

**REINVENTING THE SELF IN TERRY MCMILLAN'S *HOW STELLA GOT HER  
GROOVE BACK***

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**ABSTRACT:**

The contribution of the twentieth century African American women writers is significant in African American literature as they have upgraded American literary tradition with their individual outlook. They are significant for opposing white predominance as well as the injustice of their own men. The writings of these women propose an unusual alternations in the way of thinking and perception in the lives of African American women. In the contemporary African American women's fictions, Terry McMillan can be acknowledged as an eminent innovatory figure whose novels exhibit the efficiency of female characters. Her way of portraying black men, women, family and love distinguishes her from other women writers for she never emulates the motif of any other predominant writers. Her interesting stories, attractive characters and wise explication of present day African American encounter are treated as a significant addition to up-to-date popular literature. Through her novels McMillan prefers dealing the problems of African Americans in the present-day American society. Her intense interests on African American women can clearly be seen through the portrayal of the women characters in her novels even though she does not give priority to race. McMillan depicts her protagonist as a complex woman with very limited victories over their complicated situations. This paper aims in exploring the issues of the protagonist in finding fulfilling relationship with her men to lead a satisfied life for herself.

**Key words:** fulfilling, satisfied, relationship, problems, complex.

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McMillan's fourth novel *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* involves the problem of the title character Stella Payne who possesses everything in her life except a steady partner for her. It is a story of a middle-aged woman who falls in love with a twenty one-year- old young

man in her trip to Jamaica like McMillan who met her boyfriend Jonathan Plummer in Jamaica who was much younger than her. The novel is politically correct because in *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, Stella does not shed tears for anything instead she has been a sole control not only for her mind, body, child and finance but also for her vigorous desire in bringing back her dream lover to her side. While commenting on McMillan's powerful female craving, Schillinger states, "Women are ready to read about themselves not only as schemers or sufferers but as the adventurous heroes of their own lives" (8).

In the novel the protagonist Stella Payne feels unhappy because of her unsuccessful married life with her husband Walter. Though she works as a security analyst, she is not satisfied with her job but feels her life is not interesting which makes her to send her loving son Quincy to his father and takes a trip to Jamaica for vacation. Her unexpected love with a young man Winston Shakespeare, twenty years her junior induces her to invite him into her life in spite of many hurdles. Stella's intimacy with a blackman Winston Shakespeare, who has come to Jamaica as a chef apprentice forces her to spend her nights with him, without minding that she is like his mother. Though Stella's conscience pricks her at first, later she convinces herself that she is not going to marry him but have only sex with him. After spending some days together, when Winston leaves her as he has been appointed as the head chef in another resort, Stella plunges into deep sorrow for she cannot see him again. In her grief she tells in herself that how many times she falls in love with a man and makes a move from him without having him permanently. She feels that her longings and imaginations will never be fulfilled as she has not been satisfied with anything in her forty two years. After Winston leaves Jamaica, Stella's contact with another person named Judas, makes her to spend her nights with him but ends in failure because he reminds Stella's ex-husband and not Winston. On the day of his departure Winston comes to bid farewell to Stella. Though Stella feels bad for his leaving from her, she says,

I am saying that even though I feel like I'm totally smitten by you and everything, and if this were a perfect world we could do this, even take this to another level for real, but the world is not perfect and Winston you are too young for me and I'm too old for you and that's reality of the situation. (193)

When Winston informs Stella that they both can be friends she is completely collapsed. Her stress increases when Leroy, one of her earlier men, tells her now, that he has been thinking of her for the past two nights though he has a wife at home. In addition, Stella's sister Angela's enquiry about her contact with a teenager and the information Stella gets from her office that she is out of job, bring her under the depressed state. Stella is not able to

imagine her condition without a job. Her pathetic situation forces her to convey everything to Winston and he convinces her by saying that he will come to her place within three months. Now the new tension arises to her because she does not know how to inform her closeness with Winston to her son Quincy but decides to pacify him by insisting him that Winston is only her boyfriend and not Quincy's stepfather and so he can treat Winston as his big brother without considering his age. Stella's next issue is, her neighbours blame her for her connection with a twenty-one-year old boy. Stella is also advised by both of her sisters that she should not spoil her son by her mean behaviour. In her anger Stella says, "I have not done anything! I am not marrying him! I just slept with him and hope I get a chance to do it again and plus I happen to like him. What is wrong with that?" (226).

Stella ignores the warning of her sisters for she considers that the fancy of every young man is to sleep with an older woman. As Quincy desires to visit Jamaica, Stella takes a trip for the second time which leads her to meet Winston again. As soon as she returns to her place, Stella is advised by her sister to concentrate on her job as she is unemployed at present. When Winston confirms his arrival to her house, Stella is nervous because she will be criticized by the members of the nearby resident again and instructs her son what he should say if anybody asks anything about Winston's arrival. Stella insists her son to say, "It's nobody's business where Winston sleeps, and if anybody asks you, you tell them to come and see your mom" (333). Due to the repeated problems, Stella falls sick, consults the doctor and shares every single thing with her including her jobless state, fondness for a young man and her repulse with her sisters for her mistaken act. Though Stella is employed and is gifted with a lovely child, her dissatisfied married life with her husband makes her to take a trip to Jamaica, which is also one of the reasons for losing her job and getting unnecessary gossip from the neighbours and family members. Her illegal contact with a young Jamaican forces her to seek support from her son for her mistakes which is not fair on the part of an ideal mother. As a result her repeated issues give her stress in excess.

Stella's expectation of her husband Walter to respect their differences and her husband's desire of Stella to be like him make them to get divorce. She does not date with anyone for one year even though she is preferred by many men. Though Stella does not give priority to search for love she is very particular in giving energy to her mind, heart and soul. So she decides to move to Jamaica for inner peace and leaves his son Quincy to his father as he has never taken the responsibility of his son in any complex situation. Her intention is to be away from all the problems and that makes her to be stubborn about her interval. Her staying at the castle Beach Negril in Jamaica makes her to develop closeness with Winston Shakespeare.

While depicting the character of Stella, McMillan remembers her own experience with her lover Jonathan Plummer and says, “Stella isn’t a reinvention of myself. She’s only part of my persona . . . .What I give my characters are my concerns, which for the most part are grounded in reality” (Porter 41). When Stella is attracted by the young Jamaican man who is half her age, on one side her inner feeling tells her that she is like his mother and on the other side her instinct induces her to have sex with him. Stella is also consoled by Winston that she need not worry at all about both of their ages, as they are only numbers and tells he will never cheat her in any situation. Even though his words seem to be convincing for Stella it does not give a proper remedy for her confusion. In this state, she tells him,

. . . if you want to change your mind it’s okay you won’t hurt my feelings because I’m a big girl a grown up really and I’m used to disappointment so if you’re having second thoughts we can just eat dinner and may be dance a little bit and say good night and be done with it no hard feelings. (109)

Winston’s rejection for this gives Stella not only extreme happiness but also makes her to expect him to be her permanent partner without minding her age. She is shattered completely when he tells her that he is supposed to leave, to be placed at another resort. Though she feels that she is dead because of his moving, she doesnot express her feeling of grief to him, instead she causally tells him that he can do anything as per his wish and insists that she has also not come to Jamaica to play any silly game with a boy as she is a big woman. After his departure, Stella is not interested in any other men including Judas and Leroy even though she is wanted by them because no one satisfies her like Winston. In her attempt to have peace of mind, she accompanies many men involving a man who is half her age. Her dating with many men, makes her to consider everyone as indistinctive and unresponsive which makes her to maintain only a short term relationship with them.

Even after Winston’s leaving,Stella’s constant chat with him makes her to feel that she cannot spend her days without him and with the intention of inviting him in her life, she takes a ticket for him to come to California to meet her. On one side Winston feels that his moving to Stella’s place will create a big issue among his parents and on the other side he fears that his presence to her house will surely be disgusting to Stella’s sisters Vanessa and Angela. While convincing Winston Stella says, “Well, Angela is pretty much on the same wavelength as your parents, but not to worry, you won’t be spending much time with her. Now my other sister, Vanessa, she’s got a nineties attitude. So she’s all for this and can’t wait to meet you” (339).

Though Stella is happy about Winston's arrival she is frightened by the after-effects which makes her to fall sick and is advised by the doctor to do yoga excluding other exercises. As Stella is jobless at present she starts doing functional sculptures and wearable art as she is the master degree holder in Fine Arts. Stella is suggested by her friend Maisha to continue her relationship with Winston which has been missed by her in her earlier days. Stella's gym mate Crystal who knows everything about Winston motivates her by saying, "If it feels good, I say go for it. Follow your own heart and your own head and forget about what anybody says. This is your life, Stella, and no one can experience it better than you . . ." (360). When Quincy asks Stella about her relationship with Winston, Stella tells outwardly that Winston comes to their house only as a guest. After spending three weeks with Stella in California, Winston moves. While moving he says,

Well I would apply to school and work on becoming a certified chef with a specialization so that it would be easier for me to get work in this country and I would work doing anything until such time, as I am not the type of man who could tolerate being taken in by a woman, you know, I mean I would have to earn my own way and help out in the household you know. (397)

Though Stella is convinced by his words, she feels guilty to bring him in her life for he is too young and she is with grey hair and wrinkled skin. But Winston expresses his true love for her by insisting that he loves her with what he has seen inside her but not with outward appearance which makes Stella to give him a positive reply when Winston asks her acceptance to marry him. Thus in this novel Terry McMillan presents her female protagonist to revive her love and life even though whom she loves is half her age. While appreciating the quality by McMillan's fictions, Jones states, "Terry McMillan created a new literary genre with her up heat novels about contemporary black women. Then she went those other writers' one better: she created an entirely new audience to go with her genre" (79).

The oppressors or victimizers of McMillan's novel are not stagnant in the same situation, instead they overcome their problems and move towards the betterment of their lives. According to David Nicholson, Terry McMillan delineates, "relationships between black men and women as something more than the relationship between victimizer and victim, oppressor and oppressed" (6). In this novel, Stella is familiar with the traditional custom of society when she thinks of marrying a person who is half her age but her liking for Winston forces her to ignore everything and react according to her own wish. McMillan has presented Stella as strong and independent in deciding her life. Through this novel, McMillan depicts an uncommon relation by representing the love affair between a fortytwo-year-old woman

and twenty one-year-old man as a typical example for this. Stella's daring behaviour makes her to think that, when older men are ready to seek younger women for reviving their love, as they feel that they have wasted their youth without enjoyment, why the same should not be agreed when it is executed by women. Generally McMillan's men depend on their women for getting economic help. In this novel Stella also fears about Winston, when her sister Angela accuses him that the main reason for his affair with Stella is to obtain financial support. But it is ignored by Stella when Winston expresses his true love for her. Similarly when Stella is alarmed by the deficiency of men, she says, "What I do know deep down although I keep it secretly secret is that I'm terrified at the thought of losing myself again wholeheartedly to any man" (93).

McMillan's female characters are uncustomary and prevail over hurdles as they prefer living successful life. Stella wants her man to be radical and she explains her point of view about marriage as, "I wanted it to be the rainbow. I wanted each day to be fresh, warm, sprinkled with something redeeming . . . We both pay attention to each other's needs, respect appreciate them"(24). When Stella wants an interval from the monotonous life she takes a trip without her son which makes her to feel in herself, ". . . for the first time in years I feel like being totally selfish" (25). Her self-determination and singularity can clearly be seen when she says, "I come to the conclusion that I have earned the right to some happiness" (252). Hence she is very particular that she should have a cheerful life. Stella's originality can distinctly be perceived through her words when she feels, "I am proud of myself for something I really want to do without worrying about what anybody will think for a change, . . ."(306). So in her way of attaining a success by leading an untroubled life she does not bother anyone while overcoming the hurdles.

Thus in this paper, McMillan has portrayed Stella as autonomous in picking out her own idea in continuing her relationship with Winston. As Stella is frightened by the inadequacy of men in general she is afraid and doubtful to have a stable connection with a young partner. Though she is warned by her sisters and criticized by her neighbours about her affair with an inexperienced person, herself-standing, forbearing and boldness make her to take decision of her own in all difficult situations and reinvent her life.

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