

**Dysfunctionality and Arrearage in Terry Mcmillan's
*A Day Late and A Dollar Short***

By

Monica Udoette

Department of English Akwa Ibom State University: Obio Akpa Campus,

Abstract

The dynamics of narrating dysfunctionality balances the writer's compelling task of divulging despondencies and short-comings of individuals in the society in discharging certain social responsibilities. This paper interprets Terry McMillan's A Day Late and a Dollar Short as an exploration of diverse and enduring problems within African American families; the internal crisis among individuals and the therapeutic role of mothers in finding a balance rhythm in a world of turbulence. The paper interrogates manifestations of dysfunction as distinct relics of racist traumatic experiences; its complexities and the perspectives that articulate significantly in relationships. Against the theoretical backdrop of psychoanalysis and its relatively new area of trauma studies, this paper effectively connects Black female writing in America to ingrained experiences of pain and trauma, through characterization and authorial dictum. The paper concludes that these writers, of which McMillan belongs, exhibit a leaning towards a literary and flexible reassessment of individual and social constructions of personality while re-ordering the narrative.

Key words: Arrearage, Dysfunctionality, Psychoanalysis, Trauma Studies, Terry McMillan

Introduction

Generally, African American literature has focused on a number of recurring historical and sociological themes, all of which reflect the politics of black American experience which include but not limited to politics, social and economic power. Lois Tyson argues that themes in African American literature, among other concerns, embrace the quest for freedom from all forms of oppression (388). This quest for freedom is part of the legacy of racial incursion and its historical trajectory that the blacks have had to agonisingly grapple with in a long history. As such, African American literary works have expanded their themes to incorporate areas pertaining to problems and conflicts in a racist society, relevance of life, urbanization, alienation, the difficulties of economic survival and the quest for personal and collective survival. From the era of the abolitionist through the rise of American Communism in the early 20th century, organized groups and individual African American leaders have taken a revolutionary standpoint and spoken against America's racist social climate. This social climate in as much as it is an agitation for the entire black community becomes more suffocating for the black woman.

In recent times, Black women writers have been in the vanguard of a crusade to foster heightened awareness of the challenges facing African American women in the United States. Mary Helen Washington as quoted in Gates mirrors the trend of advocacy for sustained revision of male dominated canon in areas that relate to women's "ritual journeys" "articulate voices" and "symbolic spaces" (32). However, the generation of revisionist image by

pioneering efforts of critics like June Jordan, Barbara Smith, Alice Walker, Mary Helen Washington, and Barbara Christian has vilified the assumed "absence of black females in written records of black literary tradition. Equally, the second generation of black women critics including Deborah McDowell, Hazel Carby, Trudier Harris, Claudia Tate, Gloria Hull and Hortense Spillers, have demonstrated that black women's writing draws on African American cultural traditions in a way that anticipates many of the more radical insights in mainstream critical theory.

Obviously, contemporary African American novels by black women provide the necessary context or subtext for a better understanding of black women writers' preoccupation with themes of racism, sexism and classism, which to a great extent, had influenced the development of concepts of love, power, autonomy, creativity, manhood, womanhood in the black family and community. The growth in the consciousness of writers and change in the reality of African American women's experience has produced young writers like Terry McMillan, Rita Dove, Ntozake Shange, Tamara Winfrey Harris and Gloria Naylor. These writers have the advantage of looking at "the silences and absences of early literature about women by women and they are poised for a more radical feminine commitment from the start" (142) as ModupeKolawole succinctly puts it. They are more determined to confront the forces limiting women in a changing society. The trend in the fiction of these writers is the prominence of women playing important roles as well as being the center of the narrative. Viola Price, McMillan's main character in *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* evidently incarnates this prominence as she single-handedly tries to bring sanity to her family. The younger generation of black women writers of which McMillan belongs, have the benefit of the restless spirit of the modern age and they start off by creating heroines who are impatient with tradition and eager to change the social set-up.

The highpoint of this paper, however, is purposively situated in the key words "dysfunctionality and arrearage". Dysfunctional derives from notions of conflict, neglect, abuse, waywardness and instability while arrearage on the other hand, is a legal term for the part of a debt that is overdue after missing one or more required payment. Put differently, arrearage is a state of being in arrears or something unpaid and overdue. Similarly, Viola Price acknowledges this tendency of arrearage among members of her family in the midst of tensions yet hopefully commits to their subsequent reclamation. Arrearage echoes the failure of kids and men who fall short of expectations. Her position is an awareness of their shortcomings, unique character traits and an overriding love that pardons. She is the bedrock of the family. It is within this context that the novel's title is projected as Viola avers, "One thing I do know about men and kids is that they always come back. They may be a day late and a dollar short, but they always come back". (*A Day Late and a Dollar Short*, 26).

Trauma, Dysfunctional Family Ties and the 'Price' of Redemption

The novel introduces a seemingly damaged Black family torn even further apart by a common denominator of an unbalanced and racist American society. Though McMillan has shifted her focus from racial narrative protuberant in African American fiction, she garners some form of relevance by focusing family relations. *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* fictionalizes fundamental personal questions and dilemmas within a complex social and psychological pressure thwarting equitable integration. James Heckman rightly observes that "Black America has a unique history and now faces unique challenges" (71). He further adds the necessity of a balanced family in child grooming, noting that "families play an essential role in

shaping their children's abilities. The family plants and nourishes the seed that grows into the successful student and adult (71) However, the break in this change of stability in families culminates in what Heckman calls "dysfunctional families" which are "increasingly prevalent in many quarters of American society", and "often produce dysfunctional children" (71). It is with this perspective of complex and disturbed family relation as an offshoot of a traumatic past that McMillan's text *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* is appraised.

Though this paper builds on the psychological interrelationship between the individual characters, their actions and the society in the novel under study, which of course is rooted in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, particular attention is paid to aspects of traumatic studies. Generally, traumatic experience can produce sometimes an indelible effect on the human psyche that can change the nature of an individual's memory, self-recognition and relational life. Cathy Caruth puts it succinctly that "literature like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet". (3). The above claim clearly establishes trauma as a valid unit of discussion in literature especially in areas of characterization. While Caruth asserts that "the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind (3), trauma is not traceable in "simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). Anne Whitehead also believes trauma to be "an emotional response to a terrible event" (16). However, all the assertions, point to the thrust that fundamental to traumatic experience is that the past lingers unresolved, not remembered in a conventional sense because it is not processed like non traumatic information, either cognitively or emotionally.

The historical contexts portrayed in the novel captures vividly the tensed atmosphere in black families in their bid to survive. This is part of the legacy of racial incursion and the throwbacks of its historical trajectory that the blacks have had to consistently grapple with. Such tension had engendered an enabling environment for drug addiction, conflict, neglect and abuse. These various indices to traumatic experience point to the failure of relationships, black subjectivity, poverty, drug abuse among others. It should be mentioned at this point and perhaps subsequently that traumatic experiences are closely linked to dysfunctional family relationship and are often processed through delayed manifestations.

The novel recreates a unique storyline from the perspective of six different characters, each a member of the Price family contending with various stages of life's crisis. Disillusionment and disappointment controls Viola and drives her into constant bitterness with her children. At the opening, everyone is at odds with each other. Viola and her husband Cecil have separated after a tumultuous, 38-year marriage. Viola and her second daughter Charlotte are not on speaking terms. Viola is troubled by a situation with her youngest daughter Janelle. The only son, Lewis, is an alcoholic, in and out of jail and alienated from the family because he feels he is the "failure" among his middle-class sisters. Paris, who admittedly is living out her mother's dream, is the only one at peace with Viola. Charlotte is not speaking to Paris because she feels Viola and Paris contrives against her. The whole family is in turmoil.

As the text begins, Viola is in the hospital recovering from a devastating asthma attack, and she decides to turn her life around, even if it means causing her large clan a little discomfort. Lewis, Viola's only son, is a drifter, handicapped both by his genius IQ and his alcoholism.

Janelle, the youngest child, is perpetually searching for the perfect career, while ignoring signs that her 12-year-old daughter is in trouble. Viola's relationship with her perpetually angry middle daughter, Charlotte, is so volatile that Charlotte periodically hangs up in the middle of phone conversations, while Paris, Viola's eldest, appears to be brilliantly successful, but is actually desperately lonely and has developed a dependency on pills to maintain her superwoman act. To add to the confusion, Cecil, Viola's husband of several years, has moved in with his girlfriend, Brenda, a welfare mother pregnant with a child that may or may not be his.

The story of how the family puts it back together is told from the perspective of all six main characters, and McMillan moves easily and skillfully from voice to voice. In negotiating and appropriating valid interactions within the Price family, McMillan avers the need for strong motherhood bonding as a panacea for combating conflicts. The novel recreates love and bond between adult family members. As such, it is a testament to the love between parents and their children, brothers and sisters. As intrusive and inconvenient as Viola's intervention is to her family, the healing process is later commended and appreciated by them especially through the letters addressed individually to them at the end of the novel. The Price family appears to be very dysfunctional in every sense. Viola writes letters addressing each member of the family, from Cecil to Janelle, exploring their situation and teaching them to embrace love and maintain the family bonding. Her letters are symbolic tools and timely intervention to put them back in shape. Therefore, the price of redemption for the Price family is extremely high and sacrificial; it cuts deep enough to cause Viola's life before some form of order could be achieved.

Apparently, Viola epitomizes the strong black matriarch who pulls her house together in the face of crises. Mary Louise Anderson qualifies a matriarch to be one who is frequently responsible for a male's emasculation; regards motherhood as the most important thing and protects her family from the prejudice of the outside world. Being responsible for a male's emasculation appears negative but that seems to define Viola's relationship with her husband, Cecil and this also informs his decision to leave the marriage. However, in administering the triple role of protecting her family, endorsing motherhood as life-sustaining and male emasculation, Viola Price conforms to Anderson's criteria of a black matriarch. Black matriarchs are known to manage the affairs of the home and restore order and sanity to the dysfunctional space. Metaphorically Viola represents survival and socio-economic stability. Unlike the matriarch, Mama Lena, in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Viola's perspective is more radical and as she combines humour with serious contemporary issues which seems to overwhelm her. Even in death her influence is significant. What McMillan does is to project a black matriarch who exhibits a good degree of control over many aspects of life ranging from, but not limited to, family, socio-economic and interpersonal relationship. According to Elizabeth Beaulieu, "through Viola, readers learn the importance of self-empowerment, family connections, personal and self love" (250). Viola therefore represents a very strong view point of survival and growth, and she teaches her family about love, hope and forgiveness.

"Liquid Jesus": Narrating the Baggages of Addiction and Sexual Abuse

McMillan's text is written in unified titled chapters with each chapter addressing a character. The expressive titles of the chapters are further revealed in the expressions or actions of characters within such chapters. Examples are titles like "Dreaming in Black and White",

"Every Shut Eye Ain's Closed", "Puff on That", "Liquid Jesus" among others. Interestingly, these titles connote different aspects of black popular culture idiom. For instance, the chapter "Liquid Jen" is basically about Lewis' life story and addiction challenges, where alcohol becomes the liquid Jesus that provides Temporary relief from pain. Thus,

Okay So I messed up. I shouldn'ta never took a sqig off Kirk's bottle. Pas I didn't even know the dude. He could have a disease. Many diseases What the hell. Now I gotta get ready for my sisters to lecture me all the way back to Mama's. They don't understand. And ain't no way for me to get them to understand. I don't want to have to drink, but... *A Day Late*, 158)

The above expression his battles with addiction. McMillan's works is argued to be rightly placed within the category of popular black women's fiction probably by her affiliation to popular culture. Robin Smiles agrees that McMillan "deliberately addresses the concerns of a commercial audience" and include "references to popular culture and consumer goods, such as movies, television shows, magazines and name-brand fashions". (124-125). Though the a reference to consumerism in her writing is criticized, it is worth noting that such references save as a means to reach and attract a specific target audience. In supporting the need for a target audience, Susanne Dietzel affirms that "for popular fiction to work, to be successful and to attract and maintain a body of devoted readers, it has to embody elements of recognition and identification" (159).

The author has each family member tell the Price family history from his or her own perspective until the family reassembles after Viola's death. Through the literary device of the talk story, McMillan explores the Price family. The first narrator, Viola Price, is in the hospital and unable to speak; readers are invited into her consciousness to "hear her thoughts". The first life story is about Paris, who suffers the pains of loneliness, the dangers of prescription drug addiction and her gullibility with the men in her life:

Now, Paris is the oldest. And just the opposite of Charlotte. Probably too much. Never gave me no trouble to speak of. And even though you love the ones that come afterwards, that first one'll always be something special. It's when you learn to think about somebody besides yourself. At the time, was sixteen and watched too many movies, which is how I got it in my mind that one day I was going to Paris and become a movie star like Dorothy Dandridge... Paris sure don't know how to pick no man. Every one she ever loved had something wrong with him.... The kind of men that drain you, drag you down, take more from you than they give, and by the time they done used you up, got what they want, they bored, you on empty, and they ready to move on to greener pastures. (11-12).

Even as Paris is loaded with weaknesses that make her crave drug prescription addiction, among the four Price children, she appears to be the most successful and corresponds to McMillan's earlier novel, *Waiting to Exhale* model of characterisation. In creating assertive and professionally successful female characters, McMillan has rightly confronted the mammy stereotype of black women in Barbara Smith's (5) essay by extrapolating alternative images designed with a purpose of expanding black women's consciousness. Lorraine Bethel

validates that black women writers have consistently rejected the falsification of their Black/female experience, thereby adding the negative types such falsification has often created in the white American male and Black male literary traditions (177) in synthesizing elements from the body of popular women's fiction as well as from the of African American Oral and print literature, McMillan has discovered a powerful for creating fictional spaces in which a black female worldview can occupy the centre rather than the margins of mainstream American reality.

According to Beaulieu, African American writers' rich literary voices continue the boundless connection between all African American mothers, who captivate their daughters with age-old wisdom and a compelling sense of belonging. Their voices continue the tradition of the souls of many mothers lifting and supporting each other, timeless and eternal (648). Perhaps this boundless connection is what offers the insight to Viola's unique knowledge of the character of her children. She talks from a position of confidence and an unquestionable role of a mother who has the right to meddle in her children's business, thus:

Can't nobody tell me nothing I don't already know. At least not when it comes to my kids. They all grown, but in a whole lotta ways they still act like children. *I know* I get on their nerves but they get on mine, too-and they always accusing me of meddling in their business but, hell, I'm their mother. It's my job to meddle. (1).

The images of motherhood in African American literature are rooted in the foundations of African culture. In African family unit, the relationship between mother and child is the foundation for a healthy kinship group. African mothers therefore forge deep and life long bond with their children. Grandmothers are not left out as they hold a special place in African family units as the holders of family history, folklore and other traditions thus commanding very high status in African society and they are perceived as occupying a special place between the earth bound families and the ancestors. They are an integral part of the familial relationship and are deeply respected. The transcending resonance of the experiences of all African mothers lingers in the heart of African American mothers. Motherhood as an institution as Collins (50) observes occupies a special place in transmitting values to children about their proper place.

The second life story is about Charlotte, who spends most of her relationship with Viola in conflict. Unfortunately, her self-perceived independence is the very thing that threatens her relationship with her siblings. From the way Viola sees it, which incidentally is the title of the first chapter, Charlotte's compulsive demand for attention is as a result of her childhood rivalry with Paris, the eldest daughter:

Charlotte just likes people to kiss her ass... Charlotte came too quick. Ten months after Paris. I did not need another baby so soon, and I think she knew it. She wanted all my attention then. And still do. She ain't never forgiven me for having Lewis and Janelle, and she made sure I knew it. I had to snatch a knot in her behind once for putting furniture polish in their milk. Made 'em take a nap in the doghouse with the dog and fed 'em Alpo while I went downtown to pay some bills. Had 'em practice drowning in a bathtub full of cold water. (7).

Interestingly, Charlotte is the only character in the novel who aspires for the inclusion in the American dream concept of beauty. Like Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* Charlotte believes that a fair complexion with long wavy hair is the true definition of the beauty she aspires. Clearly, this yearning for inclusion can be adjudged to be the manifestation of dysfunction as a distinct relief of racist traumatic experiences; one that creates a passionate desire to be the white man's model of beauty. Thus Viola concludes that Charlotte is a child that one could never praise enough and would always want more.

It appears that Lewis, the third of the Price children, struggles with demons from his past. Once married to Donnetta, Lewis cannot seem to move beyond the memories of his embattled marriage. He is unable to recognise that his trouble with relationships began early in his life when he was sexually abused by his older cousins. It is worth noting that McMillan's character, Lewis is the most affected by a traumatic experience and corresponds to Caruth's position that "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena." (11). Without the insight into the connections between his early traumas and his present state, Lewis self-medicates with drugs, alcohol, and women. Described by his mother as a genius, he is unable to complete anything, especially high school, in order to be a more productive citizen. His contribution to society is measured in the criminal activities that continually land him in jail. In retelling Lewis story, McMillan admits us into the ritual journey of characters that are being put in situations where they are being tested and how they reconcile and manage things in such situations:

Which is why I could strangle Lewis my damnsel. He is one big ball of confusion. Always has had an excuse for everything, and in thirty-six years, he ain't changed a lick. In 1974, he did not steal them air conditioners from the Luck Lady Motel that the Police just happened to find stacked up in the backseat of our LeSabre way out there in East LA. Lewis said his buddy told him they belonged to his uncle. And why shouldn't he believe him?... Lewis was always at the wrong place at the wrong time... (2).

What does not add up in Lewis' adult life is the terrible secret he keeps from his family. The blunder he makes becomes a result of the psychological effects of the experience of being sexually abused in childhood by his older male cousins. This attitude agrees with Esther Giller's analysis of trauma as an experience that "can profoundly change the way children, adolescents and adults see themselves and the world" (25). In this, McMillan's statement seems to be that people do not tell everything no matter how much siblings love each other and such secrets are disruptive of familial relationships.

Janelle, the youngest of the Price children, struggles with naïveté and low self-esteem. After divorcing her child's father, Janelle has an affair with a much older married man, George. Eventually, George leaves his wife and marries Janelle and becomes Shanice' stepfather. Unfortunately, it is soon discovered that George has been molesting Shanice, thus the reason for her strange behaviour such as pulling out her hair. Viola tells about Janelle thus:

Sometimes I feel like they made a mistake in the hospital when they handed Janelle to me. She a case study in and of herself. Been to college off

and on for the past fifteen years and still don't have a degree in nothing Hell, she should be the professor by now, Every time I turn around she taking another class. One minute it's stained glass. The next it's drapes and valances... The chile lives from one holiday to the next. If you don't know which one is coming up, hot drive by her house (16-17).

From the above, Janelle's vulnerability is similar to Robin in *Waiting to Exhale*. The difference is, while Robin seems to be gullible with her choice of men, Janelle is both gullible with men and totally clueless as to what to do with her life and career yet she never stops trying. Through Janelle, McMillan validates the role of determination as the motivation for survival. Her resolve to save her daughter Shanice from her husband's sexual overtures takes her through a process of concrete self-awareness and assertion. By presenting the evolution of Janelle's character, McMillan shows both the benefits and frustrations women experience in defining themselves as mothers and individuals. Basu Shymasree argues that "exploring selfhood by transcending the roles prescribed by society is not an easy task" (23). McMillan's novel is an example of transcending such roles.

Basically, Viola's justification of her concern for her family as maternal is both stifling and harmful. The weight of the Price family crisis is so enormous that the author symbolically relates it to the haunting effects of Asthma Viola is battling with. As such the fight for life becomes the only option available. However, as the novel concludes and Viola dies, she finally achieves the unity she promoted among her children through the letters addressed to each family member, read during the Thanksgiving after her burial. Although Viola tells it all, the mission is not about airing dirty laundry. Instead of just pointing out the dirt, McMillan's achievement is in crafting a narrative about people and situations that are causing them harm and how well they strive in such situations. Also, Monica Udoette and Joy Nwiyi avow that "Black women's work and family experiences create the conditions where the contradictions between everyday experiences and the controlling images of Black womanhood become visible" (202). These contradictions are visible in *A Day Late* as the narrative explores a black family and highlights their physical and psychic difficulties. McMillan's metaphors of chronic illness and dysfunction extend beyond the Price family to include the general state of the Black community in America:

The more I think about it, I'm beginning to wonder if we ain't one of them dysfunctional families I've seen on T.V. A whole lotta weird shit been going on in the Price family for years. But, then again, I know some folks got stuff that can top ours. Hell, look at the Kennedys. Maybe everybody is dysfunctional and God put us all in this mess so we can learn how to function. To test us. See what we can tolerate. I don't know, but we don't seem to be doing such a hot job of it. I guess we need to work harder at getting rid of that d-y-s part. I just wish I had a clue where to start. I won't lie: none of my kids turned out the way I hoped they would, but I'm still proud to be their mother. (20).

Ultimately, the appeal of McMillan's novels is prominently accessed through her unique choice of language of narration bordering explicit sexual language usage. Features of the Vernacular are extensively explored in this novel and the dialogue reveals the strained relationships among the family members. These features include but not limited to phrases

with multiple negation, habitual be final consonant cluster simplification, it for "there" was is in place of werware Thus, in conversations by the less educated characters like Viola, Cocil and Aunt Suzie Mac, McMillan reinforces this vernacular dialect to address the dialectical tension between the Price family members:

Did I wake you up, baby? Aunt Suzie? Yes, it's me.
Was you sleeping?" "Naw, I just dozed off for a minute.
How you doing? I been saving." "Hold it a minute.
First of all, when was the last time you drove a car?" "In
1978, I thank it was. Some thangs you don't never forget
how to do, baby, if you get Aunt Suzie's drift." (183).

This black vernacular is often referred to as Ebonics. The term was originally coined in 1973 by Robert Williams to refer to the study of the language of black people in all its cultural uniqueness. It is a combination of two words, 'ebony' and 'phonics' where ebony refers to black people and phonics, the study of sounds. Put differently, Ebonics is the study of the sounds of black people in the America.

Basically, Vernacular is a term with variant meanings. Its origins are in discussions of language use, as in Dante's choice to write in Italian rather than Latin, the language or dialect native to a region or country. Keith Byerman observes that in folklore studies, it connotes "a style of artistic or technical and especially architectural expression employing the commonest forms, materials, and decorations of a place, period, or group"(254). Within African American culture, the vernacular includes the conventional genres of folklore (tales, songs, beliefs, material culture) as well as performative aspects of storytelling, call-and-response, verbal contests, and religious practices. These oral forms and practices are generally understood as constituting the basis of African American culture. Vernacular expression in African American culture is a product for what may be termed as an 'everyday use' to borrow Alice Walker's coinage. It is the style of storytelling, sermonising, or blues singing that is crucial in part because the content is already known to the audience. In this, the African American novel maintains its reputation for linguistic and rhetorical innovation, through reinvention as a narrative construct and the intensity of its social meaning. In the African American novel, the world may be real or imagined, history can continue to haunt and anger, and the reader confronts the terrible silences of a shared history.

Conclusion

McMillan uses witty dialogue from a combination of unique characters in one family to tell the story. She departs from the long held view that African American literature should focus on race, racial pride, protest and racism in American society. This is not to say that her works are devoid of social criticism and issues dealing with race. What she does is adapt to new challenges, to changing situations and the diversity of blacks in the American society. Her narrative expresses characters' subjective response to individual situations and calls attention to how traumatic experiences, both racist and otherwise, is destructive to family relationships and the larger Black community in America. In narrating dysfunctionality as an excruciating social phenomenon, McMillan, adopts the literary device of stream of consciousness that invites the reader to follow through the knotting and knotting of events in the story.

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