

# African American Family Disintegration and Terry McMillan

A. N. AGUESSY

Doctorant en Anglais, Ecole Doctorale Pluridisciplinaire, Université d'Abomey- Calavi

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**Abstract:** Customarily, two forms of family have existed: the nuclear family made of a wife, a husband and children or without children, as well as the extended family, which includes all kith and kin. But nowadays, the number of single parent households, mainly maintained by women designated as female heads of family, has been increasing giving way to fatherless families. But I realize that besides that female headed families, there are other groupings of families today: male headed families, cohabiting families, heterosexual families, mixed families, childless families and homosexual families and among them there are some features of dysfunctional families. This situation is quite critical in Black American community and reveals that Black families have been threatened. Since the family is the cell of the society, this paper aims to explore the problematic of family in some Terry McMillan's fictional works and I will attempt redefining the family. This study draws on Psychoanalytical criticism for theoretical insight and orientation.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalytical criticism, Black Families, dysfunctional families, Terry McMillan's fictional works.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The biggest problem Black women are facing in family framework in America is the deterioration of the Black family structures. In this article, I will give the features of dysfunctional families, the disintegration of families in McMillan's novels and the fatherless society, cause and consequence of this disintegration.

The family is a specific social form of human relationship. If a family is in a position to fulfill its basic function, it can reproduce itself through its children. Nowadays, apart from the traditional nuclear and enlarge families, different types of family have evolved such as single parent families, multigenerational families, heterosexual families, homosexual families, reconstituted families, childless families. More and more often, these families present features of broken families. Why is Black family so disintegrated? What are the features of disintegrated family? What are the consequences of family breakdown? How could Black family be better redefined?

To answer the above-questions, this paper draws on psychoanalytic criticism for theoretical insight and orientation. Psychoanalytic literary criticism is a literary criticism or literary theory which, in method, concept or form is influenced by the tradition of psychoanalysis began by Sigmund Freud. It can be the psychoanalysis of the author or of a particularly interesting character in a given work. Fictional characters may be viewed as psychological case studies. One may psychoanalyze a particular character within a literary work, but it is usually assumed that all such characters are projections of the author's psyche (Delahoyde "Psychoanalytic Criticism"). I want to explore the psycho- affective dimension of some McMillan's characters. As far as McMillan's sources of inspiration is concerned, 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." (Bronson, "Terry McMillan: Overview"). So, McMillan's writings have a strong psychological dimension. "All psychoanalytic approaches to literature have one thing in common—the critics begin with a full psychological theory of how and why people behave as they do, a theory that has been developed by a psychologist/psychiatrist/psychoanalyst outside of the realm of literature, and they apply this psychological theory as a standard to interpret and evaluate a literary work"

(McManus, "Psychoanalytic Approaches"). That's the reason why psychoanalytic literary criticism can focus on one or more of the following:

- The author: the theory is used to analyze the author and his/her life, and the literary work is seen to supply evidence for this analysis. This is often called "psychobiography."
- The characters: the theory is used to analyze one or more of the characters; the psychological theory becomes a tool to explain the characters' behavior and motivations. The more closely the theory seems to apply to the characters, the more realistic the work appears.
- The audience: the theory is used to explain the appeal of the work for those who read it; the work is seen to embody universal human psychological processes and motivations, to which the readers respond more or less unconsciously (McManus, "Psychoanalytic Approaches").

McMillan, through her characters, tries to convey significant messages to the Black communities. I have chosen to talk about characters' behaviors, attitudes, and personalities. Like the author says, "I love when the characters tell me what they feel, and think and show me what they're going to do next. I'm just a conduit and there's nothing better than surrendering to them. After all, it's their story, not mine. It's liberating" (Rust, "Terry McMillan makes"). So, I explore characters within families, their reactions, their relations with one another, how they talk, their successes and their failures. Working on a delicate theme as family disintegration, the psychoanalytic criticism of McMillan's characters could help for deeper understanding of the characters' behaviors and their psychological and emotional sufferings in the family framework. Overall, Black men and Black women have faults of which some are beyond our understanding. That is why it is important to redefine at the end Black American family.

## 2. FEATURES OF DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

Fifty years ago, a Labor Department official named Daniel Patrick Moynihan published a paper untitled, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," which argued that "a tangle of pathology" afflicting Black communities had emerged because "the Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling." His key fact: Nearly one-fourth of Black babies were born to unwed mothers. (Chapman, "Whites have a role"). A pathological family is a family in which the behavior of an individual can affect the behavior of the other members and the behavior of family can affect its members. A family pathology is not just supposed to result from shortcomings, lack of parental loving care, death in the family, or other critical events, all these are just part and parcel of everyday life. Family pathology results from generative failure: the latest generation turns out to be quite incapable of, or severely limited in its mental and social competence (Cicirelli 28). Most of Black families are pathological families. Most African American families are dysfunctional. As said above, a dysfunctional family is a family in which the behavior of a disturbed member negatively affects the whole family and the whole family behavior likewise affects negatively the individual behaviour. For example, Tarik's family in *Waiting to Exhale* is a picture of dysfunctional family: family without the father, kids from different fathers, close birthrates: Nickida was Gloria's son's wife with three babies in four years. This son named Tarik is her second husband. She has a son by her first husband named Brass. He is twelve. He lives half-time with Nickida and Tarik and the other half with his dad, Luther, whom Gloria has never met (*Getting to Happy* 62-64). Tarik might be getting a divorce because Nickida has been cheating with her ex-husband (*Waiting to Exhale* 241). This case of infidelity is reported to Tarik by their four year old daughter who walked into her mommy and daddy's bedroom and saw things happening. Describing the situation to his mom Gloria, Tarik explains: "What happened in my house and in my bed is my wife so fit to entertain her ex-husband when he came to pick up his son that I've been caring for and feeding for fifteen days out of each and every month for the past seven and a half years, and our four- year- old daughter happened to walk into her mommy and daddy's bedroom. Then she told her daddy what she saw" (*Getting to Happy* 266). This child is doubly traumatized by this couple's infidelity. First, in witnessing the vivid scene, and second, by the lack of affection from her mother due to the divorce that followed this infidelity. This divorce is likely to create in this child, a sense of guilt because it was through her report, that this hidden relationship has been discovered and punished. This child also could be denied education since her mother will not be living with her. This child, like other children would expect to live a faithful marriage but out of fear and guilt, she is likely to experience an unhappy married life or being unfaithful. She may never get married because she could have been traumatized by one or many dysfunctional family experiences. All in all, when can we say that families started presenting some features of dysfunctions? Here are some cases:

When husband is bored with his wife or vice versa, they cannot live together. Here is Savannah who exclaims “I cannot believe my boring husband of ten years just had the nerve to say he still loves me but he’s not in love with me anymore which really is a nice way of saying he doesn’t love me and he’s found it somewhere else with somebody else” (*Getting to Happy* 80); and Sparrow adds “A lot of my friends’ parents but mostly their moms- are always in the clouds. They’re bored with their boring husbands who are workalcoholics like my dad. They’re bored” (*Getting to Happy* 168). Women and men feel dispensable and unimportant for each other. This happens when couples relate in such a way that they do not bring joy to each other but rather develop as adversaries. This point is clearly articulated by Savannah when she says: I get into divorce.

Because, I’m bored. Because these past couple of years you’ve made me feel dispensable, unimportant like an after-thought. Because you haven’t tried to do things that make me happy. Because you have deliberately done things you know won’t bring me joy. Because, it seems like you’ve become my adversary instead of the warm, thoughtful, loving and considerate man I married ten years ago. Because I don’t like who you have become. Because you’ve forgotten how valuable I am , and I know how valuable I am and I can’t live with someone who makes me feel bad, especially when you were the one person I could rely on to make me feel good. You’ve been killing me inside, and I don’t want to die like this. This is why I want a divorce. Even though I still love you (*Getting to Happy* 78-79).

When husband and wife started spending money on pornography sites: some of husbands have been having cyber-sex with hundreds if not thousands of women (*Getting to Happy* 13). Frequenting pornography sites provide husbands a kind of satisfaction and sexual relief, making them likely to be less caring and less affectionate.

When husband or wife is miserable, the family is not healthy. Savannah, being miserable, wants to get divorce; but her sister Sheila does not think it is a serious ground for divorce. “I’m filing for divorce. This silly shit shouldn’t even qualify as grounds for divorce” Savannah says. To this statement, Sheila her sister reacts: “The judge would probably laugh at you in court.” “I’m also miserable” pursues Savannah and her sister continues: “Most married people are miserable but that’s still no reason to get a divorce” (*Getting to Happy* 14). What are instances in which one’s misery could become a possible ground to file for a divorce? Being miserable indeed, can make someone feel hopeless and the status of hopelessness can lead to low self-esteem and the feeling of nothingness – feelings which can characterize the status of the person getting divorce.

When the couple has divergent political orientation, it can do harm to the family: Isaac being a Republican is considered as a Nazi. “He had the nerve to be registered as a fucking Republican! I couldn’t believe my eyes. I don’t know any black Republicans. I was not only offended, but confused. I felt like I was married to a Nazi or something. I wondered who in the world I was really married to. It worried me” said his wife (*Getting to Happy* 8). The problem here is not that the couple has divergent points of view. The issue is how this divergence is dealt with. When the divergence is not discussed between wife and husband, this can lead to frustration and bitterness and finally, to dysfunction in the family.

When the couple can no longer tell the truth to each other and an example is found with Sheila saying to her sister “You complicate everything, always have, and this no exception. Men cheat. They lie. They love porn. They don’t respect you and don’t care if they hurt you...” (*Getting to* 197). Marriage is based on love. When there is love, there is also truth. So, lack of truth destroys the foundation of marriage.

Lack of communication and education in a context of affective instability are another set of consequences of dysfunctional families. John jr, Bernadine’s son has just left for college a few weeks ago and called his mother telling her that he is coming home to get married in three weeks. He added that he was going to be a father after being crazy with about fifteen other girls. He is going to be a father and Bronwyn his girlfriend, are getting married in three weeks but he has just left for college a few weeks ago. He adds they are coming home for the nuptials (*Getting to Happy* 221).

Sometimes, a dysfunctional family constitutes an understandable phenomenon especially by children themselves. “Mom, it was your choice and your right to be a single parent, which make me proud of you, to be honest”, says Sparrow and she continues “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.” (*Getting to Happy* 29-30). In Taylor’s case, when Kathleen, her white mother left her in the hands of her father, John, Taylor’s feelings about it is:

I’m a perfect example of the so-called new nuclear family. I’m a product of a broken home. I’m biracial – but isn’t everybody these days? I’m not stupid. I know none of this shit is my fault, but it’s still very f’d up that my mother bailed

on me and my dad. Even though I'm a teenager, I'm still a child and I don't want to grow up and become a totally twisted grown-up just because I was deprived of some basic shit they say we need as children – like love and attention. Is that like asking for too much? (*Getting to happy* 171)

Daughters also think that as their mothers go through this it is normal that they also go through it. "We are our mothers' daughters" (*Getting to Happy* 203), they allege. It is a vicious circle which will continue if nothing is done.

Another sign of dysfunction in the family is the strong criticism against the classical way of being mother and wife. In fact, professional women today who strongly desire to learn how to cook for their husbands and who strongly desire to take very good care of their home as well as of their children in more traditional ways are frowned upon, and in many cases disdained by contemporary feminist Black women. Traditional Black women today (professional or nonprofessional) are classified as being weak, passive, old-fashion and very outdated by modern-day feminist Black women as long as they take seriously their roles as mothers and spouses. They are not classified as strong, nor are they considered independent.

Searching the causes of the increasing number of dysfunctional families, one can find some reasons: death of husband, pregnancy outside a stable union, conjugal violence, divorce, unemployment; drug and alcohol addiction, men in prison, confusion of priorities, illness and poverty. Another cause is the effects of war. Either Black men have been killed during wars or they have come back physically, psychologically and emotionally maimed. In fact, the traumas they have experienced during wars can have many side effects such as nightmares, depression, or the psychological or nervous ailments as in Dave's case in *Mama*. Dave, Bootsey's husband kept complaining about his back that bothered him and he blamed all his sufferings on his participation in the Vietnam War. He got an excuse for everything from his relatives. Anyone living with him would swear he had amnesia. Bootsey had to remind him to do the tiniest things. (*Mama* 172) And finally, she divorced Dave (*Mama* 237). Dave may be serious about his complaints because those who have been to wars often use amnesia as a defence mechanism to cope with their traumas. Another cause is men's irresponsibility and passivity which complicate the already shaky relationship with their wives in times of financial crisis. This statement is illustrated by Crook, Mildred's husband who was running the streets, drunk or pleaded amnesia during winter when his wife was financially in need (*Mama* 2-3).

### 3. FAMILY DISINTEGRATION IN TERRY MCMILLAN'S NOVELS

There is a crisis in Black America. Family is vanishing. The traditional family hardly exists. Nowadays, living together without legal marriage is a fashionable form of young couples and successive families are growing with an increasing number of divorce cases. If a family breaks up and each parent separately forms a new family with a partner who also comes from a broken family, successive families come into being. For example, a child with four parents and eight grandparents and living apart, sharing intimacy and perspectives but not living quarters (Cicirelli 185). As Viola observes "The more I think about it, I'm beginning to wonder if we ain't one of them dysfunctional families I've seen on TV. A whole lotta weird shit been going on in the Price family for years. Maybe everybody is dysfunctional and God put us all in this mess we can learn how to function. To test us. See what we can tolerate" (*A Day Late* 19). Fox News host Bill O'Reilly is more blunt. "The reason there is so much violence and chaos in the black precincts is the disintegration of the African-American family," he said last year. "White people don't force black people to have babies out of wedlock" (Chapman, "Whites have a role"). As economist Thomas Sowell points out, before the 1960s "most Black children were raised in two-parent families." In 2013, over 72 percent of Blacks were born out of wedlock. In Cook County 79 percent of Blacks were born to single mothers in 2003, while only 15 percent of whites were born to single mothers. (Bandler, "7 Statistics You Need") "Until that gap closes, the crime gap won't close, either," writes Mac Donald. (Bandler, "7 Statistics You Need")

Single parent family households have also become a common occurrence in the United States, and the number of these types of households has been on the rise for the last several decades (Wendy, "Single Parent Family"). Most recurrent in American society is women headed families and one can say it is a consequence of racism because Black men are in prison, at war or in drugs. But, Walter Williams differs by saying that Black female-headed households were just 18 percent of households in 1950, as opposed to about 68 percent today. In fact, from 1890 to 1940, the Black marriage rate was slightly higher than that of Whites. Even during slavery, when marriage was not permissible for Blacks, most Black children lived in biological two-parent families. In New York City, in 1925, 85 percent of Black households were two-parent households. A study of 1880 family structure in Philadelphia shows that three-quarters of Black families were two-

parent households (Williams, "Black female head"). This statistics contrast with the present days realities in contemporary Black America.

Most of McMillan's characters in the novels are dysfunctional families, mainly female- headed families. These Black women have had no choice but to be father, mother, gardener, chauffeur, cook, plumber, etc., while many Black males were 'out sowing their wild oats.' Black women are expected to work both inside and outside the house in order to ensure the stability of the Black family. Between the history of their role in the family and the reality of their responsibilities, Black women have had to wear many hats. Many of these parents do not choose to be single, but due to life circumstances such as divorce or separation, abandonment by a spouse, or death of a spouse, they find themselves raising their children alone. Nowadays, Black families have been deteriorating and the number of single parent households has been increasing, mainly maintained by women designated as female heads of family. Female-headed families are growing at such a rate that by the time the mother and children unit may be considered as a norm. One can say without doubt that the female-headed family will remain a significant feature on the American scene for many years. Women-headed families are broken and dysfunctional families with a host of consequences:

- Lack of psycho-affective balance of the kids due to the absence of the father,
- lack of paternal education
- Lack of authority figure.

Besides, African American women do not want their children to suffer whatever frustration due to the absence of their father because sometimes, children may feel humiliated, ashamed and hopeless. Some African American women headed families face financial difficulties. Poor rates are very high among families headed by Black women. Mildred Peacock, a single mother and a former high school drop-out, struggled to raise her children without a man because physically and emotionally, she was abused by the latter. Therefore, she divorced and became head of her family. Female-headed families have to face all the expenses – food – clothing- shelter- education –medicare with insufficient resources.

Moreover, Black mothers develop a kind of anxiety, the fear of knowing that, they were the persons who were preparing their sons for manhood. As Gloria asks herself "what if she forgot something crucial? How would she know? And when would she know it? Who would tell her...?" (*Waiting to Exhale* 66). This kind of anxiety makes women suffer. They worry about their sons coming late and want to pay a price to keep the children in the best school districts and away from drug and gang infested schools. They did not want to be the culprit because many males are in jail, or are robbers, irresponsible... As Trinitta says, "I am a terrible mother and I know it. They deserve more love than I'm able to give them right now...Kids give you a reason to live. But you gotta have something to give them. I ain't exactly no role model. Although I would like to be one day" (*Who Asked You* 102)

When it became difficult for Mildred to cope with her financial hardship, she alternated among domestic work, factory jobs, welfare, prostitution.... Being sole bread winner was difficult. Mildred had to make unsteady jobs as the following, "scrubbing white folks floors, waiting on people in a bar, cooking hamburger and French fries, taking care of dying old people, or winding spools of wire from three thirty to eleven thirty at night" (*Mama* 84). After some African American women with insufficient resources fail to pass from welfare to welfare, they find themselves in debt and get arrested for writing bad checks. Mildred is an example. She was arrested for writing many bad checks (*Mama* 231). The situation is worsened with girls when they are abandoned by parents because of poverty. They become precociously sexually active with houses full of babies hence the multigenerational families. As Maya Angelou says

... Young girls, abandoned by their mothers, ignored by their fathers, untaught by their teachers, and uncared for by their country's politicians are having babies at a rate which startles and frightens us. Too frequently, they know little about babies and even less about being mothers, and nothing at all about what being a Black American mother means. Rarely do the young mothers have any hope of support from the – also young fathers... (Maya 37)

So, young adolescents are forced to face alone their problems with their children in their already broken families. The reality is that these young men have been forced to "raise" themselves as many have no fathers and their mothers may be forced to work on two minimum wage jobs just to feed and clothe them. Without appropriate role models, they seek the advice and support of friends. This may lead them to participate in risk taking behavior but often just places them in "the wrong place at the wrong time" (Chipman, "Violence in the African-American"). Hence, the need for multigenerational families to cope with this situation.



Multigenerational families include grandparents residing in the home of a nuclear family, or grandparents raising grandchildren when parents are absent from the home. Grandparents play many roles in the family. One role involves teaching their daughters about child development thus, providing an intergenerational link to family codes and family traditions. However, sometimes, grandchildren bring trouble in the family. For example, in *A Day Late and a Dollar Short*, Viola was forty-two when Suzie Mae called her at four –thirty in the morning to tell her that her Daddy’s sixteen-year –old grandson by his first wife, who he had taken in, had stabbed him thirty-six times and killed him because her Daddy would not let his girlfriend spend the night. She had an anxiety attack and could not catch her breath. The doctors treated her for asthma, and she has been on medication ever since (*A Day Late* 24).

Grandparents bear the burden of the child abandoning their children. For example, “Trinitta never put much thought into how she was going to take care of her kids. She just had them. She has treated them like they were mistakes. Which is one of the reasons they’re over here so much” (*Who Ask You?* 22). The grandparents are put in a position where they are often forced, mostly out of concern for the well-being of their grandchildren, into substitute parenting, and it is usually because the parent has fallen prey to the lure of drugs. It is sad to watch grandparents, who should be preparing for retirement, take on this burden, which is exactly what it is, but they do it so that their grandchildren do not have to be raised by strangers (*Who Asked You?* 119). They start over parenting their grandchildren. It is not easy. Sometimes, they have to do part time job to feed them or to educate them. After having made some mistakes bearing their children, they want to avoid the same mistakes with their grandchildren. That is the reason why they worry about parenting asking themselves questions that most of the time have no answers. “What if I can’t handle all this responsibilities? What if I’ve forgotten how to be a parent? It takes so much energy. What if I don’t have enough to last? What if my daughter comes back next week or next year and wants them back? What if I give them the wrong stuff like I did my kids? I don’t want them to turn out like mine did. I want them to be proud, honest, dignified, civil, kind, and loving. I want them to be strangers to trouble (*Who Asked You?* 138).

Children are often mentally wounded in dysfunctional families. These wounded kids once grown up become irresponsible parents, husbands or wives, or gay or lesbians.<sup>1</sup> Homosexuality is sexual desire for a person of the same sex. This is not usually present until adolescence, but there is considerable evidence to show that the roots of homosexuality are to be found during childhood or adolescence and are quite common and not in themselves a sign that the child will be homosexual (Levine, et al 246). For example, Bernadine realized that her daughter, Onika and her friend, Shy are homosexual. Bernadine is not shocked but grateful; this is finally out in the open, but she wonders if John, her husband knows (*Getting to Happy* 51). Gloria’s husband has told her that he is now a gay hence their separation. In *I Almost Forgot About You*, Naomi and Macy are lesbians.

The overall cause of this situation is the absence of fathers in family.

#### 4. FATHERLESS SOCIETY IN BLACK AMERICA

The paternal function is decisive in the education of children and therefore, in the development of the nation. In the past, mainly in patriarchal society, the presence of the father is seen as invasive, omnipotent, the authoritative figure, powerful, decision maker, oppressive. As Pope Francis said, the father’s absence is seen as “liberation from the father-master, from the father as the representative of the law that is imposed from without, from the father as the censor of his children’s happiness and the obstacle to the emancipation and autonomy of young people” (Pope Francis “The family - 3. The father (First part)”). For Pope Francis, these fathers treated their children like servants, they did not respect their individual needs for growth, they did not help them to start out on their journey with freedom, did not help them assume their own responsibilities to build their future and that of society. But today, however, we sadly realized that the society falls down to the other extreme of this reality: the absence of the father in family with its host of consequences. As the Pope Francis again said, our contemporary society has reached the point of claiming that our society is a “society without fathers” and Phillippe Oswald maintains that, “a society without a father is a society without reference” (19) and further argues that “The great temptation of fathers today is to be absent” (20). Furthermore, the Canadian Guy Corneau psychiatrist deplors

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<sup>1</sup>I am not giving a moral judgment about homosexuality. This is debatable. Homosexuality is not evil for many people and many feminists would support it. However, the novels here under consideration gives credence to union between a man and a woman but it is also possible that forming groups of women to support each other which could be seen as homosexuality on an extreme analytical implication could be a good thing.

that “Our fathers fled” (16) in *Père manquant, fils manqué*. In fact, the actual socio-cultural crisis where the average family is scattered and dispersed, is rooted in the crisis of paternity.

Fathers are absent physically and psychologically. Fathers are physically absent when they are separated, divorced, or in prisons as it is the case in McMillan’s novels. They are also absent in contemporary America when concentrated on their work, or on their career or on themselves or on their well-being. They do not have time to spend with the children. Fathers are sometimes psychologically absent when they are on drugs or sex and come home late at night when the children are all sleeping, or they come home drunk just to sleep or to exercise violence on children or mothers. As children have behavioral and psychological difficulties, conflicts persist, and communication becomes absent, the decision of separation becomes irrevocable and violence of any kind intervenes. Fathers do not know if children are around, if they have eaten, if they have gone to school. They forget about all their duties as fathers and educators. Even present, they do not act as fathers; they do not have a talk with their children. In both cases, fathers forget that they have children to care about; they have family to care about. As Pope Francis said

The absent father figure in the life of little ones and young people causes gaps and wounds that may even be very serious. And, in effect, delinquency among children and adolescents can be largely attributed to this lack, to the shortage of examples and authoritative guidance in their everyday life, a shortage of closeness, a shortage of love from the father. And the feeling of orphanhood that so many young people live with is more profound than we think (Pope Francis “The family - 3. The father (First part)”)

Taking all that has been said above into account, I can conclude that most Black children are reared without male responsibility. Most African American men turn their back to their wives and children and by so doing, they weaken seriously the traditional, strong Black family. A great number of Black children are living without a father in the house. Sometimes, they do not know who they are. Trinita’s children say “Mama never tells us who our daddies were and we just assumed they were the same man since we look so much alike” (*Interruption of Everything* 346). Occasionally, they are forced to lie to their friends about their daddy. “I’ve told a few of my semi close friends he’s dead, because to me he has been” says Sparrow (*Getting to Happy* 29).

So, one can wonder if man is still substantially important in the family. It is as if family does not need them anymore. This situation can be explained by the devastating nonsense emerged during the 1960s and exemplified by Johns Hopkins University sociology professor who argued, “It has yet to be shown that the absence of a father was directly responsible for any of the supposed deficiencies of broken homes” (Williams, “Black female head”). Since a growing number of Black male unemployed or not without steady occupation, or who cannot make enough money to cope with family responsibilities prefer to desert. The real issue, Williams went on to say is not the lack of male presence but the lack of male income which means that marriage and fatherhood can be replaced by a welfare check (Williams, “Black female head”). Some others prefer to leave the house, and by so doing, allow their wives to qualify for federal assistance and care of them instead of staying there jobless, useless and worthless. African American women have to rely on government aid and child support passing from welfare to welfare. Welfare reveals itself to be steadier (*Mama* 30). Consequently, most children are going out without father. They are often absent from the house and the consequences are chaotic: lack of affection, lack of good education, adolescent delinquency etc. Viola said about Nathan:

He don’t hardly call. I guess he forgot how to write , and ain’t sent nary a birthday card and not a single solitary Christmas present in the last three years that I know of [...] If a man ain’t gon’be there for his kids then he should at least help pay for ‘em. Ti’s the reason we got so many juvenile delinquents and criminals and gangs running through our neighborhoods. Where was they damn daddies when they need one? Mamas can’t do everything. (*A Day Late* 15)

Arguing about the issue, Phillippe Oswald complains that, the great temptation of fathers today is to be absent. For him, women have opened widely their doors. By claiming their independence, they encourage in men an old penchant for disengagement, vagrancy, irresponsibility. Hence the multiplication of divorces, the growth of one parent families and multi composed families. This situation forces children to collect stepparents which is the surest way to finish ruining any filial relationship and, of course, all parental authority (20).

The social problems engendered by fatherless families have their roots back in the type of parental relations the children have had with each parent before the separation. The problem is so serious that the father, not only ceased to pay attention to his children after having left the household, but even when he was living with his family, he was careless and useless. That is the case of Money’s relationship with his father. He never had time to take Money to fishing or to the barber’s

shop or at the baseball game. His father had never shaken hands with him or patted him on the back for anything, had never even had a father to son talk (*Mama* 122). Omar's mother asks the right question. "And how many men have those boys called Daddy?" (*Who Asked You?* 46). Omar's daddy has chosen not to be in his life because he claimed Omar's mother has tricked him by getting pregnant so he would leave his wife, which was pretty much true (*Who Asked You?* 47). Besides Omar has never met him, because his mother told him she did not know where his father was. And she thought that was best and they have done just fine without him in their lives. It is for this reason that she has probably gone a little overboard parenting him (*Who Asked You?* 47). Talking about the situation, Trinita's children say "We don't know who our daddy is and I really don't care. Plus half the kids in this school and in the building where we live don't know who they daddy is either. We used to have a little sister but her daddy came and got her live with him when she only had six teeth" (*Who Asked You?* 71-72).

When men start refusing the duty which goes along with fatherhood, husband-wife relationship seems deteriorating and men feel useless and worthless. In their relations to women, most men are only good at love making but are highly irresponsible. Using Robin's expression, they run away like mice whenever they are invited in having a serious relationship and to take their responsibilities. As Marie-Francoise Houemavo said men are "baby makers" (5) and they "[...] think the only thing they have to feel usually good about themselves is sex [...] they spend most of the time playing games, drinking, smoking instead of staying at home with the children they helped bring into the world" (5). The typical example is Mae Curly. Because of her faithfulness to their marriage, she accepts to stay and carry the burden of marriage by staying alone and carrying the burden of educating the children even though she was married and was living with her husband. Like Mae Curly, as Martinson states,

Many African-American women also stay in abusive relationships to 'present a united front.' That is, because the national media and politicians have historically assaulted the Black family as degenerating in a 'tangle of pathology,' many African-American women feel the need to stay in their relationships, keep their families together, and be unified against outside oppressions and stereotypic representations. They feel that to break up the family would just add to the problems of both their own families and the problems of the Black community. (Martinson, "The Effect of Racism")

As a reader, I think that to accept to stay in the house is not the real solution. Sometimes, it is more painful. In Mae Curly's case she got tired of telling her children to keep out of problem, to leave dope alone, to finish school, and to get a job. In spite of these situations, she did not divorce her husband and the children's education was deeply affected. As she said, "My kids are some of the most ungrateful bunch of bastards I ever seen in my life. And sometimes I don't want to believe I even gave birth to'em" (*Mama* 175). If faithfulness in marriage despite the challenges is a virtue as witnessed by Mae Curly, it is sometimes wiser to leave for the sake of the children. One could be tempted to say that a woman so dedicated to her children could give up the marriage. Of course 'yes', if the daddy constitutes a handicap to their blooming. Even if the father is present, in fact, about her children, Mae Curly said: "They take after their no-good daddy"...And about her children's daddy, she added: "[...] that husband of mine", she sighed, 'he still drinking and screwing everybody in the streets'" (*Mama* 174). So, the physical separation could have a positive impact on the children in this case as the instability of the father could have an impact on the emotional and psychological stability of the children. That is why Mildred quit easily her husband's home when she realized that she had made a mistake as she said, leaving Rufus, "Crook was a mistake, and you, you worse than one, you was an accident" (*Mama* 77). This decision has helped Mildred to raise quite graceful and successful children while Mae Curly's had the most ungrateful ones. Moreover, not leaving decisively can cause the same effect: Mildred's elder sister Georgia's second husband had left her for the hundredth time. Her four children did not provide much comfort. Her first son married a white girl and was living somewhere in California. Her first daughter was an alcoholic living in the projects with three babies by three different men, and had never worked a day in her life. The second had been the home-coming queen and had married someone else's husband. The youngest son was in love with his first cousin from Arizona, Leon's first daughter (*Mama* 201).

Children born without their fathers are more and more numerous in African American society and in McMillan's novels and the cases are various: the child's father can refuse to accept the pregnancy of the child to be born and ask the mother to abort. The child's father can also abandon the child at birth. In many homes, the father is absent, either through separation, divorce or death and children feel bitter with the absence of the father. In *Waiting to Exhale*, Tarik, and Gloria's son told her that he cannot wait to talk with his father. He said: "That man is not my father, he's my daddy. If he was my father, he'da been here to help you take care of me. If he was my father, he'da more than drop a check in the mail. He'da taken me to my baseball games, to the movies, somewhere- anywhere. I know a whole lot of dudes out here making babies and bragging about it [...] I see this bastard every two years, and I'm supposed to get excited? You get excited, Ma" (*Waiting to Exhale* 64). Philippe Oswald sums it rightly saying that,



The "fatherless society" is now a global phenomenon that is accompanied by destruction of the family and deeply undermines societies. The general crisis of authority does it not come from what women attempt to exercise authority in the masculine form of the command? The time seems to be arrived not a patching of paternal authority but a true renaissance of parental authority within which the authority peculiar to the father would find its place. (Oswald 110-111)

At the present time, there is confusion as to whether these groups can be considered families. For example, many individuals, like McMillan characters, no longer spend most of their lives in one type of groupings, they may marry, divorce, remain single for a while, become part of a cohabiting couple, then remarry, and so on. Perhaps, such a situation would be only a minor problem if the traditional family type represented most members of society; however, the traditional family has shrunk from its formerly dominant position in society until it is now a minority type itself. More important, this newer groups are becoming the dominant forms of social units. Such confusion points to the necessity of revising or expanding the definition of family to fit present-day realities (Cicirelli 185).

## **5. REDEFINING AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY**

The actual socio-cultural crisis where the average family is scattered and dispersed, is rooted in the crisis of paternity. When the paternal role lacks, the child finds himself in a single headed familial situation. This is a danger to the child's stage of adolescence because it prevents the identification to the absent parent and promotes deviance in the young adolescent or adult. The issue of who to head the family needs a social revision. It is cultural that the man is the head of the family and that is ok but this should be seen as a leadership of service not one of dominance or master-slave relationship. Besides, it is cooperative headship that is essential where the man heads the family alone and in cooperation with the woman and not exclusive of her. Besides, with formal education opened to women, it is not necessary that the bread winner must be a man where the man's job or business is failing or earning a little, there should be a new socialization that does not treat it wrong for a woman to earn more than her husband.

Today, family size is decreasing, roles of family members are changing, and the wild as well as reckless behavior of youth is of societal concern. Perhaps, the diversity, today's challenge is to reach for an inclusive definition of family- one that can incorporate "nontraditional" families (Melton and Wilcox 36). A new definition of family is the household where each member has his/her place and fully plays his/her role. The man is brought in the house and kept in it even if he has some disturbances. The love and caring within the family can heal them.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The family is the first cell in the social network and plays a crucial role in the education and shaping of individuals. Through families, individuals are prepared to participate in the community and society. It is within families that the training of the individual's character begins. The family is therefore the first and fundamental school of life. Within the family, young people receive their first ideas about truth and virtue and learn what it's meant to love and to be loved. The family is therefore also a place of education in personal and social values. So, it is important to face all the challenges specific to African American families and society. In family, both parties are responsible and that both sexes need a revival to educate children.

McMillan's characters' families are broken ones. But even broken, family is very important for everyone to be restructured or restored. As Dolly Rebecca Parton Dean<sup>2</sup> sings:

"Family"  
When it's family...  
You forgive them for they know not what they do.  
When it's family...  
You accept them 'cause You have no choice but to.  
When it's family...  
They're a mirror of the worst and best in you.  
And they always put you to the test...

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<sup>2</sup> Dolly Rebecca Parton Dean is an American singer, song writer, multi-instrumentalist, record producer, actress, author, businesswoman and philanthropist born in January 19, 1946 ( 71 years old)

And you always try to do your best...  
And just pray for God to do the rest when It's family.  
Some are preachers. Some are gay...  
Some are addicts Drunks and strays,  
But not a one is turned away when it's family.  
Some are lucky others ain't.  
Some are fighters others faint  
Winners losers sinners saints. It's all family  
And when it's family...  
You trust them and your Heart's an open door.  
When it's family...  
You tolerate what You'd kill others for.  
When it's family...  
You love and hate and take, then give some more.  
Somehow you justify mistakes.  
Try to find way to find some better way to  
Solve the problems day to day in the family  
You take the trouble as it comes and love more them than anyone  
Good or bad or indifferent...It's still family.  
You choose your lovers You pick your friends  
But not the family you're in.  
They'll be with you Till the end'cause because it's family...  
When it's family...  
You forgive them for they know not what they do.  
When it's family...  
They're a mirror of the worst and best in you.  
When it's family...  
When it's family...  
Let me be all that I Should be to the family.<sup>3</sup>

This family depicted by Dolly Parton is like Terry McMillan's characters families. But the family should be the place where man learns to love. The family is a school of love, where people learn to love one another, to learn to live as brothers and sisters. The family is the sanctuary of life, the place that hosts life and watches over its development, the place of the culture for life. The family should allocate more place to men to play their role. Mother should also stay to help children to become healthy adolescents. We must return to family values. The family is very important and its happiness is more important.

Is there any hope to find new fathers react very positively, with pride and happiness, to the role of fatherhood so as to prevent family disintegration?

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