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Terry McMillan's "It's Not All Downhill from Here": black women discharging interpersonal conflicts

Pradip N. Pawar

Rajarambapu Institute of Technology, Sakharale, Republic of India
pradip.pawar@ritindia.edu

Abstract. The research work attempts to study the contemporary African American women's struggle to discharge their interpersonal conflict with reference to Terry McMillan's "It's Not All Downhill From Here". Conflict is an expression of struggle between two or more interdependent persons who have incompatible goals. Through her works, Terry McMillan voices the life of urban African American middle class women. The Black women of this class are suppressed under various roles and responsibilities especially related to their families that have lots of challenges like addiction, crime, lack of trust and emotional bonding. Lack of any support builds up antagonistic mindsets and develops interpersonal conflicts. They are trying hard to resolve these conflicts and attempting to restart with more focus on exploration of self. The research work analyses the conflict resolution strategies employed by African American women in the novel.

Keywords: conflict resolution, African American women, self, interpersonal relations

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Терри Макмиллан «Отсюда не все так плохо»: разрешение межличностных конфликтов чернокожими женщинами

П.Н. Павар

Технологический институт Раджарамбапу, Сахарале, Республика Индия
pradip.pawar@ritindia.edu

Аннотация. Исследуется борьба современных афроамериканских женщин за разрешение межличностного конфликта в книге Терри Макмиллана «Дальше не все так просто». Конфликт – это выражение борьбы между двумя или более взаимозависимыми

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людьми, преследующими несовместимые цели. Показано, как своей работе Терри Макмиллан рассказывает о жизни городских афроамериканских женщин из среднего класса, которые подавлены различными ролями и обязанностями, особенно связанными с их семьями, и сталкиваются с множеством проблем, таких как наркомания, преступность, отсутствие доверия и эмоциональной привязанности. Сделан вывод, что отсутствие какой-либо поддержки формирует антагонистическое мышление и развивает межличностные конфликты. Проанализированы стратегии разрешения конфликтов и способы начала новой жизни с большим вниманием к самоисследованию, используемые в романе.

Ключевые слова: афроамериканские женщины, самость, межличностные отношения

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Introduction

The present research work studies Terry McMillan's middle class African American female characters in the context of interpersonal relations within and outside the family. It seems that the African American women in Terry McMillan's novels are desirous to have strong mutual relationships for which they strive hard to overcome conflicts at relational level. The main drive of the study is to reveal the struggle to resolve interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict of today's African American women through representation of African American women in Terry McMillan's novel *It's Not All Downhill From Here*. Even though persons competent in communication can handle conflicting situations skillfully to groom the relationship further, Terry's African American families lack healthy interactions among its family members. Involvement in conflict is mostly a devastating experience that may shatter one's world-view or response which may be negative or positive.

As individual's training to deal with conflicting situations starts in the family, Loretha Curry, the protagonist of the novel, has experienced it with her family members. A person witnessing conflicts and handling it skillfully within the family can further apply these observations and experiences affirmatively while facing such situations in the outside world. So, the approach should be positive while dealing with the conflicts. Loretha, a certified senior citizen of Pasadena California, feels undermined due to her conflicting emotional encounters. Loretha is not sure whether she has served the purpose of her life or not, so she does not want to declare herself a retiree. She is tired of attempting to fulfill everyone's expectations in the family and feels that she should start saying no. She is of the opinion that no one is perfect. So, one should be kind towards not only others but to self also. She knows that self criticism and harsh judgment of others do not always help. Social knowledge in various forms influences interpersonal conflict. The six major influencing factors in a conflict identified by Roloff and Miller are: person's

interests, concerns and past experiences; beliefs about functioning of relationships; sequence of actions; behavioural social norms; problem appraisal; and information about a person with whom one is engaged in conflict.

Conflicting situations not only evolve at interpersonal level as a person has familial, social, and professional life but also at intrapersonal level. Changing interpersonal relations is the root cause of conflict that may be implicit or apparent. Loretha married three times "that's how many times it took her to get it right" (McMillan, 2020, p. 30). Here, she has spent her lots of energy and time. Carl, a retired contractor, is Loretha's third husband who has entered in her life when children left her for their career. His entry revitalized and restored her life to liveliness. Absence of familial stability, low level of involvement and lack of affinity with the family members are some of the causes that trigger interpersonal conflict in the family.

Discussion

According to Sartre, conflict is an unavoidable regular happening in human life that is the result of choices made by us, associations with others, and freedom of expression. He further states that "conflict is the original meaning of 'being-for-others'" (Sartre, 1993, p. 364). Loretha owns a Pasadena Store that supplies beauty products. She loves the business and never keeps "the House of Beauty and Glamour" (McMillan, 2020, p. 19) closed without a valid reason. Though she does not like getting preached, she used to be a regular visitor of church and has a strong belief in Christian life. Since Carl's death, Loretha has stopped visiting the church and decides to close her stores. Later, on the insistence of her friend Sadie, she decides to visit church on Sundays with her. Interpersonal conflict can also be explained with apprehension of interpersonal relationships that influences interpersonal communication. Loretha does not have healthy relations with her daughter Jalecia with whom she has had no dialogue since last one year. Jalecia is forty-one-year-old but not self-reliant and sheltered at Peggy's home who is half-sister to Loreth's first husband. She is helping Jalecia in making her free of alcohol addiction. Though Peggy tries to demonstrate closeness and care for Jalecia, she extracts money from Loretha as her expenses on Jalecia's stay, food, and medical treatment. Jalecia shares her emotions with Peggy but not with Loretha which hurts her lot. Loretha has a deep desire to improve relations with Jalecia. According to Hocker and Wilmot, people in Western countries most of the times could not negotiate in integrative manner that is with love and respect. The intervention should be skilled and without any vested interest otherwise it creates further complications in the relations (2018, 260).

Frank Fincham states that persons look for valid reasoning to support their being in conflicting situations and relations. Jalecia thinks that Loretha favoured Jackson, her brother who lives in Japan with his wife Aiko and his daughters. It keeps her emotionally detached from her brother. This incomprehension of relations and underrating of self leads Jalecia to be an addict. Due to her alcoholism, she got arrested many times in drunk and drive cases. Every time, Loretha bears those expenses of bail to get her free. She has a strong desire to help in taking Jalecia away from addiction. She wants Jalecia to join an alcoholic anonymous

group, but Jalecia does not want to help herself. According to Loretha, Jalecia is not good in taking decisions and also reluctant in shouldering responsibility for the decisions taken. She has this indecisiveness due to internal conflict. She is serious about bringing positive change in self and to improve relations with Loretha, but she is unable to do so. While addressing a conflict, it is necessary to review the situation from different angles and should take into consideration the involvement of everyone and everything in it. On Kwame's suggestion to keep trying to bring Jalecia on track, Loretha replies: "I'm trying my hardest but when you hold out a branch to someone and they don't grab it, it makes you wonder if they really want help at all" (McMillan, 2020, p. 206).

Jalecia does not share anything with her mother. Peggy informs Loretha that Jalecia is not showing any improvement in her behaviour and is inclined to self-destruction. If the intrapersonal conflict is not managed appropriately and in time that may have disastrous consequences. Jalecia moves to Las Vegas with her boyfriend Jerome, but Loretha does not know about it. Peggy informs Loretha that Jalecia is safe and pregnant, but does not want to keep the baby because she does not know its father. It's very awful to Loretha who blames herself for failure as being a good mother. Loretha expects that her children should show care for her at least by inquiring about her health.

When Jalecia is hospitalized to get treatment for her catatonic depression, hospital authority informs Peggy about it but not Loretha. It hurts Loretha that Jalecia has given Peggy's number in the hospital and not her. All the same, she cannot stop herself worrying about Jalecia. She seeks advice for her from a psychologist and a psychiatrist. She wants to take Jalecia home after hospital discharge. On visiting the hospital to meet, Loretha is surprised to know that she is not on Jalecia's visitation list, so she could not meet her. After the treatment at hospital, Jalecia leaves with Peggy instead of informing and going with Loretha. On the one hand, these incidents develop in Loretha a strong antipathy towards Peggy and on the other hand, she keeps blaming herself for not properly looking after Jalecia's emotional needs.

Kwame, Carl's son from another woman, is jobless and lives in Loretha's apartment after Carl's death. Loretha is of the opinion that "Nobody should have to hind who they are inside to please people on the outside" (McMillan, 2020, p. 18). He is not in healthy relations with his mother Carolyn. Loretha is empathetic to it because she does not have healthy interactions with her children. She wants Kwame to settle the issues between him and his mother. As Kwame's mother has a stroke, Loretha wants him to attend her as early as possible. She wants him to look after his mother and expects from him to fill the gap between them. Loretha ensures Kwame that she is always there to support him. She arranges airplane tickets for him to go to Michigan urgently. Also, she sends two thousand dollars as he starts looking after his sick mother. Though Loretha is not receiving love and care from her children, she tries that Kwame's mother should get that. Loretha becomes successful in making him realize the responsibilities of a son that she expects from her children also. The result of the whole incident shows Loretha's conflict management skills and it encourages her to resolve conflicts within and with others.

Different objectives of persons become a major reason behind interpersonal conflict. Odessa, a twin sister to Loretha, left her job as a policewoman. She has a handyman named Derrick who is her boyfriend. Her husband left her for a woman who is ten years younger than Odessa. In a case conflicting personalities could not handle conflict, they lose interest in relationships and try to seek such a company that supports their goal and help in achieving those goals (Donohue, Cai, 2014, p. 36). Odessa undergoes a financial crisis and claims the house that is owned by Loretha and Carl. She is facing accommodation problems and wants to stay with Loretha in her house but she is not interested in taking her in. Loretha says to self "…just because someone is family doesn't mean that you have to like them" (McMillan, 2020, p. 7). With change in attitude towards conflicting situations one can use conflict constructively with changed world views to improve the quality of one's and others' lives. While informing Loretha about his work; Jackson, her son, said that he is working for the company like a slave. Recognizing it as a bad analogy, he corrects himself and continues telling that he is under a lot of work stress. This indicates African American's attempt to leave behind the black racial past.

A woman's hidden desire to have control and power over men is expressed by Terry McMillan in Ma's story. Loretha's mother is very energetic and hopeful about life. She is of the opinion that "you're old when you think you're old" (McMillan, 2020, p. 151). She does not want anybody to interfere in her life. Ma wants equal rights to men and carries a strong desire to have equal holding of power. She shares her strong feeling of power with Loretha and shares a secret that she had relations with two men in two days intentionally to get the feel. Loretha notices a feeling underlying with Ma's expression that men get freedom of having relations with many women and nobody objects to it. Loretha is very caring for Ma, that compassion she could not receive from her children. Loretha worries about herself for receiving care in old age. According to Nancy Burrell, people have different approaches or styles to resolve conflicts. It may be integrating where person has high concern for objectives of self and others, avoiding where person has low concern for goals of both, dominating where person has high concern for own objectives, obliging where person has low concern for own and high concern for other's objectives, and compromising where person has moderate concern for objectives of both (Burrell, 2014, p. 163).

In her childhood, Jalecia was expecting complete attention from her mother that she did not get due to her younger brother. This has created a gap in her relationship with her mother. Seeking affection from people in different relations is inherent in human beings. As a result of this, people are involved in conflict for relational issues like control, trust, and affiliation and they compete for relational control using language (Donohue, Cai, 2014, p. 27). During the treatment of depression, Jalecia has seen many patients deserted by their parents. This brings to her notice Loretha's care for her and she starts respecting her. Jalecia now recognizes that her mother has never sides with either of them. She also would like to express apology to her brother who is now in Tokyo. An email from Jalecia informing about her treatment results makes Loretha very happy. This is the first time she is informing her mother about her whereabouts and health. Jalecia returns to Loretha and regrets her previous behaviour that makes her happy. During

these days, Loretha finds her relations with her sister Odessa are also improving. Loretha invites her to join on a cruise where she enjoys their stay. According to Dunn and Herrera, children follow the techniques, strategies, and approach shown during conflict resolution by elders in the family. They recommend to have such moves in resolving conflict that shows concern for others and nature of compromise (Dunn, Herrera, 1997, p. 354).

Person's changing thoughts and emotions; his/her ideas, values and beliefs; and his/her tendencies and attitude are the main causes of intrapersonal conflict. People like Poochie never reflect internal conflict through their behavior. After Poochie's death, in her letter before death, all her friends come to know that she was having colon cancer. She has also suffered from arthritis pain. She is the eldest among friends whose husband died ten years back and has no child. She looked after her mother in her last days whose death makes Poochie lonely. She is very empathetic towards people around her.

Korynthia, a friend to Loretha, has three children from three different men, but still decides to remain alone. Her daughters do not respect her for her not having any degree. She does not have a full time job or business. These things make her regret not going to college. They do not have healthy interaction among family members. Her son Bird is a drug addicted and a victim of internal conflict whom she admits in a rehab. He leaves the rehabilitation center with incomplete treatment but she wants him to re-enroll and complete the treatment. Later, Bird starts his treatment that makes Korynthia happy. During self-medication, an overdose of pain relief has taken his life. On losing Bird, Korynthia suggests to Loretha to help her daughter to overcome addiction. African American women cannot avoid responsibility of parenting as they do it till their child's middle age and grandparenting afterwards. Sometimes it is willing, most of the time it is unwilling and compelled by their child. Korynthia's daughter needs her in babysitting her four kids who are below seven year old. Like Loretha, Koryhthia does not receive respect and care from her kids, grandkids, and great grandkids. Korynthia is fed up with the responsibilities of mothering – mother, grandmother and great grandmother even her mother has suicidal tendency. These unwanted and forced familial responsibilities lead to the conflict.

William Wilmot advises the married couples to have healthy interpersonal dialogue to avoid situations of quarrel. They should have clarity about each other's feelings, emotions, and thoughts (Wilmot, 1995, p. 138). Elizabeth Taylor alias Lucky, married to Joe a white, has no child. He loves Lucky and always respects her, but she is not in good relations with Joe. She could not recognise her love for him. They have a strained relationship. So, in order to avoid conflicts Joe divorces her. Now, Lucky is doing nothing except shopping and eating. Additionally, her ill-health and lots of free time lure her to smoking marijuana and lose attention from self and home. Conflict can be mutually beneficial in many cases but your attempt to avoid it may result in some loss. Especially, in a marital relationship, a couple can come across each other's expectations that remain unheard most of the time in normal situations.

Social conflict is unavoidable in the society we live in. Even though it has dark sides, racial conflict in the society facilitates in building an individual's iden-

tity. It influences a person's comprehension of incidents and situations around. A cop who looks like a redneck, a poor South American, stops Loretha who is driving a car swerving. When he stops her and asks for driving license and car papers, she starts thinking about why he has stopped her, a senior citizen. That may be because she is a black. Social conflicts help in developing affinity towards racially identical people. On knowing that Korynthia is in love with Henry, Loretha is interested to know whether he is white or black. When Loretha seeks advice for Jalecia from two doctors, one psychologist and another psychiatrist, she is expecting them to be black persons. This choice indicates Loretha's affinity towards doctors that are black. Loretha has sold her store in L.A. to two black graduates that show her kinship with black community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, change is one of the possible outcomes of any conflict. The interest of parties involved in the conflict behind its resolution should be to avoid loss for both of them. Conflict management needs to be impartial and feeling of justice done is desirable at both the parties that is by creating a win-win situation for them. In the later stages of life after a long period of conflict within and outside, Terry's female characters found taking decisions to refresh them with preference to spend free time on self and to live remaining every moment of life happily. Terry's black women choose to free themselves from all kinds of stress and from irrelevant things in their life. Conflict usually does not remain limited within parties involved; but like a chain reaction it starts affecting people associated with parties. People may learn from other's mistakes or give suggestions to conflicting parties based on their experiences as Korynthia warns Loretha. Conflict brings with it challenges and to address them one seeks from others, formal or informal help. Conflicts can be settled down by employing two methods – either mutual agreement after the discussion or inviting third party to reconcile that is negotiation. Intervention of third party to settle down the conflict may not always work due to personal interests of mediator as Peggy takes undue advantage of Loretha's helplessness. Further research can be undertaken to study impact of conflict and its resolution in shaping Terry's black women's identity.

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Bio note:

Pradip Nathuram Pawar, Assistant Professor, Department of Science and Humanities, Rajarambapu Institute of Technology, Sakharale, Sangli, Maharashtra, 415414, Republic of India. ORCID: 0000-0003-4778-1468. E-mail: pradip.pawar@ritindia.edu

Сведения об авторе:

Павар Прадип Натурам, доцент кафедры естественных и гуманитарных наук, Технологический институт Раджарамбапу, Республика Индия, 415414, Махараштра, Сахарале, Сангли. ORCID: 0000-0003-4778-1468. E-mail: pradip.pawar@ritindia.edu