We’re writing stories that reflect our experiences, and they may have absolutely nothing to do with race.” Qtd. in Will Nixon, “Better Times for Black Writers?,” *Publishers Weekly*, February 17, 1989, 37. Emphases added.

¹⁶⁶⁰ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 121.

¹⁶⁶¹ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 219–221.

¹⁶⁶² bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, 29.

¹⁶⁶³ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 220–221.

¹⁶⁶⁴ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 238.

more books African American people buy the better; to choose from a wide variety of nonfictional essays, biographies, letters, memoirs, historical fiction and nonfiction, speculative fiction, romance novels, spoken words, mysteries, or poetry has never been easier for them.

Black popular fiction authors have claimed existing genres as their own, modified them, and expanded them in order to depict issues of immediate interest to their black readers. What else contributes to the availability of African American popular fiction books is their potential of reaching their diverse audience. And as explained various times in the dissertation, the bookstores are definitely not the only place where to get books, not to speak about the libraries, Internet and electronic books, book clubs, and so on. Some popular authors depict love affairs, others critique existing racism within the U.S. society, encourage African Americans in their Christian beliefs, imagine and reimagine better worlds, etc. All in all, most of them even serve as self-help encouraging and empowering tools in the hands of their readers.

More important, African American popular fiction has attempted to “balance the demands of its reading public with the conventions and formulas of genre fiction. In this sense, African American popular fiction makes a contribution to the African American literary tradition and to mainstream commercial fiction as well.”¹⁶⁶⁵ The results from the analysed novels as well as from the discussion of other works by McMillan show that fluidity is something rather typical of the popular black novel, particularly in terms of the influence of new trends, thematic, setting, plot as well as age group variability, language playfulness, the ability to borrow from formulaic conventions inherent to various genres, demands of the African American community, and the capability to react to and mirror the changes in the society in a quick-witted manner, depending on the demands of its readers. At the same time, the popular novel must meet certain requirements: it is grounded in the real and immediate, it tackles the issues of the community’s concern; there is a wide variety of characters who can operate as foils to one another, simultaneously there must be at least one likeable character the reader can identify with; the authors use a variety of particular narrative situations and draw the reader’s attention by means of subtle shifts within them, and humour of various kinds is often an inseparable part of the novel. As a result, all four novels led the dissertation to consider what Stanzel sees as the relationship between the literary and popular novel¹⁶⁶⁶ which lies in the arrangement of the dynamic and schematized parts as well as in their ratio and sequencing. The reader brings to the process of reading several things: according to Weinrich, two of them are “a space of freedom which the reader enters in view of the negativity of the world” as well as “the freedom of his imagination to add the banality and the stereotypical nature of reality.”¹⁶⁶⁷

The evidence which has been surveyed in this dissertation (and many more examples which could be referred to) strongly suggests that—in addition—there are apparent and identifiable repetitions of such things as thematic concerns, stylistic devices, and image patterns among the selected women writers. (As Maryemma Graham puts it, the African American novel maintains its reputation by means of linguistic and rhetorical innovations, through “reinvention as a narrative construct and the intensity of its social meaning.”¹⁶⁶⁸) Many of these, admittedly, are also shared by contemporary male writers, but usually without the central emphasis or typical feminine connotations these hold in women’s writing. Of

¹⁶⁶⁵ Dietzel, “The African American novel and popular culture,” 168.

¹⁶⁶⁶ The “open” and “close literary work” terms offered by Eco, however, were applied in each of the four analyses in this respect. ??? vyhodit

¹⁶⁶⁷ Qtd. in Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 78. What Weinrich suggests is defined as the necessary prerequisites for the popular novel’s success by Dietzel: elements of recognition and identification—see chapter five.

¹⁶⁶⁸ Graham, introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 4.

course it is impossible to say that the three African American women writers of popular fiction selected for this dissertation exhibit all of the stylistic devices and image patterns delineated here in all their works. But the four particular novels examined do so to various extents, or at least exhibit some of them.

One of the basic questions raised in the introduction was whether the contemporary popular novels and the books belonging under this umbrella term reflect the changes in the U.S. society within the last thirty years. Generally, it can be said that in the 1980s romances featuring rather dominant males and submissive females prevail. In the following decade the romance does not fall behind but is joined by the chick lit (with its second-wave numerous subgenres such as Sistah lit, Christian chick lit, ghetto lit, etc.) whose promoters and consumers consider the romance to be “receding into an unlamented past.” In chick lit, in any event, literature seems to have reached the point in which on one hand, “globalization permits the dissemination of mass-produced fantasies to *and from* far reaches of the planet and where, on the other hand, new media allows the individual to rework a fantasy so it more closely meets [his/]her own psychic needs and desires and to send it out to the world to join up and intermingle with fantasies fashioned by others.” Still, only a very small amount of population makes use of the opportunity to intervene in cultural production and share their fantasies, and “individual products do not escape their imprint of ideology,”¹⁶⁶⁹ so effecting a social change is not as easy as it may seem.

The protagonists of sistah lit as depicted by McMillan and her contemporaries show precisely how the roles of love, sex, marriage, domesticity, motherhood, and professional success have changed toward the turn of the 21st century. Ferris and Young are absolutely right when they claim that chick lit “is not superficial but a reflection of consumer culture.”¹⁶⁷⁰ What is more important, it is true that African American women have been radically transformed “to shrug off the confinement of traditional notions of womanhood;” still, it is virtually impossible to rid completely of the history and feminine inheritance.¹⁶⁷¹ Even in the third millennium, black women do not seem to be completely free of limiting stereotypes, labels, prejudices, and connotations of various kinds. What is even more surprising, these labels can be imposed on them by the very female members of the black community and academia.

Despite all difficulties, African American women writers’ continuous effort to resist confinement is reflected in their artistic inventions. There is an apparent progression towards “truth”¹⁶⁷² in their literary efforts, which stands in opposition to the need to employ any magical or supernatural elements in women’s fiction by African American women writers in the past. Having liberated themselves from reactions to patriarchal and racial pressures to a large extent, and having had a strong belief in their black audience, they have been free to deal with themselves, and therefore give an unembellished account of the black female experience. By contrast, it is rather intriguing to realise that when it comes to the African American popular fiction authored by men, “Black male fiction writers remain little affected by the boom”¹⁶⁷³ at the turn of the 21st century, having had its day before.

In the last decades times changed for the black people in the U.S., just as McMillan has changed the mode of articulation and the way of dealing with them in her novels. There is no voicelessness and no need to wrestle the individual black subject from the position of anonymity, for her protagonists’ strong “I” stands against and negates the uniform

¹⁶⁶⁹ Modleski, introduction to *Loving with a Vengeance*, xxxii,

¹⁶⁷⁰ Ferris and Young, introduction to *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, 4.

¹⁶⁷¹ Guerrero, “‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White,” in *Chick Lit*, 90.

¹⁶⁷² Considering the presumption that literary texts can be identified with real life and that language serves as an objective mirror to life, as suggested in the chapter on methodology and literary theory.

¹⁶⁷³ Max, “McMillan’s Millions.”

indistinguishable identity of the mass. The I becomes a subject with his/her right to history and place. The above mentioned ability to mirror and validate many of their readers' immediate circumstances and environment gives the readers of popular fiction an additional quality. The books can also create a space where these circumstances can be evaluated, where resistance can be imagined, and where contradictions can be resolved. The precise diagnosis of the state of things can potentially lead to the willingness to change them—even if in a local context. McMillan reminds her readers that it is up to the African Americans to be responsible for themselves, and they must fight back against whatever remains of the previous destructive systems within the U.S. society. More particularly, for the far less restricted existence of black women in the third millennium, the popular fiction authors feel no need to utilize exotic settings or other escapist features in order to reach out for fictional spaces which would enable them to explore extreme, obsessive, or unlikely emotions of their protagonists to feed their female audience, for they feel comfortable with their familiar domestic world. Neither do they resort to construct utopian feminist-inspired fictions in which they would explore wholly new possibilities of the female destiny. Therefore, they feel free to remain within the limitations of realist plots and characterisation, which for instance enables McMillan to be “an important chronicler of 1990’s black life.”¹⁶⁷⁴

The authors' concern over the single status women is obvious. By offering literary representations of social observations that have to do with longing for human connection, popular literature authors offer a greater degree of psychological realism. Harzewski explains that a growing body of feminist social science “has sought to replace negative images of female singleness—waste, desiccation, and bareness—with affirmative models. For example, *singularity* is transformed from incompleteness to a state of readiness, of openness, and self-sufficiency.”¹⁶⁷⁵ This, however, does not make women hide their feelings of loneliness and frustration.¹⁶⁷⁶ And sex is not what would give the protagonists the answer, as Katherine Marsh puts it.¹⁶⁷⁷

Besides that, contemporary African American popular women's novel clearly rejects the traditional opposition between literature and politics, or—if you will—the personal versus the political, melting it together. “Of course, black authors have been a fixture on the literary landscape for decades, but the majority of their books have been consciously literary efforts, or novels in which ideology is at least as important as character development and plots,” as Max observes.¹⁶⁷⁸ And also according to Maryemma Graham, meanwhile earlier authors “may have felt that to be political somehow diminish the status of their art, contemporary black novelists see this dual mission in complementary rather than oppositional terms.”¹⁶⁷⁹

Success of chick lit and its flourishing can possibly be attributed to a certain crisis in romance publishing fuelled by the changing social condition for women at the turn of the 21st century. Simultaneously, as it has been shown in the analyses, the line between chick lit and its various kinds, women's fiction, and romance novel has been blurring. What was once an avant-garde of women's writing, is nowadays perceived as a fiction of bourgeoisie escapism with an incredible amount of novels, some of which are inferiorly written. It comes as no

¹⁶⁷⁴ Max, “McMillan’s Millions.”

¹⁶⁷⁵ Harzewski, “Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners,” in *Chick Lit*, 39.

¹⁶⁷⁶ Marcelle Clements, a sociologist, admits quite frankly, “It’s not that there are no men, it’s that there are no men she wants to want, or who would want her the way she wants to be wanted.” Marcelle Clemens, *The Improvised Woman: Single Women Reinventing Single Life* (New York: Norton, 1998), 25.

¹⁶⁷⁷ Katherine Marsh, “Fabio Gets His Walking Papers: Can Harlequin Rekindle Romance in a Post-Feminist World?,” *Washington Monthly*, January/February 2002, 39–44.

¹⁶⁷⁸ Max, “McMillan’s Millions.”

¹⁶⁷⁹ Graham, introduction to *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, 7.

surprise, then, that chick lit is generally a not very welcome attribute by African American women or most of any other writers.

Despite the great variety of contemporary popular American novels and subgenres of chick lit in particular, numerous critics have made their argument that chick lit has failed to offer true diversity.¹⁶⁸⁰ As Ferris and Young sum up, the existence of so many subgenres of chick lit results in the fact that “the overwhelming majority of chick lit continues to focus on a specific age, race, and class: young, white, and middle.” But it is equally important to notice that “the demand for and popularity of fiction focusing on protagonists beyond those categories is growing exponentially. Black chick lit, in particular, has experienced a burst of popularity since 2004.” Still, sadly enough, although Terry McMillan remains what Ferris and Young call “the original progenitor of popular women’s fiction,” most of the recent black chick lit “owes more to *Sex and the City* than *Waiting to Exhale*.”¹⁶⁸¹

Black chick lit is fiction about and for the “new woman” (that is, the contemporary reader of the postfeminist culture), and a “new woman’s fiction” a form of popular literature mostly written by women for a female audience.¹⁶⁸² Chick lit shares a number of similarities with earlier genres produced for women, namely the romance novel. They have in common the focus on the female voice, there can be similarities in the narrative point of view, and they appeal predominantly to women. Similar growth in paperback romance industry in the 1980s and the chick lit novels a decade later. Both react to the demographic changes occurring in the U.S. in the final decades of the 20th century and at the turn of the 21st one.

Broden rightly states that “[l]iterary divas Morrison and Walker forged a Women’s Renaissance in the 1970s that etched out an artistic path for newer women writers like Gloria Naylor, Marita Golden, and Bebe Moore Campbell. Terry McMillan [in particular] has emerged to take her place among these highly esteemed writers, equally brilliant, yet determined to speak to her contemporary audience in her own ‘tough, new urban voice.’”¹⁶⁸³ Despite the prestigious awards McMillan has received earlier in her career, her commercial success has made academic critics reluctant to recognize her as a serious writer. Still, she has made an important contributor as a scholar, teacher, and mentor to younger artists in addition to what Richards describes as inspiration of “a whole new school of urban black fiction.”¹⁶⁸⁴ Even if Davis who suggests in her article “Don’t Worry, Be Buppie” that many in the new generation of black women writers have abandoned their “genuine African American riches” for mainstream banality¹⁶⁸⁵ were right, “these writers are already part of the tradition, and thus demand—and often deserve our attention and careful consideration,” if only for the fact that many 1990s novels “clearly reveal their debts to earlier black women’s narratives, while adding viable and sometimes compelling new perspectives.”¹⁶⁸⁶

Whether approaching McMillan’s novels as representatives of the so-called chick lit (and/or its branch called black chick lit or Sistah lit), or more realistic parodies of the (Harlequin or Arabesque) romances or romance novels, a specific kind of African American popular bildungsroman, girlfriend, sister-girl or womanist novels, or girlfriend novels, it is impossible to ignore her popularity and importance in the form of the new trends she started. When McMillan’s third novel, *Waiting to Exhale*, was released, it not only became a national

¹⁶⁸⁰ Jessica Jernigan is one of them. Cf. “Slingbacks and Arrows: Chick Lit Comes of Age.”

¹⁶⁸¹ Ferris and Young, introduction to *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, 8.

¹⁶⁸² For more information about the dual function of chick lit, see Shari Benstock, “Afterword: The New Woman’s Fiction,” in *Chick Lit*, 253–256.

¹⁶⁸³ Broden, “Terry McMillan: Overview.”

¹⁶⁸⁴ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 1.

¹⁶⁸⁵ Davis, “Don’t Worry, Be Buppie: Black Novelists Head for the Mainstream.”

¹⁶⁸⁶ Reid, “Beyond Morrison and Walker: Looking Good and Looking Forward in Contemporary Black Women’s Stories,” 313.

best-seller but it succeeded outside the black community, for she took an honest look at something her audience regardless of skin colour had not encountered before: “normal middle-class black life. For many readers, it was a revelation.”¹⁶⁸⁷ The way in which her work has satisfied and surpassed the readers’ and critics’ expectations have proven to be determined not only by the formal and thematic features her works display, but also thanks to the social climate in the U.S. society, in combination with the state of the contemporary literary production of other African American authors at the given moment of history.

McMillan’s novels have in common with other popular women’s fiction that both generally, “provide readers with a forum for considering the ramification of problems that women face in the most important aspect of their daily lives—their relationships with friends, family, and lovers. If nothing else, the trials of [her characters] reassure black women that they are not alone and that their singleness is not a sign of personal failure,” but results from demographic forces in any cases. And since these forces “have transformed women’s roles throughout American society,” McMillan is capable of simultaneously appealing to “a broad spectrum of female readers who have experienced similar frustrations in their personal relationships.”¹⁶⁸⁸ As Richards states, in “synthesizing elements from the body of popular woman’s fiction as well as from the traditions of African American oral and print literature, McMillan has discovered a powerful strategy for creating fictional spaces in which a black female worldview can occupy the center rather than the margins of mainstream American ‘reality.’”¹⁶⁸⁹

Both McMillan and chick lit satirise the excesses they depict, but do not attack “the very foundations of the consumer culture, which in her view teaches women in particular to crave luxuries and to create themselves—and their friends and daughters—as veritable objects of consumption.” Simultaneously, and that is of essential importance, the protagonists make enough money to be financially autonomous (and even support their parents, for instance), McMillan does not cast a lasting doubt “on the notion that self-indulgence is key to a rewarding life” but in a very different way than her chick lit colleagues.¹⁶⁹⁰

In the last decades and at the turn of the 20th century the African American people in particular find themselves in a changing society where traditional concepts of family are constantly challenged and redefined. The consequences caused by high prison rates of black men, abuse of drugs, and violence—all these affect people: black men directly and black women as their partners, wives, sisters, mothers. And therefore, as Joyce who believes that “all writing is political” states, “the trauma of the African-American community of suffering demands the attention of every politically conscious writer and scholar.” In addition, they should “attempt to close the emotional and physical chasms that separate Black people.”¹⁶⁹¹ McMillan’s novels do so by debunking the stereotypical idea that misunderstanding rules the relationships between African American men and women. In her books she presents what exactly prevents them from having healthy relationships. And what they learn from their previous experiences always helps them to engage in new relationships, even if it takes a very long time.¹⁶⁹² As a result, it is possible to say that McMillan recognizes what Joyce terms as “the political ramifications of the relationship’s evolution to well-being of the African-American community.”¹⁶⁹³

¹⁶⁸⁷ “Publishing Company Called Out over ‘Ghetto Lit.’”

¹⁶⁸⁸ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 121–122.

¹⁶⁸⁹ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 51.

¹⁶⁹⁰ Wells, “Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History,” in *Chick Lit*, 64.

¹⁶⁹¹ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 216.

¹⁶⁹² The black man-woman relationships as well as alternative family patterns McMillan offers in various novels are discussed, e.g., by Ellerby, “Deposing the Man of the House: Terry McMillan Rewrites the Family.”

¹⁶⁹³ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, 216.

McMillan's success was enabled by the rise of women's popular fiction, and—in turn—her phenomenal success has helped “awaken publishers to the viability of African American women's popular fiction.” She has paved the road for mainstream distribution and marketing of not only African American romance lines such as Arabesque and Indigo but also black chick lit. Richards correctly states that as “a mature writer, McMillan has chosen to address the mass audience rather than the literary establishment. She may never produce a *Wuthering Heights* but her way with dialect, her insights into relationships, and her ability to transform the oral culture of her primary [black] audience into print will provide the seedbed for future literary masterpieces.”¹⁶⁹⁴

Her novels are women's fiction; still, they transcend traditional popular fiction categories. Focusing on relationships, her approach to telling stories is different from the conventions of other popular women's fiction—both from the romance novel and black chick lit books. Simultaneously, she precedes the first wave of original chick lit, and—despite some drawbacks of the sequel of *Waiting to Exhale*—she goes beyond its second wave in terms of changes of the structural form from novel to novel, experiments with altering narrative voices and situations, authentic use of autobiographical features in a way “that blues singer would draw on her experiences to give a greater sense of emotional truth to her testimony about life,” thematic choices, and the spiritual growth of her protagonists which reflects her own one. (As stated before, it is McMillan's own as well as her readers' sense of self-growth that fuel her writing energy.) According to Richards, the way African American community responds to her oral-like performance corresponds with what the African American linguist Geneva Smitherman terms as “testifyin” which can occur both in secular and sacred context but is not “part of the reality known to the high-culture publishing industry.”¹⁶⁹⁵ Smith is right when she says that McMillan's “own fiction which often portrays successful middle-class professionals is a case in point.”¹⁶⁹⁶ It was proven in the analyses that McMillan's works are deeply rooted both in literary and vernacular traditions of African American storytelling; in addition, the way she combines both makes her writings highly creative. McMillan frequently draws from her own life for her fiction, as argued in the sixth chapter. Joyce says that the beauty of her novels “comes from the author's adept ability to channel her experiences and observations through her imagination.” The result is that such novels both entertain and teach,¹⁶⁹⁷ as it was explained in the analysis of *Waiting to Exhale*. The importance of McMillan also lies in her enormous appeal and making use of the media. Instead of an adjustment to the dominant white culture she has preserved her integrity and confidence.

The mixed reception of McMillan mirrors not only the quality of her works but also reflects the non-existing unanimity within the African American as well as mainstream academia, among critics, and popular reviewers. On one hand, Donella Canty advises the reader to “[m]ove over Alice Walker and Toni Morrison; make room for Terry McMillan,” for she “will need a lot of room on the bench of elite, female African American writers if her latest novel, *Waiting to Exhale*, is any indication of her true talent.”¹⁶⁹⁸ Similarly, Susan Dodd describes her third novel as “a romance of allegiance and gripe.”¹⁶⁹⁹ Some critics say she “has joined the ranks of black women writers who have achieved literary acclaim by their

¹⁶⁹⁴ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 20–25.

¹⁶⁹⁵ In addition, she puts emphasis on the fact that prior to McMillan's era and the black book market boom, there was not much space for blues autobiography in print. Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 35–37. Cf. Geneva Smitherman. *Talking and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State: 1986).

¹⁶⁹⁶ Smith, “Terry McMillan: The Novelist Explores African American Life From the Point of View of a New Generation,” 51.

¹⁶⁹⁷ Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurors and Priests*, 239.

¹⁶⁹⁸ Canty, “McMillan Arrives,” 86.

¹⁶⁹⁹ Dodd, “Women, Sisters and Friends,” 11.

relentless pursuit of narrative voices that are informed by their self-defined artistic integrity.”¹⁷⁰⁰ Others have no doubt that she belongs among the more respected black American women authors who actually do not share their enthusiasm about McMillan’s works. As Karen Grigsby Bates rightly states in *Emerge* in 1994, “[t]he success of Morrison, Walker and McMillan may have begun another renaissance for black authors—which in turn may result in more black bookstores and even publishing houses, which can only benefit all of mainstream publishing.”¹⁷⁰¹ Some, by contrast, consider her to be “a mediocre novelist whose work is consecrated to the spirits of women and blacks.”¹⁷⁰² Darryl Pinckney points out one particularly important fact: the spectacular successes and triumphs of various African American women writers were not immediate. Namely, Toni Morrison’s novels from the 1970s “got very mixed receptions,” too.¹⁷⁰³) In contrast to the massive audience of supporters who have been captivated by her realistic portrayal of black women, whose lives are complicated by various problems such as men unwilling to make commitment, there are the critics who are offended by the spicy language in the dialogue, claiming for instance that she “[b]ombards readers with four-letter words.”¹⁷⁰⁴ But, aware of criticism, McMillan herself is “no novice to critical commentary, nor to the controversies generated by her personal, and often intimate, approach to writing.” She resists such criticism, saying she produces narratives in “a tough, new urban voice.”¹⁷⁰⁵

By writing about “the lives of essentially conventional blacks” who received little attention up to then, since the readers of these books were—or were thought to be—whites and a small group of black intellectuals, McMillan’s cross-race success “has opened publishers’ eyes to a growing black middle-class readership.”¹⁷⁰⁶ As for the readers, much has been said throughout the dissertation about her impact on both the black audience and the cross-racial devoted fans McMillan has had. Her trust in the black audience in particular has been rewarded by its positive acceptance of her works.¹⁷⁰⁷ “Terry McMillan accomplished a major literary feat when she dismantled a long-standing myth that black Americans do not buy or read books.”¹⁷⁰⁸ Her rejection of the culture of complaint together with the self-confidence with which her characters enter the reading space as its particular manifestation even apparently have had the power to refine the negative impact of the mainstream ideas upon the black thinking. And she has overcome the widely held belief among writers, publishers, and critics alike that white readers might show interest in reading about characters of colour, the uneasy relationships among them, the subjectivity of Afrocentric value and belief system. The broad scope of McMillan’s appeal is also evident in the demand for her appearance on talk shows like *Oprah* and *The Today Show*, as well as the articles and interviews published in numerous magazines such as *Emerge*, *Essence*, *Ebony*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *New York Times Book Review*.

The dissertation has been fully aware of the fact that sales figures cannot be the only reliable source of information about how the readers accept a book, or whether they approve

¹⁷⁰⁰ Bolden, “Terry McMillan: Overview.”

¹⁷⁰¹ McMillan’s objections reflect the opinions of many ghetto lit critics who point out that much of it is poorly written, barely edited, and increasingly promoted at the expense of better books. Qtd. in Broden, “Terry McMillan: Overview.”

¹⁷⁰² *The New Republic* qtd in Max, “McMillan’s Millions.”

¹⁷⁰³ Pinckney, “The Best of Everything.”

¹⁷⁰⁴ Sybil Steinberg qtd. Broden, “Terry McMillan: Overview.”

¹⁷⁰⁵ Broden, “Terry McMillan: Overview.”

¹⁷⁰⁶ Max, “McMillan’s Millions.”

¹⁷⁰⁷ The girlfriend novel about “female buddies in good times... and bad” has been “enormously popular through the years, the pleasure of sharing a friendship among women seems to be so great we can’t get enough of it.” Isaacs, “Chilling Out in Phoenix,” 12.

¹⁷⁰⁸ Broden, “Terry McMillan: Overview.”

of it. After all, as Blanche Richardson frankly states, McMillan “might be popular with people who may not ... read another book in their life.” Ishmael Reed, by contrast, says her “books clearly appeal well beyond the feminist intellectuals to, ‘a black everywoman.’”¹⁷⁰⁹ But most readers’ ongoing interest in McMillan’s works speaks volumes. In addition, the success of her earlier texts revealed a market for other stories about young single women grappling with their modern lives regardless of colour.

And when it comes to her impact on other authors, McMillan not only precedes the American as well as British chick lit classics, and successfully modifies the romance novel, but has also inspired a whole school of popular African American girlfriend novels. Namely, her influence can be seen in the following formal and thematic features: the use of the black vernacular language, careful consideration of narrative voices and situations, chapter demarcation, a group of female protagonists united by friendship and/or sisterhood, confidence in black audience, but also the ability to address multiethnic readership, open discussion of love, sex, and relationships, rejection of the burdens of the black past, and—which is rather essential—the refusal of culture of complaint.

Her legacy in the use of multiple voices and perspectives is worth a few words more. The first-person narrative McMillan uses makes an intense impression of immediacy, so that the reader is wholly drawn into the respective protagonists’ position. (Simultaneously, the authorial narrative situation prevents the reader from perceiving a too narrowed and subjective account of the action and events.) What is more, this mode is also self-deprecating, amusing, and very effective in depicting the absurdities as well as minutiae of everyday life. The reader is, however, not confronted with impassioned powerlessness of African American women’s voices, voices of women who are disregarded in the male-dominated society. The result is they give the reader the sense of being inside the mind of the character and “watching her or his perceptions unfold, rather than of reading a planned crafted narrative.” Yet, it does not demand of its readers the kind of unconditional attention required by the stream-of-consciousness technique. McMillan inspires her followers to “deprive the reader of the satisfaction of conclusion that ties up all plot strands,”¹⁷¹⁰ and does not always reward the protagonists with the objects of their desires, whether mate, job, or both.

The question to be answered in the following paragraphs is where the reasons for McMillan’s enormous appealing ability lies. The way she deals with sensitive topics could be summed up by words of Michelle Norris in an interview. “Often you write about subjects that people talk about at the beauty shop or the kitchen table, and you try to take those sort of sensitive subjects and sort of put them in a public form.”¹⁷¹¹ The topics range from racism, sexual orientation, glass ceiling, finding a proper mate within the African American community, and gender biases, etc. While other authors’ reaction is often to shy away from difficult or controversial topics, or to approach them from a superficial, strained or half-hearted standpoint, McMillan shows how these are crucially important to her readers’ awareness of the world and its social, moral, political and civic underpinnings. And she shows her audience deserve to be told about these topics in authentic, engaging and, purposeful ways.

The Afrocentric literary criticism understands literature as both an aesthetic and functional sort of activity aimed at the promotion and dissemination of cultural values and views of the world which are connected to the authors’ interests and needs. Her works reflect the triadic parallel among the meaning, mode, and of expression and ideology, as suggested by Joyce. For the word provides solace to the African American community, McMillan injects

¹⁷⁰⁹ Both Richardson and Reed qtd. in Max, “McMillan’s Millions.”

¹⁷¹⁰ Wells, “Mothers of Chic Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History,” in *Chick Lit*, 67.

¹⁷¹¹ “Interview: Terry McMillan discusses her new novel, *The Interruption of Everything*.”

her works with hope and optimism which are often communicated by means of humour. The importance of friendship is woven into the very structure of her novels, along with the changing points of view and characterisations. The individual women protagonists' stories are bound to one another, but there is no diminution of their individual ones. By means of employing alternating perspectives in most of her books, she reveals more sides to her stories. Whether using the reflector-character perspective or the authorial narrative voice, she takes her reader deep into the characters' heads, showing the complicated processes of thinking in a way that their accounts become not only comprehensible but also affecting.¹⁷¹² The reader comprehends the reasons for their behaviour—which is sometimes more than wicked—and perceives them as whole persons. Her risky portrayals which include intimate details and motivations may be controversial, but the characters are undeniably alive.

McMillan has allayed the thirst of the underestimated African American middle class to read about themselves. In Richard Bernstein's opinion (which is also in concord with other reviewers), *Waiting to Exhale* "was warmly welcomed as an expression of middle-class black female identity." The "hood" is "only part of the larger black pageant. The larger picture also included middle-class black women with educations, careers and sensibilities who wage a special kind of struggle over the missing ingredients of the affluent life."¹⁷¹³ Having completed college degrees due to desegregation and having advanced into rather well-paid professional positions in the white corporate world does, however, not mean they are not worried financially.

McMillan is not one of the African American writers who would reinforce the mainstream community's controlling images and stereotypes of the black people; "[t]here's nothing stereotyped in her work here: it is fresh and engaging."¹⁷¹⁴ First of all, she portrays vivid and dynamic characters with a rich inner life which definitely resist any classification. Second, she sees her black female protagonists' emancipation connected to the male's one. The alternative family reunions she suggests in her novels do not stem from her unwillingness to include African American men, which makes her more a womanist than a conscious feminist. Stereotypes of African American women (not only in popular culture) have proven to be not only offensive but also harmful in the history of African Americans. Simultaneously,—as stated by Audre Lorde—"[d]ifferences between ourselves as black women are being misnamed and used to separate us from one another."¹⁷¹⁵ McMillan knows one for sure: any strictly defined categories cannot even begin to describe the multitude of black women.

What the critique of popular romances despises in particular is feeding the (female) reader with sugar. A particularly effective parallel is drawn by Modleski who—despite the fact that she refers to a television commercial for the Harlequin Romances—has a point: women who tend to succumb to what she calls "disappearing acts" and therefore "vanish quietly behind the scenes" should better "start making themselves more visible." This, however, is

¹⁷¹² What makes the biggest difference between the first- (whether personal or not) and third-person narration also causes essential reasons for the narrator's motivation to narrate and subsequently the reader's attachment to him/her. For the embodied reflector-character this motivation is "existential," directly connected with his/her "experience, with the joys and sorrows" he/she has gone through, moods, and needs. The act of narration thus "can take on something compulsive, fateful, inevitable." By contrast, for the authorial voice, there is no such "existential compulsion to narrate." His/her motivation is "literary-aesthetic rather than existential." Despite the reader's relative unawareness of these phenomena, he/she "cannot escape the very specific suggestive effect from the existential motivation of an embodied narrator." Stanzel and Helmut Winter qtd. in Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 118–119.

¹⁷¹³ Bernstein, "Black, Affluent and Looking For More," C17.

¹⁷¹⁴ Review of *Waiting to Exhale*, *Publishers Weekly*.

¹⁷¹⁵ Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Race, Class and Gender*, ed. Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2004), 69.

not very likely to happen if the women readers continue to feel an urge to escape into the sugary pink selflessness.¹⁷¹⁶ No pink fantasies are stimulated by McMillan; on the contrary, she urges her characters and therefore also stimulates her readers of both sexes to act and be responsible for themselves.

The tangible evidence for what has just been suggested is her own campaign at the beginning of her literary career. To write her first novel and rely on the publishing house for success was simply not enough. Broden comments, she “masterminded a new-age publicity campaign” when she wrote over three thousand letters to bookstores and universities inviting them to stock copies of her book, then embarked upon her own promotional tour for the first novel.¹⁷¹⁷

In addition, Richards sees McMillan’s use of blues aesthetics as a potential key to her success and cross-over appeal.

In literature and fine arts, African Americans have had to struggle against biases that held that blacks were incapable of meeting the aesthetic standards of the literary establishment. In popular culture, however, every musical form African Americans have created has found a crossover audience and has wielded profound influence on the development of all forms of American music.¹⁷¹⁸

More important, “freed-from the double-consciousness dilemma,” McMillan is able to “manipulate conventions of form and manage audience expectations of verisimilitude in creative ways,” which allows her to testify to her own truth.¹⁷¹⁹ As a result, her writings which effectively counter long-standing misrepresentations of the blacks have reached not only the African American readership but also the mainstream one.

The power of the spoken word as her African heritage which McMillan makes use of is essential in three aspects. The blues mode has been a fruitful source of inspiration for her. Dramatised scenes with narrative function consisting of dialogue prevail in her book, leaving no space for silence in the dialogue-driven plot. She actively engages in call and response both in her texts and in her promotion campaigns in which she makes use of the well-known appeal of the spoken word to African American people. The spoken word is “rooted both in the cultural traditions and buying habits of African-Americans,” says Cheryl Woodruff, adding that “word of mouth” is a much greater factor than in the white market.¹⁷²⁰

McMillan’s characters do not fall prey to the harmful climate of compulsory glamour that would further put demands on her readers. Consumerism does not play a key role in her novels, for she takes into account the negative effects of extensive spending. McMillan operates as a modern blues singer with the ability to challenge patriarchy by affirming black women’s right to mobility and sexual independence, as defined by Hazel Carby.¹⁷²¹ Her protagonists take the initiative in sexual relations, leave their husbands, travel as they like, quit a relationship with a man who treats them in a bad way, affirm the right to economic and sexual self-determination—all these, as Willis explains, are themes resounding in the black female blues tradition.¹⁷²²

Demographics has proven to play an indisputable part in the impressive response by African American readers to her works. Social phenomena such as the increasing age for the first marriage together with declining rates of remarriage, high divorce rates, increasing interracial dating figures, changing educational patterns, etc. lead to singleton lifestyles of

¹⁷¹⁶ Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, 28–29.

¹⁷¹⁷ Broden, “Terry McMillan: Overview.”

¹⁷¹⁸ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 39.

¹⁷¹⁹ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 42.

¹⁷²⁰ Max, “McMillan’s Millions.”

¹⁷²¹ Hazel Carby, “It Just Be’s Dad Way Sometime,” *Radical America*, vol. 20, no. 4 (June/July 1986): 9–22.

¹⁷²² Willis, “I Shop Therefore I Am: Is There a Place for Afro-American Culture in Commodity Culture?,” *Changing our Own Words*, 186.

black young urban professionals.¹⁷²³ It would be very incorrect to say there have not been conflicts between the rising black middle class which has managed to take advantage of the opportunities made possible by the Civil Rights Movement on one hand, and the large economic underclass that still suffers from inequality and injustice which result from racism as well as capitalism. At the same time, the rising middle class and its successes in terms of education and wealth must not be ignored. And if it had not been for the growth of the black middle and upper-middle class “since publishers last looked at the market,” as for instance Daniel Max explains, things would have been very different for Terry McMillan. In addition, the “average black reader wasn’t buying books because there were few books he or she wanted to buy.”¹⁷²⁴ It was McMillan’s timing together with her own effort put into promoting her works¹⁷²⁵ which went hand-in-hand with her craft of writing that resulted in her phenomenal success. The enormous success of *Waiting to Exhale* reflects the undeniable transformation of the institution of the black marriage and relationships in general. For example, Richards sees the book as “a significant contribution to a larger dialogue within the African American women’s imagined print community about the dire shortage of eligible African American men. Overall, the cultural nationalist values of this imagined print community seek to preserve racial and ethnic identity.”¹⁷²⁶

Her proximity to chick lit, romantic comedy and romance fiction has led to a double effect. It has elicited a critical denigration due to the novels’ gendered reclamation of commodity roots. Despite the fact that McMillan does not directly connect fulfilment in one’s life with purchasing designers’ clothes and shoes, indulging and grooming, but—on the contrary—shows the negative sides of addiction on them, many critics have failed to understand her attitude. The last thing she would wish is to reinforce and upscale fashion and shopping fetish, especially in affiliation with mass culture. Next, her high visibility in the media has sometimes been approached as unliterary to some extent, focussing more on McMillan herself and grasping her works rather as social and sociological documents, especially as far as relationships among black men and women are concerned. In other words, the burden of traditionally frowned-upon “reading for women” in her version has not avoided stereotypes drawn on cultural conventions. Last but not least, her impressive sales records paradoxically have not challenged the deep-rooted mistrust toward the producers of popular fiction, the female target group, as well as her deliberate acquisition of commercial success. Her mission to write books that would shed some light on the rich and changing African American community should not be overshadowed by what some critics classify as producing readable books. The mixed feelings McMillan and her followers’ creations provoke enables one to revisit the old discussion about the function of such prose which has always concerned a debate about the ethic, moral and financial status of women writers, regardless of their race on one hand, and the entertainment, and other benefits of the works together with the effect they have on the reader on the other one.

The idea that a more sophisticated and complex view of sexuality is offered by the contemporary African American popular fiction must be related to one phenomenon: for a

¹⁷²³ In 2005, married couples became a minority in all U.S. households for the first time. Roberts qtd. in Harzewski, introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 3. Cf. Claudia Lawrence-Webb, Melissa Littlefield, and Joshua N. Okundaye, “African American Intergender Relationships: A Theoretical Exploration of Roles, Patriarchy, and Love,” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 34, no. 5 (May 2004): 623–639.

¹⁷²⁴ Ishmael Reed, McMillan’s friend and former mentor, adds “There has always been a market; commercial publishers just didn’t go after it.” Max and Ishmael Reed qtd. in “McMillan’s Millions.”

¹⁷²⁵ Her endless reading tours, which included places such as colleges, jazz clubs, free time centres, etc. in addition to traditional bookstores created “a paradigm of how to sell to black American readers.” Max, “McMillan’s Millions.”

¹⁷²⁶ Richards, *Terry McMillan*, 121.

very long time, black sexuality was generally surrounded with myths of immorality, insatiability, and wild untamed images of both black men and women. These stereotypes not only meant a seemingly logical explanation of oppression of American people of African origin, but also forced them to put on masks of chastity, purity, and piety in order to be able to meet the requirements of the white majority. McMillan deals with sexuality, openly depicting the healthy relation of her protagonists to it; the women characters are active agents with no sexual deformation, there are no female characters whose participation would be defined by what their husbands' or partners' desires dictate. Those who condemn authors such as McMillan ignore the negative phenomena explained above in this paragraph. To feel free to picture sexuality without taboos or demonising it and claim it as a natural part of one's existence is a form of freedom that the African American literature was denied in the past, and apparently it has to do with McMillan's axiom that there is no need to prove the black existence to anyone but themselves, stated in *Breaking Ice*. If the critics fail to understand this, the countless women readers across the races apparently do not.

Resumé

Má práce si klade za cíl charakterizovat románovou poetiku a základní motivickou strukturu vybraných próz Terry McMillanové. Pro takový cíl bylo nutno provést celou řadu předběžných průzkumů a výzkumů prostoru kolem daného literárního díla. Porozumění umělecké a lidské zprávě, kterou autorka nabízí, totiž ztěžují dvě specifické společenské okolnosti.

První je fakt, že se jedná o autorku-Afroameričanku. Může se to zdát absurdní, přísnější a přesnější teoretikové – vycházející primárně a zásadně pouze z textu – by mohli mít pocit, že toto škatulkování a členění je zavádějící. Já jsem ale přesvědčena, že literární dílo prostě nežije ve vzduchoprázdnu, nerodí se pouze jako jakýsi nehmotný nositel všepřavd a velkých idejí, ale naopak je utvářeno střetem, který je dán vazbou mezi autorčinou životní perspektivou a představou o světě, jejím systémem hodnot, způsobem, jakým je tento záměr realizován v díle, a v neposlední řadě také tím, jakým způsobem tento základní vzkaz čtenář té které skupiny či generace re-konstruuje (jsem si vědoma, že to, co tu momentálně představuji, je základní trojdílnost Ecovy představy interpretace literárního díla, ovšem Umberto Eco, jak bude uvedeno níže, pro mě představuje jakousi základnu v nejobecnějším smyslu slova, ale metodologicky daleko potřebnější se ukázaly spíše způsoby práce recepční školy estetiky). A právě čtenářky Terry McMillanové prokazují, jak podstatným je pro ně její literární dílo vzkazem, jak se vlastně trvale podílí na procesu, který se sice v očích vládnoucí ideologie zdá být dokončen, ve skutečnosti ale stále probíhá; totiž proces skutečného osvobození afroamerického obyvatelstva a jeho vyvázání z čistých asimilačních pokusů, které jediné mohou vést ke znovunalezení vlastní identity.

Druhou je potom skutečnost, že se dílo Terry McMillanové těší značně kolísavé oblibě u literární kritiky – pojmu obliba rozumějme tak, že se jedná o dílo často hodnocené, analyzované, zdá se mně však, že poměrně málo interpretované. A právě literární kritika (jako jeden z nejrespektovanějších a nejpodstatnějších čtenářů) sehrála v názoru na dílo Terry McMillanové tak podstatnou úlohu, že jsem pokládala za nezbytné se kritickým přijetím projít do té míry, aby bylo zřejmé, co lze pokládat za opodstatněný hodnotící argument a co se stalo zaběhaným a při jakékoli situaci použitelným klišé, které už zdaleka dnes není s to charakterizovat toto v mnohém rozporuplné, ale v mnohém také až překvapivě jednostranné dílo. S tím souvisí ještě jedna podstatná věc, a tou je vztah díla Terry McMillanové k feminismu a jeho podobám. Opět tu platí, co bylo řečeno výše: tento průzkum byl nezbytně nutný proto, aby se daly objasnit a blíže specifikovat stereotypy, které se podílejí na škatulkování toho díla místo toho, aby se je pokusily interpretovat.

Po těchto úvodních poznámkách nyní představím, jakými cestami jsem se k této literatuře přibližovala a do jakých celků jsem celou práci rozčlenila.

Práce se skládá z jedenácti kapitol, ke kterým ještě přináleží úvodní kapitola metodologická (*Literary Theory and Methodology Applied in the Dissertation*) a dvě závěrečné kapitoly shrnující poznatky získané studiem tzv. chick lit a četbou díla Terry McMillanové, stejně jako vybraných románů dalších dvou afroamerických autorek populární prózy pro ženy, tj. *African American Popular Literature and (Black) Chick Lit: „Independently Indebted”* a *Conclusion: Ice Broken*.

První metodologická kapitola nemá ambici prokazovat mé znalosti v oblasti literární teorie, proto se věnuje jen těm oblastem, které pokládám pro studium díla Terry McMillanové za základní. Jsem ostatně už dlouho přesvědčena o tom, že literární vědec si nemůže pro svůj celý badatelský život vystačit s jednou propracovanou metodou, ale naopak, musí být schopen naslouchat svému předmětu zájmu s takovou důsledností, která nakonec může vést

i k zásadnímu předpodstatnění v otázce literárněteoretických postulátů. Jinak řečeno, že zkratka každé literární dílo hodné toho slova si může nárokovat svou vlastní, na jiné dílo jen stěží aplikovatelnou metodu, která se tedy zákonitě dílo od díla liší. V mém případě se ukázalo jako zásadní rozumět literárnímu dílu v jeho horizontech kulturních a čtenářských.

První horizont mě zavedl k otázkám, které se ptaly na vazby mezi literárním dílem a afroamerickou „kulturou“, tedy tím, jak se literární dílo podílí na tvorbě hodnot té které společnosti, jak se v něm vyjevuje účel, pro který vznikalo apod. Jde tedy přesně o ty jevy, které se často v souvislosti s afroamerickou kulturou diskutují pod společným názvem afrocentrický přístup. Jako plodné se tu zdá být přemýšlení Joyce A. Joyceové, jež pro tyto potřeby pracuje s triádou význam-způsob vyjádření-ideologie (myšlenka). Zároveň s tím jsem ale nespouštěla ze zřetele ani základní danost literatury – ve všech kulturách a ve všech časech, možná občas překryta funkcemi jinými, stojí literatura trvale na strážní za člověka celého, ve všech jeho polohách a podobách, a právě tímto je zřejmě jedinou nositelkou lidské zkušenosti formulované na základě konkrétních, individuálních lidských osudů. S tím samozřejmě souvisí také názor, s nímž se zcela shoduji, že literární dílo nikdy nepřináší žádnou zaručenou, všeplatnou pravdu, ale je především osobním vyjádřením autorovy potřeby vzkazu. Toto vše, co se zdá být zcela obecné, bylo potřeba přeci jen zpřesnit – protože v afroamerické literatuře je trochu jinak formulována otázka literárnosti, a to především v závislosti na tom, jak do ní byly nejen ve druhé polovině 20. století implantovány eurocentrické představy o hodnotách, literárních kategoriích či standardech. Všechny zde naznačené otázky mě nakonec přivedly k tomu, že jako neadekvátnější metodologická základna pro zkoumání díla a obecně fenoménu Terry McMillanové se ukázalo být myšlení prezentované autory sdruženými v tzv. Kostnické škole recepční estetiky. Především to byly otázky související s aktivní rolí čtenáře při přijímání literárního díla, a to i v konkretizacích časových a místních (ostatně ani jistá literární sociologie se mně v budoucím bádání nejeví jako neopodstatněná). V neposlední řadě se mně zdá nezbytné připomenout, že u tohoto typu literatury platí asi víc než kde jinde i ta skutečnost, že čtenář(ky) se zapojuje(jí) do literárního díla daleko emocionálněji, že je prožívají s větší mírou sebeprojekce, ale také s větší mírou spoluúčasti na rekonstruovaných životních událostech a konkrétních dějích.

Druhou kapitolu (Mainstream and Black Feminism) tvoří otázky související s feminismem. Cílem kapitoly je kromě jiného definovat, nebo spíše vyabstrahovat definici toho, co feminismus je, stejně jako toho, co není – protože právě při těchto negativních definicích vyjde najevo, kolik stereotypů je s tímto způsobem uvažování o světě spojeno a jak se podílejí na analýzách konkrétních uměleckých děl. Pro tento účel bylo nezbytné vrátit se k tzv. druhé vlně feminismu, tedy sledovat situaci v USA po šedesátých letech dvacátého století. Zatímco otázky týkající se odlišností různých vln feminismu byly v odborné literatuře řešeny zevrubně, mě daleko více zajímalo, co oba proudy spojuje, a také, jakým způsobem dokázaly vedle sebe koexistovat, či dokonce spolupracovat. Pro další práci bylo také potřeba pojmenovat pozici uprostřed základní otázky feminismu, tedy střetu mezi privátním, osobním na jedné straně a politickým, veřejným na straně druhé. Zdálo se mně vhodné charakterizovat jakousi „zlatou střední cestu“, jak ji lze sledovat nejen v USA na přelomu 20. a 21. století. Všechny tyto úvahy jsem směřovala k tomu, abych zachytila celkovou kulturně-politickou atmosféru, uprostřed níž díla Terry McMillanové vznikala. Nešlo mně samozřejmě jen o jakýsi pozitivistický sběr dat a faktů, nýbrž spíše o to, připomenout, odkud se v románech bere ta sveřepá potřeba řešit rozkol mezi světem věcí privátních a veřejných. S tím souvisí i skutečnost, že bez znalosti feminismu a jeho středobodové otázky by bylo jen stěží přijatelné a srozumitelné svéhlové a jednolitě přesvědčení vyzářující z knih Terry McMillanové – totiž fakt, že žena, chce-li jí být právoplatně, musí být informovaná, obeznámená s chodem světa a především, musí být schopná nést zodpovědnost za svá životní rozhodnutí.

Třetí kapitola (Black (Feminist) Literary Criticism) se soustředí na to, co bychom mohli pojmenovat jako vnitřní hodnototvorný kontext. Mapuje totiž afroamerickou literární kritiku. Noří se trochu hlouběji do minulosti, protože právě tam se nejspíš zakládají fenomény, které vykrystalizují v úvahách let devadesátých a určují diskusi o tomto typu literatury dodnes. Jako milník v kritickém uvažování vnímám rok 1992 jako rok vydání třetího románu McMillanové, *Waiting to Exhale*. Mohlo by se zdát, že jde o kapitolu spíše slovníkového charakteru, že takový přehled není právě originální. Jenže: bylo prostě nezbytné pokusit se (a právě i ona historická procházka to dobře ukázala) charakterizovat, jaké požadavky jsou na mnou sledovanou literaturu kladeny právě zevnitř, z okruhu jejich „vlastních“ autorek. Potvrdilo se ostatně, že zásadním rozdílem je ten fakt, že afroamerické feministicky orientované kritičky zdaleka nezůstávají jen ve vnitřních kontextech kulturních, či dokonce úzce specializovaných literárních. Jejich metodologická základna je daleko plastičtější, chce se skoro napsat bohatší. Toto se projevuje v jednom velmi zřetelně formulovaném a odvážném nároku – ženské kritické psaní definuje také kulturně-společenskou atmosféru, ve které díla vznikají; spojují pak ve svých úvahách často svět kritického a beletristického psaní, definují nástrahy, které na oba typy psaní čekají, a tím vším jako by se pokoušely nastolit, nebo alespoň se přiblížit stavu jakési „rovnováhy“. Nejspíš právě proto, že svůj koncept literatury zakládají široce, najednou se mnohým z nich jeví jako zásadní zbavit se vlastně otázky prosté „kultury stěžování“ – tady se také projevuje střet s tradicí. Nejen početná skupina afroamerických autorek, ale i mnohé kritičky dnešní generace už přestávají rozumět nároku na akcentaci diskriminace. Zdá se jim, že fakt diskriminace už není potřeba tolik zdůrazňovat a v žádném případě z něj nelze neustále destilovat jakýsi literární nárok.

Kapitola je také zpočátku strukturována jako analýzy některých zásadních jevů, které se týkají černošské (feministické) literární kritiky. Je to zejména důležitost ženského typu psaní, kritéria, která jsou uplatňována pro porozumění a evaluaci díla napsaného černoškou autorkou, a některé další. Kapitola se v těchto otázkách prochází po zásadních textech a skrze ně připomíná nejvýraznější autorky tohoto proudu psaní od druhé poloviny dvacátého století dodnes.

Ještě jednu věc je tu třeba zmínit, a totiž skutečnost, že zhruba od devadesátých let je v afroamerické literárně-kritické tradici sledován ještě jeden jev, zdánlivě protichůdný k těm výše jmenovaným, totiž snaha kritiky vymanit se z jazykového schématu akceptujícího výhradně poststrukturalistickou literární teorii. Pokouší se (i v jazykové rovině) objevit vlastní vnitřní gramatiku i jazyk pro charakterizaci historie i současnosti afroamerické literární tradice. To se pak projevuje v příklonu k tradičním, skoro se chce říci strukturálním diskusím, akceptujícím proměny vyprávění a další, už imanentně literární elementy literárního textu.

Čtvrtá kapitola (Literary Context: African American Women Writers' Renaissance) se naopak vrací ke kontextu nejužšímu, tedy k vlastní literární tradici. Zdůrazňuje se zde otázka multizánrovosti jednotlivých autorek, které se v zásadě nespecifikují na jediný literární druh, ale své otázky řeší na několika úrovních. Mnohdy se samozřejmě také orientují a aktivně účastní i diskursů dalších, ať už toho kritického, tak obecně společenskovešedního.

Kapitola se vrací k už mnohokrát popsaným obecnějším otázkám ženského afroamerického feministického psaní (a tady je třeba připomenout, že se tu omezují výhradně na prozaické texty, protože ona žánrová a druhová rozrůzněnost by sama vydala na zvláštní práci); zejména mě zajímala otázka společenského přijetí (tam se ukazují moje výklady jako nejvíce skeptické, jako by tradiční stereotypy – i přes poměrně značný úspěch řady autorek – přetrvávaly). Akcentuji v ní me stále ještě marginální postavení afroamerických spisovatelek v minoritní společnosti, zajímala mě také otázka tradice, stejně jako převažujících témat, a zejména pak otázka, jakým způsobem se v tomto typu literárních děl rodí či řeší otázka osobní identity člověka, resp. afroamerické ženy.

Zároveň má kapitola svůj rozměr historický, rok 1970 je pro mě klíčovým milníkem, od kterého teprve lze definovat to, co bývá označováno jako tzv. renesance černošských spisovatelek. Tento rozměr bylo nutné udržet zejména proto, abych si otevřela cestu k dalším kapitolám, ve kterých půjde o populární afroamerické romány a o jejich žánrové i typologické rozčlenění. Tento typ literatury a jeho rozmach by totiž byl bez tzv. renesance nemožný, což lze hmatatelně cítit i ve století dvacátém prvním. Stále se tu totiž ozývá tak obecná, a přece tak trvale platná a stále zapomínaná otázka – i když ty nejzrůdnější a nejživotnější stereotypy se snad v americké společnosti rozpadají, ještě stále je afroamerické obyvatelstvo stíženo „dostatkem“ mýtů jiných, které je třeba nabourávat. A to se může podařit pouze literatuře dobře napsané.

Právě populární literatura je hlavním tématem kapitoly páté (African American Popular Novel). Podávám v ní základní pohledy na danou oblast, pokouším se charakterizovat a připomenout pestrost žánrovou (narážím tu na komplikace s překladem, protože román pro ženy v českém případě příliš evokuje prastarý druh „románu pro služky“, pojem „harlekýna“ se zase příliš specializuje na jedinou řadu jednoho nakladatelství, a pokud jde o otázku chick lit, jsem také vlastně stále na vážkách), zároveň si znovu kladu i otázku, proč je tento typ literatury tak málo reflektován a naopak tak často bagatelizován, ba dokonce zavrhován.

Ve snaze o definici vycházím z těch úvah, které jsou orientovány na strukturu děl, a především pak na již výše zmiňovaný fakt recepce. Jde tedy o texty s relativně dobře rozpoznatelnou narativní strukturou, která byt' může být i docela komplikovaná, nemá strhávat pozornost sama na sebe. Podstatným aspektem chick lit je potom to, že k těmto postupům je přistupováno s jistou mírou zlehčení. Kapitola se o definici těchto jevů snaží na historickém podkladě, protože se ukazuje, že nelze hovořit o oddělených oblastech, protože jakoby jednotlivé, typologicky odlišné podoby populární literatury na sebe navzájem navazují a ovlivňují se. Zároveň se zde zabývám otázkou, které bylo podle mě do této chvíle věnováno málo pozornosti. Že totiž v základu jakýchkoli úvah o populární literatuře psané Afroameričankami je jedno podloží, které sice nebývá připomínáno, ale zásadním způsobem potom samotné úvahy modeluje. Totiž že v rámci literárněvědných úvah je s jakousi samozřejmostí favorizován jiný svět populární kultury, zejména film, hudba, z vlastní, původní kultury je to pak především rap, hip-hop a černošský film, v pozadí pak stojí takové žánry, jako je romance, science-fiction apod.

Kapitola ale neřeší tyto otázky jen na úzce vymezeném poli, ale historicky. Zajímá mě i otázka velkého nárůstu knižní produkce, což podle mě není primárně způsobeno tím, že by v knižním průmyslu v USA byli na významných postech zastoupeni Afroameričané, ale jde spíše o obecnější požadavky čtenářské. Na jedné straně totiž sami černošští autoři a autorky přistupují na hru autor-čtenář, ve které dominantní pozici získává čtenář, tedy že autor díla se najednou snaží saturovat jeho požadavky, protože i v centru jeho zájmu je prodejnost vlastních knih. I když tedy populární literatura roste a vyvíjí se, ovlivňována jak hlavním čtenářským proudem a z něj jakoby zrozených konvencí, zároveň v tomto konkrétním případě jsou do této oblasti implementovány i poněkud odlišné zájmy afroamerické komunity, a to zejména požadavek plastičnosti, tzn. že jim jde o to, aby se dokázali v literárním díle uvidět, poznat, protože to, co uznají a poznávají, se jim také líbí.

V devadesátých letech je patrný boom tzv. sister-girl románů, které mohly vzniknout a být úspěšné ze dvou důvodů. První je přísně literární: slovo „sestra“ tu totiž neimplikuje pouze rodinný vztah či blízkost, ale je také oslovením rodícím se z náboženských komunit a od nich obecně celé ženské oblasti. Druhý souvisí s tím, co bylo řečeno v předchozích kapitolách: se zmiňovanou renesancí afroamerické literatury a především s prudkým nárůstem kupní síly afroamerické střední třídy.

Zajímala mě rovněž otázka hlubšího literárně-kulturního kontextu populární literatury a jejích podob. Pokud jde o to, z čeho tento typ literatury vychází, projevuje se tu vazba na

vlastní tradici danou lidovou slovesností, zároveň ale i vazby na „tradiční“ populární žánry, jako je detektivka, romance pro ženy a další.

Zároveň se bylo třeba ptát detailněji na chick lit – na to, jaká je vazba mezi touto literaturou a postfeministickým teoretickým diskursem – ukazuje se, že velmi problematický. Bylo třeba projít se po zásadních stavebních kamenech této literatury, vyjasnit si, jak ji ti kteří autoři definují, jak ji omezují apod. Všechny z těchto mnohých otázek přitom ústí v jednu zásadní – totiž že má smysl se tímto typem literatury zabývat, protože je jednak specifickým komentářem stavu americké společnosti a jejích hodnot (a to zejména v černošské komunitě), jednak je ukazatelem jednoho základního fenoménu – totiž že černošští autoři, a především autorky, píšou hodně zejména proto, že černošští čtenáři hodně čtou. To jsou dva jevy, které by se neměly přecházet jako bezvýznamné, protože jde o jevy, které majoritní společnost po dlouhou dobu do značné míry podceňovala.

Šestá kapitola práci jakoby ještě detailněji zužuje. Je věnována Terry McMillanové jako spisovatelce, ale také jako člověku, který se podílel i na tvorbě nového afroamerického kriticko-teoretického diskursu. Klíčovým nejen pro pochopení postavení této autorky v kontextu afroamerické prózy, ale, domnívám se, i pro interpretaci celého díla Terry McMillanové je koncept horizontu očekávání, jak jej popsal, z historických souvislostí vytěžil a jako literárněvědnou kategorii v život uvedl Hans Robert Jauss. Jaussovy úvahy totiž lze dobře aplikovat pro popis toho, jaké nároky jsou kladeny na černošské spisovatelky na přelomu dvacátého a dvacátého prvního století. Zároveň je to koncept, který umožňuje (ve spojení s analýzou struktury literárního díla a jeho jazyka) popsat i způsoby, jimiž se Terry McMillanová s těmito nároky literárně vyrovnává a jak na ně reaguje. Je zřejmé, že autorčiny teze a východiska jsou pro mě stejným předmětem odborného a kritického zájmu, nejsou tedy v práci nijak favorizovány, nýbrž spíše kriticky čteny.

Kapitola se dále zabývá vztahem Terry McMillanové k chick lit a popisuje rovněž koncept literatury, jak jí rozumí Trey Ellis, formulovaný především v textu *The New Black Aesthetic*. V něm se totiž ustavuje cosi jako nová černošská estetika, což jsou přesně ty průhledy do fungování literárního díla, které se odrážejí v konceptu psaní, jak mu rozumí mnou sledovaná autorka. V souvislosti s tím jsou připomenuty i další zdroje, ze kterých McMillanová čerpá. Samozřejmě, že mně tu nejde o žádné nové aplikace pozitivistických vlivologických studií, spíše se pokouším charakterizovat ukotvenost autorky v určitém kontextu nejen psané literatury, ale i myšlení o ní. Zdůraznit je tu ale potřeba dva texty z této oblasti. Jednak je to předmluva Johna Edgara Widemana a úvod Terry McMillanové k prestižní a obsáhlé antologii černošské krásné prózy z roku 1990 s názvem *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction*.

Kapitola se v omezené míře věnuje i datům biografickým, především pak spouštěcímu momentu, který autorku k psaní přivedl, což byla zřejmě práce v knihovně a studium. Tím se otevírají také důvody, myslím tím ony vnitřní, související s autorskou intencí obsaženou v každém literárním díle. Tím si také otevírám prostor pro dvě obecnější otázky zrcadlící se v díle Terry McMillanové. Tou první je otázka autobiografičnosti a její míry obecně v dílech černošských autorek. Její specifika se projeví také v souvislosti s již připomínanou sebereflexí černošských čtenářek do literárního díla. Zároveň s tím souvisí i důležitost mluveného slova jeho „autentického“ záznamu, stejně jako toho, jakým způsobem mluvené slovo zasáhlo celý naratologický systém a jak se podílel i na těch partiích, které jsou nositeli zprostředkovaného vyprávění.

Všechny výše naznačené úvahy a otázky se pak prohlubují, případně řeší, v kapitolách následujících. Sedmá kapitola (Terry McMillan: *Life and Works*) se ještě jednou, a tentokrát s větším důrazem na jemnější analýzu, vrací k pojmu čtenářského horizontu očekávání. To zejména proto, aby práce byla schopna nejen analyzovat romány McMillanové, což provedly kapitoly následující, ale především položit na pevný základ debatu o obrovském úspěchu

románů autorky, především od románu *Waiting to Exhale*, a zároveň věnovat kritickému (ne)přijetí těchto textů.

Život autorky je vztahován k jejímu dílu, ovšem nikoli primárně mimeticky, nepokouším se ani v náznaku zapomenout na to, že se pohybuji stále v prostoru literárněvědné analýzy a že ten hlavní důvod této významné a sledovatelné autobiografičnosti je nejspíše dán skutečně jiným prožíváním čtenářským, jde o neoddiskutovatelný fakt, který lze jen stěží přehlédnout, chci-li se skutečně vážně dílem Terry McMillanové zabývat.

Když se v této kapitole věnuji jednotlivým dílům, akcentuji především pohled kritický, a to z prostého důvodu – protože má práce si neklade za cíl pouze analyzovat (to dělají následující kapitoly, jak doufám, s náležitou přesností), ale chce také rozumět fungování těchto děl ve dvou zdánlivě odlišných diskurzech, které jsou propojené. Tím jedním je právě diskurs kritický, a v něm se ukazuje asi nejvýraznější pohyb. Autorka je nejprve přijímána (v 90. letech) spíše pozitivně, jako nový, živý proud v tomto typu literatury. Později se začínají ozývat kritické rozpaky, takže od konce 90. let je Terry McMillanová v kritické reflexi přítomná mnoha texty, které ale působí velmi rozkolísaným, nejistým a nejasným dojmem. Situace se markantně mění po roce 2000, kdy jsou sice stále díla autorky recenzována, ale už bez hlubších pokusů kriticky zahlédnout celý korpus díla v celku a nějakým způsobem jej začlenit do organismu afroamerické, případně americké literatury. Druhým diskursem je diskurs čtenářský a mediální, a tady naopak od *Waiting to Exhale* lze mluvit přímo o zjevení. Terry McMillanová nejenže prodává své knihy, ale je také v centru pozornosti médií. Ovšem zatímco čtenářská zkušenost je nejspíše motivována spíše onou schopností vytvořit takové románové typy, se kterými se lze ztotožnit, ve kterých lze uvidět sebe, zájem médií obraz sledované autorky jakoby křiví, protože jde o zájem výběrový, související výhradně se skandály souvisejícími s její osobou.

Opakuji tedy – tato kapitola nemíní sledovat literární dílo skrze život autorky, to, bohužel, velmi často dělá kritika posledních let, informace biografické měly především potvrdit teze o nutnosti autobiografičnosti jako jevu, který potvrzuje a naplňuje nárok sebereflexe černošských čtenářů a především čtenářek. V žádném případě tedy nemíní celá práce (ani tato kapitola) překračovat tradiční rámec literární vědy, které ale rozumím jako disciplíně, jež je schopna pro své uvažování čerpat i z jiných vědeckých oblastí.

Po těchto „přípravných“ pracích následuje soubor čtyř kapitol, které postupně analyzují jednotlivé zásadní romány. Začínám romány Terry McMillanové *Waiting to Exhale* (kapitola 8), navazuji románem *Getting to Happy* (v kapitole 9), představujícím pokračování nejúspěšnějšího románu této autorky. Pak následují romány autorek, které jsou nějakým způsobem signifikantní pro rozvoj a proměnu fenoménu chick lit. Konkrétně jde o Tiffany L. Warrenovou a její román *What a Sista Should Do* (kapitola 10) a Anitu Doreen Diggsovou a román *The Other Side of the Game* (v kapitole 11).

Z těchto kapitol bych ráda zdůraznila především první z nich, orientovanou na přelomový román celé této oblasti. Předtím je ale třeba charakterizovat obecně všechny kapitoly. Metodologicky jde vždy o to, představit v základních obrysech zápletku a motivickou strukturu textů, dále pak se detailně věnovat vyprávěcí situaci, a to jak vazbám mezi jednotlivými vyprávěcími postupy a přepínáními mezi první a třetí vyprávěcí osobou, tak především v rozkmitu mezi vyprávěčem a reflektorem. Poněkud stranou ponechávám otázku fokalizace, protože přeci jen, zejména díky častým proměnám vyprávěcích perspektiv i horizontů, se tento jev neprojevuje tak zásadně.

Každá kapitola zároveň otevírá jakýsi svůj, osobní problém či otázku. V kapitole osm je to především to, jakým způsobem se Terry Mc Millanová ve svém přelomovém románu vztahuje k horizontu očekávání svých čtenářů. Vazby na *Malé ženy* americké autorky Louisy May Alcottové z r. 1896, projekce autobiografických momentů osobního životního selhávání, především ale minimální důraz na rasový aspekt postav a naopak důraz na zcela nový,

nezvyklý a netradiční typ postav, kterými už najednou nejsou zchudlé a outsiderské lidské (nejen ženské) figurky, ale spíše střední třída, to vše jsou tematické rysy, které už ukazují jiným směrem. Tato jinakost se projevuje také v sice po jisté chvíli celkem odhadnutelné, přesto ale poměrně náročné a oživující narativní kompozici, která je založena na střídání vypravěčských a reflektorských postupů. Jako by se tu autorka dotkla některých obecně lidských kategorií, jakými je na jedné straně soucit jako cosi výsledovatelného, popisujícího, a na druhé straně, především v reflektorských partiích, účast jako spoluprožívání lidského údělu, ne proto, aby se člověk dokázal soustředit na své místo ve světě, ale aby se na co nejmenější mez přiblížil konkrétnímu životnímu osudu toho druhého.

V případě McMillanové (jak se ostatně ukazuje i v jejích dalších románech) tak lze hovořit o jakési bluesové pozici – v žádném případě nejde o nenásilné přijetí toho, co se od literatury tohoto typu očekává, ale naopak, jde o rozrušování a překonávání tohoto konceptu. To vše proto, aby se na jedné straně svědčilo o stavu společnosti, na straně druhé aby se zároveň tímto způsobem hledaly problémy i možnosti řešení. Jako dobrý příklad toho, o jak vážnou věc zřejmě i podle autorky šlo, uvádím skutečnost, jak zásadním způsobem si vynutila autorka zasahovat do převodu románu do filmové podoby – byla v pozici jakési spolurozhodovatelky, především proto, aby zůstal nezpochybněn hlavní rozměr románu

V analýze navazujícího románu se ptám po tom, jakým způsobem reaguje spisovatelka na úspěch výše popsaného románu *Waiting to Exhale*. Ukazuje se, že i když jde v případě *Getting to Happy* z r. 2010 o román napsaný bez větších zásadních kompromisů a velmi kultivovaný, který poněkud znepravidlnil i střídání vyprávěcích pozic, přesto v zásadě jen doplnil předchozí román, je tedy slušným, ale v zásadě nijak nerozvíjejícím textem.

Je pravdou, že do románu vstupuje daleko větší množství postav, že postavy stárnou, a tím se i trochu pozměňují jejich předtím daleko radikálnější pohledy na svět. Je tu důraz především na popření materialistického a konzumního způsobu života, ale neděje se to jako jakési naplnění teze, ale spíše skrze (poměrně bohatý) duševní život hrdinek. Právě jejich zklamání v milostném životě se projevuje kromě jiného i tím, že pokud se pokouší hledat životní štěstí ve vazbě na to ekonomické, dostává se jim jen jakýchsi prchavých momentů spokojenosti, ale skutečného štěstí nedosahují.

Kapitola také zdůrazňuje, proč je pro autorku tak komplikované připustit vazbu mezi svými díly a chick lit. Tím základním je především snaha vyhovět čtenářským očekáváním, nijak je nerozvíjet, což je ale pro Terry McMillanovou nemyslitelné. Dokazuje to analýza velmi podobná té, která byla uplatněna v předchozí kapitole.

Desátá kapitola se zamýšlí, opět na základě konkrétního materiálu, nad tím, kam se chick lit posunula, jak se během své zhruba dvacetileté existence vyvinula. Zvolený příklad, tedy *What a Sista Should Do* z r. 2005, prezentuje i jistou specifickou oblast této literatury, totiž tzv. Christian chick lit. V tomto podruhu chick lit se mísí hned několik pohledů, které si zdánlivě protirečí, přesto ale v zásadě mohou spolu vést jakýsi srozumitelný literární dialog. Tím základním je střet křesťanského bytí na tomto světě, které, v důrazu na boží stvoření, na základní hodnoty víry, ke kterým patří manželství, akcentuje heterosexuální manželství a vůbec tradiční představy o rodině. Proti tomu stojí vnitřní svět hrdinek, které hledají své místo v životě společenském i milostném, přičemž k tomuto hledání patří samozřejmě také sexuální svoboda, promiskuita a podobně.

Analýza je zároveň otázkou po tom, jak se chick lit vztahuje k horizontu očekávání svých čtenářek, jak se tento horizont projevuje ve struktuře díla. Ukazuje se, že celkový tvar literárního díla je vlastně podobně neukotveným místem střetu. Na jedné straně tu máme co do činění s charaktery, které jsou výsledovatelné, poznatelné, vyprávěcí situace spíše nadbíhá svým čtenářům, než že by literární dílo ozvláštňovala. Na druhou stranu jsme konfrontováni s poměrně dynamickým světem postav. Tato dynamičnost je dána především akcentací dialogu. Kdybych ale přeci jen měla rozhodnout, tak onen příklon ke čtenáři je zde nakonec

dominantní, což se zřejmě nejviditelněji projevuje v moralistním, otevřeně, a nikoli skrytě moralistním vyznění celého textu. To je potvrzeno také tím, že míra autenticity velmi klesá právě v rovině dialogu, který se tak stává spíše kazatelským než živým jazykovým prostředkem.

Kapitola 11 se vrací k románu, který je zprávou z boje a zároveň jeho předmětem. Jde o druhý analyzovaný román, psaný v roce 2005, kdy se schyluje k jedné ze zřejmě nejzásadnějších bitev o koncepci chick lit. A román *The Other Side of the Game* do ní zasáhne svérázným způsobem. Kolem tohoto druhu románu obecně (tedy tzv. black chick lit) se vedou debaty o jeho společenském dopadu, o tom, jak je díky své až rigidní uniformitě vlastně nebezpečím pro další začínající autorky. Nicméně analýza tyto obavy vůbec nepotvrzuje. Naopak, ukazuje se, že román otvírá zásadní otázky člověka jako takového, jeho vazbu na sociální postavení. Autorka se tu hlásí k domněnce, podle níž jsou peníze prostředkem k nabytí svobody. Zároveň ale nejde o dílo natolik moralistní a kazatelské jako v případě předchozím. Na druhou stranu je tu i řada jevů, které jako by zase celý text vracely o několik desetiletí zpět. Především je to praktická absence tolerance, neschopnost řešit historická i osobní traumata, jednostranný a přehlíživý vztah k mužům ze strany některých postav apod.

Zkrátka: tyto dvě kapitoly chtěly ukázat, že oblast chick lit je oblastí daleko plastičtější, než by se mohlo z dobových ohlasů či diskusí zdát. Nabízí knihy nejružnější kvality, od umělecky náročných pokusů o osobitou a osobní lidskou výpověď až po texty, které přirozeně kalkulují s tím, co chce čtenář nebo čtenářka číst, a jejich nároky saturují. Tyto shrnující teze byly podpořeny detailními analýzami základních složek uměleckého díla literárního.

Kapitola 12 (African American Popular Literatura and (Black) Chick Lit: „Independently Indebted“) shrnuje poznatky z předchozích kapitol. Především tu zjišťuji a potvrzuji, že populární literatura Afroameričanek má opravdu velmi širokou škálu podob, směrů, typů. Že je strukturována nejen typologicky, tematicky či žánrově, ale je i hierarchizována podle toho, do jak velké míry jsou autorky ochotny omezit svůj vlastní, osobní prožitek a autorský vklad a podřídít se jakýmsi žánrovým pravidlům.

Především se zcela jasně ukázalo, že Terry McMillanová skutečně nepatří mezi ukázkové a vzorové autorky tohoto typu literatury. Její osobní přesvědčení se projevilo i ve formální a tematické rovině románů, zkrátka – její dílo se ukazuje jako daleko vrstevnatější, a díky tomu zřejmě též překonává tradiční oblast zájmu ženských čtenářek tzv. romance novel či harlekýnek. Terry McMillanová zkrátka změnila, či minimálně posunula horizont očekávání soudobých čtenářek, po jejím úspěchu navíc přichází vlna knih, které reflektují mýtus samostatnosti Afroameričanek. Dokazují, že skutečně rovnoprávné a svobodné nejsou v 90. letech 20. století jen bělošky.

Toto všechno jsem sledovala na čtyřech zmíněných románech. Tyto analýzy snad prokázaly, že celý pojem chick lit je krajně nespolehlivý a vytvářet uprostřed něj jakési dvě vlny se též nezdá být právě plodné, protože chybí milník a jasnější rozlišovací rysy.

Podstatnější se ale jeví otázka charakterů postav – Afroameričanky jsou tu už emancipované, samy svým způsobem ochotné rozumět a přijímat nevázaný a nezávazný způsob života. Zároveň jsou to právě ony, které – pokud nějakým milostným vzplanutím projdou – nesou důsledky vlastního milostného prozření či probuzení.

Ještě jeden fenomén je v rámci tohoto shrnutí popisován, a to fenomén čtivosti. Tu tady v žádném případě nemíním charakterizovat jako kategorii evaluační, je to zkrátka vnitřní, strukturní rys románu, který je dán jistou mírou autobiografičnosti, důrazem na dialog, střídáním vyprávěcích pásem tak, aby se akcentovala lidská účast se sledovanými postavami. To vše má v afroamerické kultuře své kořeny a není, jak se domnívám, nezbytné hned hledat v tomto jevu jakýsi implantát bělošského nebo západního světa. O této potřebě blízkosti se lze dozvědět především z tzv. low culture.

Čtivost zároveň vychází ze vztahu, který autorky mají ke svým čtenářům. Ten je dobře vidět na příkladu Terry McMillanové. Klíč jako by byl v jejím vztahu k postavám: jsou tu totiž prožívány jako živé bytosti. Nejen tím, jak přesně se o nich mluví, ale i tím, že je autorka nechává zasahovat do fikčního světa. S tím souvisí také fakt (opět dokladovaný na konkrétních místech), že Terry McMillanová zásadním způsobem omezuje zprostředkovanost, nebo přesněji pocit zprostředkovanosti tím, že pro svá vyprávění akcentuje pozici reflektorskou.

V závěru (Conclusion: Ice Broken) se pokouším sumarizovat svůj pohled na stav současné afroamerické populární literatury pro ženy. Znovu se zamýšlím nad významnou rolí čtenářských nároků, které se, možná víc než kdekoli jinde, podílejí na struktuře konkrétních literárních děl i celkového diskursu. Zároveň zde připomínám významnou proměnu sociokulturní, především pak nárůst střední třídy Afroameričanů, bez které by nejspíš tyto pohyby nebylo možné sledovat a možná by k nim ani historicky nedošlo.

Zároveň pokládám za důležité zamyslet se tu nad rolí, kterou v celkovém diskursu i v jednotlivých knihách hrají úvahy o realismu, a vůbec všechny ty otázky akcentují v literatuře vycházející z nápodoby. Tyto otázky dobře osvětlí jednu významnou oblast populární afroamerické literatury pro ženy, a sice tzv. girlfriend novel („román o přítelkyních“) a sister-girl romány. Jelikož jde o romány, které akcentují jisté postavení ženy v určité konkrétní historicky, společensky, ale též věroučně utvářené společnosti, jejich autorky se cítí nejlépe právě v původním, vlastním prostředí a oblast exotická pro danou komunitu je prostě nezajímá. A to dokonce ani jako případné místo pro nový životní začátek. Podobně jako by neměly potřebu jakéhosi historického ukotvení. V tomto typu literatury se prakticky nepracuje s otázkami historických křivd a nespravedlností, spíš jde o prózy akcentující pohled dopředu, nezatížené ani traumaty osobní minulosti, ani těmi z obecné historie.

Otázky mimetické zase souvisejí s tím, jak výraznou úlohu (danou jistě i oním tolik zde aktivizovaným čtenářským očekáváním) hrají v charakterech hrdinky. Jsou to ženy nezadané, romány řeší právě jejich problémy. To se projevuje i v další klasické otázce tohoto typu literatury – o vazbě mezi osobním a politickým. Autorky mnou sledované se pokouší oba světy propojit a otázky osobních komplikací jsou řešeny na půdorysu postavení ženy ve společnosti a v možnosti proměny této pozice.

Odtud pak pramení ještě jedna otázka, kterou snad lze naznačit právě díky kapitolám mapujícím minulost tohoto literárního proudu. Není náhodou nepřesné nahlížet na chick lit jen jako na jakousi pokračovatelku harlekýnek a nenáročné četby pro ženy a dívky? Vždyť tyto autorky přece prokázaly, že čerpají nejen z tohoto okruhu (zejména věci formálního charakteru), ale že zároveň naplňují své knihy novým obsahem, který už reaguje na všechny nejen kulturněspolečenské proměny, ale též na výboje „vysoké“ afroamerické literatury.

Úplný závěr je pak věnován Terry McMillanové. Především je tu zdůrazněno, že její dílo od třetího románu *Waiting to Exhale* už není jen výslednicí pohybů uvnitř populární afroamerické literatury, ale stává se samo její normou, knihou, která sama znamená předěl. Je to samozřejmě dáno i jejím nebývalým úspěchem komerčním (nezapomínejme na to, že kromě knižního vydání se román dočkal i svého zpracování filmového).

I zde opakuji mnohokrát připomínanou a analyzovanou tezi – tento úspěch se nerodí jako důsledek přijetí a saturování horizontu očekávání čtenářek, ale paradoxně právě tím, že je smysluplně a komplexně posunut. Postavy se rozrůžňují, otevírají se do té doby buď rovnou tabuizovaná nebo přehlížená témata, autorka si vypracuje velmi svérázný umělecký jazyk, který je schopen zachytit úvahové pasáže akcentující obecnější, lidské podloží všech řešených otázek, stejně jako dialogy plné velké lidské blízkosti a porozumění. K tomu je potřeba připočíst již zmiňovanou schopnost vytěžit ze vlastní historické identity to cenné. V tomto případě je to důraz na mluvené slovo jako kulturní institut. Mluvené slovo je tu důsledným

a právoplatným protihráčem slova psaného. S tím souvisí i fakt, že v jejím vyprávěcím světě se daleko častěji referuje, než vypráví. A také je třeba připomenout, o čem se referuje. Jedním z nejzákladnějších témat románů autorky je sex, sexuální prožívání, což je v tomto typu literatury skutečné novum, které ale není podáváno s jistou mírou exotiky, nebo případně s pomrkáváním připomínajícím lechtivost tématu, ale právě díky reflektorskému zaměření románů jde o právoplatný projev lidské individuality.

Vzniká tak literatura, která spojuje estetické a funkční. Odmítá předsudky tradované kolem tohoto typu literatury jako pravdy, snaží se je vlastním dílem nabourávat a napadat. Což se ostatně projevuje i v tom, že dílo Terry McMillanové už dávno není jen událostí afroamerické komunity, ale je úspěšné i u ostatních etnik.

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