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Trauma and Women's Agency in Terry Mcmillan's *Who Asked you?*

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of psychological trauma and female autonomy in contemporary African American literature. The study examines how Terry Mcmillan's novel *Who Asked You?* represents trauma and women's agency through the experiences of the three central characters: Venetia, Arlene, and Betty Jean. Utilizing a qualitative textual discussion supplemented by direct textual evidence, the study analyzes how these protagonists actively navigate personal adversity. The findings reveal that each woman or character rejects passive victimhood, thereby responding to

traumatic disruptions through self-directed, empowering choices such as confession, geographic relocation, employment, intensive caregiving, and deliberate self-improvement. Ultimately, the paper argues that agency within the novel is not a uniform response; rather, it manifests in highly individualized, diverse forms that are fundamentally contingent upon each character's specific lived experience and unique perception of trauma. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of resilience and coping mechanisms in modern domestic fiction.

Keywords: Literary trauma theory, female agency, Terry Mcmillan, contemporary African American literature, textual analysis, character resilience

Introduction

Societal expectation, structural marginalization, and sudden interpersonal crises often compound the weight of personal trauma for Black women. In contemporary African American literature, the domestic space serves as a critical, unglamorous arena where these individual psychological wounds are openly confronted for decades, traditional literary trauma theory – largely constructed around Western psychoanalytic paradigms by fundamental scholars like Cathy Caruth has conceptualized trauma through lenses of unrepresentability, speechlessness, permanent psychic fragmentation, and existential paralysis. This classic framework posits that a traumatic event shatters the victim's cognitive landscape, freezing them in a perpetual cycle of silent repetition. However, contemporary domestic fiction by African American women is staging an intervention against this limiting perspective. Instead of viewing the scarred psyche as permanently broken, modern writers shift the analytical lens toward individual survival, deliberate emotional processing, localized coping strategies, and the proactive rebuilding of the self.

Terry Mcmillan's novel, *Who Asked You?* stands as a poignant and analytical rich intervention in this literary discourse. Far from romanticizing resilience, chaotic complexities of modern kinship, familial disintegration, and individual psychological endurance within working-class domestic spheres. Rather than rendering its characters mute or helpless under the strain of sudden crises, the text maps out the messy, everyday mechanics of psychological recovery. This paper explores the intersection of individual psychological trauma and female autonomy within the novel, asserting that healing is an active, labor-intensive performance rather than a passive state of being.

By focusing on three central protagonists – Venetia, Arlene, and Betty Jean, Mcmillan systematically dismantles the reductive archetype of the passive, permanently damaged victim. Instead, she illustrates how deep, localized psychological wounds can catalyze profound configurations of individual agency. Utilizing a qualitative textual analysis supplemented by direct narrative evidence, this study examines how these distinct protagonists actively navigate severe personal adversity and internal pain. The findings reveal passive victimhood, asserting control over her own narrative trajectory. They respond to psychological trauma through highly calculated, self-directed, and empowering choices. These survival mechanisms include verbal confession,

geographic relocation, economic employment, intensive caregiving, and deliberate, structured self-improvement.

Ultimately, this paper argues that agency within *Who Asked You?* is not a uniform or static response to suffering; rather, it manifests in highly individualized, fluid, and diverse forms that are fundamentally contingent upon each character's specific lived experience, socioeconomic capital, and unique internal perception of her trauma. In so doing, this analysis expands traditional trauma theory. It contributes a necessary, intersectional layer to the understanding of localized resilience and personal coping mechanisms in modern domestic fiction. A great motivating factor is the fact that scholarship on this novel is limited. Although critics have written on some of her works such as *Mama*, *Disappearing Acts*, *Waiting to Exhale*, *How Stella Got Her Groove*, and *Getting to Happy*, Mcmillan in *Who Asked You?* has brought in agency from a different perspective. As such, I wish to bring it to the limelight of academia and to show that the novel is worth an exploration with regard to trauma and women's agency in their multifaceted dimensions. Before I proceed, I will love to define trauma and agency as used in this work.

The term trauma according to Cathy Caruth "is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (Caruth 1996, 3) ^[1]. Judith Lewis Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* states that trauma is "a feeling of intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat to annihilation. As such trauma with regard to these assertions, point to the individual reactions to certain frequent events, actions, and unforgotten incidents that injure the human psyche and endures for long in the mind. Traumatic experiences from a general point sometimes produce an enduring impact on the human psyche that can change the nature of a character's reminiscences, self-awareness and interpersonal life.

On the other hand, agency in its most basic definition is the capacity to act or perform an action. Individuals insofar as they are able to act, exert some form of agency. Naila Kabeer posits that, women's agency is broadly defined as a set of skills and propensities women possess and actively utilize in their own terms in order to achieve goals and objectives that enhance their well-being (Kabeer 1999) ^[5]. Terry Mcmillan thus presents women's own voices as they negotiate challenges and develop ways to cope within the context of their everyday traumatic lives as will be examine below.

Agency at the Individual Level

Agency at the individual level entails owning up for one's mistakes or shortcomings, accepting them and forging ahead in life by making choices that will make one's life better than what it has been before. According to Anthony Giddens, individual agency refers to the capability of an individual to control his or her destiny and make choices to fulfil goals set autonomously. According to Encyclopedia.pub, it is the psychological and sociological concept that individuals possess the power to think for themselves rather than just passively responding to external environmental or societal pressures.

In Terry Mcmillan's *Who Asked You?*, Venetia as an agent of her own life discard the banner of religious fanaticism she has been hiding under, thereby believing that marriage is for better or worst no matter the circumstances in which one finds his or herself. In order to face the reality of life and move on, she has to first admit that something is wrong with

her life and that she has been suffering in silence for a very long time. Without admitting that there is a problem, it will be difficult for one to possibly look for a solution. Having been traumatized by her husband's wayward and cheating nature, she is able to gather the pieces of whatever is left of her and is ready to turn a new page. She does this as she says:

I pray every day for everybody. But mostly I pray for patience and guidance, and I know I've been very patient but now I'm not too proud to admit that I'm tired of being treated like I'm undesirable, when I am. I'm tired of being treated like I don't matter, when I do. And more than anything, I'm tired of being taken for granted by my kids and my husband. I'm just tired of being tired and it feels good to finally fucking admit it (p. 262).

From the above excerpt, the repetition of "I'm tired of being" indicates that Venetia has reached the height or limit of tolerance and want to make a change. Though her words are filled with bitterness, the fact that she admits that she has suffered psychologically is a great step of relief. She moves ahead to relate that "I have always found it hard to say no even when I really wanted to, but after years of saying yes to everybody but me, I'm discovering that it's just as scary to try something new as it is not to try anything at all ... to change our direction if we ever hope to be astonished. I'm already feeling lighter, even joyous, because I finally own my life" (p. 344-345). Venetia here has realized herself and is ready to do something positive with her life.

After admitting that her life since she got married has not been a bed of roses but thorns, she goes ahead and sells the house in which she has lived with Rodney and the children for many years, and relocated to another condo in Marina as she relates:

I sold the house and moved into a nice condo out here in the Marina. I didn't bring any of that old fuddy-duddy furniture either. Since I don't have to worry about where my next meal is coming from. I sold it all and donated every penny of it to charities that help feed children. I also didn't want to be reminded of what used to be, since my new mission is to discover what is still possible (p. 345).

Venetia, therefore makes us understand that, she can now heal fast from her wounds by relocating to a different place, so as to get rid of her trauma or bad memories. She is also seen here as a humanitarian when she decides on her own to help the needy.

Lastly, Venetia, after realizing that there is still more to life than what has already happened in her life, engages in many other activities as she says:

I have prayed for all of us to come to our senses even though I know it's an ongoing process. We're not getting any younger and family is family. It is also the reason why I'm taking a Zumba class at a gym where they make you hot tea. I will try yoga in the future, but right now I am loving my jewelry-making classes and might consider selling some of my wares, since people are starting to ask where I bought them. I have started taking drives, something I've always loved to do. I

sometimes go five or eight miles over the speed limit and usually go very early along the Pacific Coast Highway. I roll my windows down so I can hear the birds and the wind and the tide. Sometimes I let the cool mist on my face be my latte (p. 347).

From the repetition of the personal pronoun “I”, Mcmillan lays more emphasis on the individual or self. This excerpt is proof of the fact that, Venetia has owned up to her life and is making the best of it, rather than wallow in silence and pain. She enjoys what life and nature has to offer, and from every indication is gradually stepping up economically. Her reliance on external economic mobility and vocal assertiveness outlines one methodology of trauma processing; however, Mcmillan complicates this singular definition of autonomy by contrasting her with Arlene.

For Arlene, the psychological wound requires an entirely different, internal restructuring of the self. As an act of agency, Arlene, Omar’s mother, and Betty Jean and Venetia’s sister, first acknowledges that she is the root cause of her trauma and is ready to right her wrongs and make a move in life. She owns up and confesses about everything that had traumatized her since childhood, and how she has dragged it into her adulthood which has greatly caused her more harm than good, as she opines through a flashback:

Being mean has cost me my sister and my son. I have been lonely and it’s been hard trying to pretend like I don’t have a son or sister. I have always been jealous of Betty Jean. When we were kids, she was the one who got straight A’s, she was the one who knew all the dance moves, and on Saturday mornings when our parents had people over, she was the one who performed. She’s the one who got applause. Venetia clapped, too. But I just couldn’t. And it’s the reason I cut her hair off. She had too much of everything and more than me, and I wanted her to know what it felt like to have less. I’ve dragged this attitude into our adulthood ... But she was happy for years, raising her kids and Lee David was a decent enough fellow ... I am ashamed of myself for what I’ve put Omar and Betty Jean through (p. 335-336).

From this passage, Arlene, takes the readers back to her childhood days which has turned her into a truncated self even up to adulthood. What happened during her early years when she was a child is in conjunction to what Toni Morrison reiterate that, what we do to children matters and they may never forget. She has been traumatized by her parent’s lack of appreciation and attention towards her which is evidence in her repetition of “She was” in the excerpt which hints to her disgust towards her sister Betty Jean. This takes us to Volker H. Keller Susanne’s article “Maternal Interactive Behaviour in Early Infancy and Later Attachment” which emphasizes on the way mothers, parents or caregivers address or treat an infant from an early stage in life and how it might leave wounds in the child’s psychological and emotional life as he/she matures. Rejection or lack of appreciation from parents has widespread negative impact on children. It oftentimes led to hostility, aggression, dependency, emotional instability, a low sense of self-esteem and self-worth, and a generally negative view of others as well as the world. This is the case of Arlene who perceived her parent’s attitude towards her as

a form of rejection. All thanks to the passage of time, Mcmillan portrays her in the above quotation as a remorseful and self-realized individual. In order to put this into actualization, she decides to drive up to the restaurant where Omar her son works as a chef to apologize for all that she did and did not do for him all those years. She is delighted and relief after meeting and discussing or making amends with her son whom she has not seen for many years. Seeing his son who has grown into a handsome and slim guy, she says “I almost squeeze the life out of him. ‘I’m Sorry,’ I whisper in his ears” to which he says “It’s okay” (p. 368). The words “I’m sorry” are therapeutic to both the offender and offended, but more to the offender (Arlene) as she feels some sort of inner peace that she has never felt before.

After confessing to her son, she later walks into the senior center where Betty Jean volunteered twice a week in an attempt to also make amends with her. She is happy to see her sister whom she had bailed out of her life for some years. She appreciates the fact that Betty Jean has “lost a few pounds and is probably a size fourteen, a size she hasn’t been in centuries, and she looks good, damn good” (p. 369). She apologizes for all the mean things she had done and said to Betty Jean. Despite everything, family remains family as Betty Jean hugs and holds her tightly. Looking at the above two mentioned female characters Venetia and Arlene, we can see that Venetia’s agency is attained through self-reclamation while Arlene’s is through repentance and repair. This is evidence of the fact that agency vary depending on the individual perception. Although Arlene finds agency by re-evaluating her psychological boundaries, her trajectory underscores how deeply localized these recoveries remain. This individualized nature of trauma response becomes even more pronounced when analyzing Betty Jean, whose domestic burdens force her to transmute grief into radical acts of caregiving.

Betty Jean the eldest and protagonist of *Who Asked You?* has also been through a lot in her life. She has suffered rejection from her first son Quentin, waywardness and disappointment from Dexter and Trinetta, coupled with her husband’s incurable illness. After several pieces of advice from her two sisters, she stands her ground not to keep her husband in a facility. Even when Trinetta, bails on her children Ricky and Luther, she also refuses to hand them over to foster care and vows to do all her possible best, no matter her financial situation. As an agent of her life and that of her grandchildren, she categorically tells Trinetta who mentions of coming back for her children thus:

Well, let me say this. If you for one damn minute think you and Donkey Kong or whatever his damn name is can just come back here and get these kids like you’re picking them up from camp, think again. I’m not going to let you put them through any more of your bullshit. If you want to come visit them, that’s fine, but if you act like you want to take them, I’ll go to court because this is their address and they’re staying right here with me and your daddy (p. 192-193).

Betty Jean’s agency as from the extract is that of caregiver. She is ready to protect her grandchildren at all cost since their mother is a drug addict and has cause more psychological and emotional harm on her children, especially Ricky who was born with traces of it on his

system. After Trinetta's death and her persisting health situation, she vows on keeping and taking care of her grandchildren. Though she laments, she is hell-bent on working in order to put food on the table and also send them to school as she relates "I have a dying husband inside that house I can't do anything for. I can't afford to retire but my knee is finally starting to give out and I'm on my feet for almost eight hours, five days a week. I've got arthritis in the right one and these shorts only last so long" (p. 234). Despite all of these, she is not ready to give up on her job which is the source of income that she manages to take care of her household.

In addition, Betty Jean in order to economically empower herself and others, jointly opens a beautification center with Tammy her white friend. She does not end there as she states "I still volunteer down at the senior center, but I also have a part-time job working as a receptionist and, I suppose, office manager at Mr. Heaven's construction company" (p. 379). At her age, she is supposed to sit and enjoy her life and children, yet she still engages in many activities just to make sure her grandsons get the best life has to offer. She also made so many improvements in her life, as she "started a book club and about nine of my neighbors are members. We rotate at each other's homes once a month" (p. 380). With the book club, they are able to discuss and learn a lot about other aspects of life. She even went ahead and had a knee surgery as she relates "I went ahead and had that surgery on my other knee, and on top of losing about twenty-five pounds on Jenny Craig, neither one of them bothers me much anymore. I have learned to walk farther than my mailbox" (p. 380). Due to her size and weight, Betty Jean, also, join weight pounds which plays a great role as far as her health is concern. She does not sit down, fold her arms and only complain, but goes for what she wants in her life or in order to improve or ameliorate her situation. She is no more the reluctant and self-doubting woman one saw at the early pages of the work.

Last but not the least, Betty Jean has come to terms with her sisters Venetia and Arlene. The three sisters are able to learn and discover more about themselves by being close to each other. They also decided to organize walking dates and in the course of this, each person is able to unveil what has been disturbing or torturing her psychologically, or what she liked and disliked about the others as she says:

I have also begun to appreciate my sisters. We have walking dates. One way to get to know someone better and get closer to them is by walking miles next to them. We prefer the beach ... it seems easier to be honest with both of my sisters and say what's on our minds and in our hearts out there. It's also so much easier to listen when they talk. I have come to realize how different we are and yet how alike, too ... we are also learning how not to get so worked up when we disagree and when to keep our thoughts to ourselves. That we don't always need to be heard, that we will never agree on everything, especially how to live our lives (p. 381).

From the above quotation and with the passing of time, Betty Jean and her sisters have come to accept and appreciate each other for who they are, and not for what

they want them to be. All her life, Betty Jean has always wanted to please everybody, but now as a self-actualized individual, she wants to do something for herself as she relates at the very last page of the book:

Now it's my turn to do what I think works for Betty Jean. And I'm not going to worry about who doesn't like it. Sometimes you have to know when to trust your instincts about how you live your life and especially how you feel. We all have a right to make our own mistakes as long as we're willing to pay for them (p. 383).

After facing trauma from every angle of life, all hope is not lost, as Betty Jean gives life another chance. With the current improvements and engagements, she has made in her life, she decides to go out on an official date, where a man is waiting to pick her up. Something that never happened with her late husband Mr. Lee David. Time as the saying goes, heal all wounds. Betty Jean now sees life from a different and positive perspective. From the aforementioned, the change of individual agency could have a correlation with different types of traumatic experiences. As such, individual agency varies depending on the individual's perception in the face of trauma.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Terry Mcmillan's *Who Asked You?* offers a highly nuanced blueprint of individual survival that fundamentally redefines female autonomy and reshapes traditional literary trauma theory within contemporary African American literature. Through the distinct divergent journeys of Venetia, Arlene, and Betty Jean, the novel demonstrates that healing an individual psychological wound is rarely a linear, uniform, or predictable process. By deploying deeply localized coping mechanisms – ranging from geographical relocation and financial independence to emotional confession and radical, intensive caregiving – these protagonists actively dismantle the patriarchal and academic myth of the passive, broken victim.

Their narrative trajectories prove that personal trauma does not merely shatter the individual psyche; it can also act as a powerful, albeit painful, catalyst for self-reclamation and existential agency. Autonomy emerges from this text not as a grand, sweeping political gesture, but as a highly individualized, fragmented construct that is deeply shaped by a person's unique socioeconomic background and specific psychological wounds. By grounding recovery in the realistic, unglamorous, and often exhausting spaces of domestic life, Mcmillan expands the rigid boundaries of traditional trauma narratives. Ultimately, this study underscores that true resilience is not merely the passive ability to endure hardship or silently absorb suffering. True resilience, as modeled by Mcmillan's protagonists, is the revolutionary, everyday willingness to claim self-determination, reject victimization, and rewrite one's individual narrative in the wake of internal chaos. The author thus in one way or the other uses the sisters to show that agency is not about being perfect or completely independent; it is about having the courage to live by your own values, even when the people closest to you are asking you, *Who Asked You?*

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