

REINVENTION OF IDENTITY IN TERRY MCMILLAN'S *HOW STELLA GOT HER GROOVE BACK*

Pradip N. Pawar, Research Scholar, Department of English, Shivaji University, Kolhapur

Dr. Rajendra R. Thorat, Head, Department of English, Venutai Chavan College, Karad.

Dist.: Satara, Maharashtra, India

Abstract:

Exploration of self and one's identity has many shades. In case with African American people in general and African American female in particular, search for identity becomes more complicated due to racial past, white dominant sociopolitical systems, and instability in their life at present. While in an attempt to overcome difficulties of life African American women lose their selves. Terry McMillan's How Stella Got Her Groove Back carries impression of her life. In the later stage of protagonist of the novel Stella's life, awareness of loss of individual identity makes her think about reinventing it. This research paper is an attempt to explain Terry's reinvention of identity through Stella. The close analysis of incidents in the life of Stella makes the researcher conclude that for her individual identity is more important than racial, gender, and cultural identity. Stella's reinvention of identity becomes her journey to rediscover individual self. This research paper is an analysis of Stella's transformation from external to internal identity.

Keywords: *Quest, self-identity, reinventing, transformation.*

Introduction

The term identity is relational and dynamic in nature that makes tracing one's search for identity more complicated. *Cambridge dictionary* explains the term identity as "who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group that make them different from others". A person's search for identity helps him/her in making the life meaningful. To make it successful, one has to meaningfully correlate the mental state within him/her with the physical world around. *Cambridge dictionary* defines quest as "a long search for something that is difficult to find, or an attempt to achieve something difficult". Quest for identity may be everlasting. This search is sometimes internal i.e. psychological for identification of inner self. It identifies your uniqueness as a person. Quest for identity is sometimes external i.e. physical to identify quester's social positioning. It may be an attempt in suitably placing oneself in desired social setting. Quest or search may be in the form of an adventurous journey to attain expected goal or some kind of reward. Identity is indeterminate in nature, at one moment during the search quester may think that he/she has established identity, at another moment due to experiences with changing contexts of external world quester may think that he/she needs to move ahead in the search.

A novel always carries shades of reality. Writers either fully or partially give expression to their life experiences through the works. T. M. Pearce in his review paper *The Legacy of Robert Bridges* quoted following lines from Bridges' *The Testament of Beauty* (1929)

the secret of a poem

lieth in this intimate echo of the poet's life.

It means that a literary piece closely reflects the life events of author. A novel fictionalizes the real life characters especially close ones from family or writers themselves or the contemporary people around them. According to Chris Baldick "the novel differs from the prose romance in that a greater degree of realism is expected of it, and that it tends to describe a recognizable secular social world, often in a

sceptical and prosaic manner inappropriate to the marvels of romance". A novel describes life and the knowledge built on author's experiences and observations in the society. Several African American authors are found fictionalizing realities of contemporary life. To list a few, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) is physical and psychological search of identity by a biracial woman Helga Crane, who has never seen her black father. She travels to Harlem and Denmark in self-identification. Buchi Emecheta's *In the Ditch* (1972) depicts her own experiences of living on corrupt welfare system. She is struggling against reception of unequal treatment and odds around her to remain independent. Albert Murray's *The Spyglass Tree* (1991) is an academic novel narrates story of a young African American boy named Scooter who is living in Mobile County, Alabama. Music and singing is inseparable part of African American life that had been remained untouched by African American authors. He tried to bring it in the light.

A few more popular examples of this type of writings are *The "Genius"* (1915) by Theodore Dreiser, *Burmese Days* (1934) by George Orwell, *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath, Robert Boswell's *Crooked Hearts* (1987), etc. dealing with various themes like love, art, adultery, family life, death, life of immigrant, poverty, and travelling experiences. These examples help in endorsement of the opinion that the quest of fictionalized characters is author's expression of his/her own quest for identity through these characters.

Discussion and Analysis

Terry writes about her urban and suburban life experiences and minute observations of people around in the community. Her *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1996) is an autobiographical in nature which tells a story of Stella who is living with her loving son who occupies major space in her life. She is a financially stable woman. Except this she finds her routine life not fascinating and she is carrying a sense of incompleteness within herself. The novel narrates protagonist Stella's attempts to regain lost groove in her life and in establishing meaningful relationships with men. This has similarity to Terry's real life relationship with Jonathan Plummer. However, Terry clarify that "Stella isn't a reinvention of myself. She's only part of my persona....What I give my characters are my concerns, which for the most part are grounded in reality" (Porter 41).

Stella is forty-two years old, an independent and high spirited woman. She is of the opinion that woman should not allow a man to decide her life style. Stella and Walter, her husband have parted three years ago. It was not because of dislike or hating each other. Walter wanted Stella to be just like him. He wanted to change Stella into something which she was not. She wanted him to realize their differences and respect her individual identity. Stella left her husband because she felt that imposition of other's self on her as a threat to her existence. It is found that most of the Terry's female characters are not happy with their married life. They are facing problems in their relations with their husbands. So the sense of incompleteness is pervading these characters. They keep searching a suitable companion. Unfortunately, these African American women couldn't understand that such man can only exist in imagination. "...our perfection is merely a figment of our very own distorted imagination" (124).

Stella is proud of her race. She doesn't like gangsta rap songs because they refer to black women as bitches, they use word "niggah" which she never uses and doesn't allow the use of it in her house. Though she carries pride for her race, she is unbiased and doesn't want to stop the progress of family by unnecessarily despising white community. She lives in white neighbourhood because it has best schools wherein she wants to educate her son. In all black neighbourhood most of the youths are criminals and drug addicts. Stella scares of such places. She doesn't want her child grow up there.

Stella is working as an analyst in an investment banking firm. She is hardworking and devoted to job. Due to this dedication to work, she couldn't find time to write or to talk to her friends and relatives who are close to her. She is having such a busy life where she couldn't look after herself. Now, she wants to slow down her life and get relaxed. She has also recognized a threat to her job. She knows that in coming days she would be replaced by the computers and accepts the fact. She is no more enjoying the job. She feels

lonely and gets fed up with the job. She always thinks about her uneventful life. She is in dilemma whether she really wants to escape from her own world or not. She couldn't figure out her safe change in lanes. Stella sends her eleven years old son Quincy to Colorado to meet his daddy and to stay for a few days with him. This brings her privacy back for three weeks. Stella decides to get rid of routine life. "...as I sit here and watch Phoenix shacking himself dry, I decide that today maybe I should shake myself up a little too" (20). She doesn't know how much time it will take to get her groove back on but she wants to revitalize her life.

For something creative and fulfilling Stella is searching within herself. Stella thinks that she lived like she was in cocoon. Stella has already missed opportunities for being happy. She wants to be smarter. She wants to know how far she can go alone and how far with somebody. She wants to be in deep love with a man. She also wants to be the ideal mother, best friend, and best sister.

Stella gets enchanted by a television commercial inviting its viewers to Jamaica. She decides to visit it alone. This is the first time in last six years Stella is going to take vacation without Quincy. Stella's visit to Jamaica is going to take her away from everything and everybody. She has lost her original self somewhere back in the darkness that she wanted to bring it out to front in the light. It is the first time in her life she is doing something spontaneously. Stella shows courage in visiting Jamaica lonely. Stella feels liveliness in her life there.

At the hotel Castle Beach in Negril, Jamaica, Stella meets Winston Shakespeare. He is a student at University in Kingston. He is twenty years old. There is an age difference of around twenty years between them. Her first meeting with Winston moved Stella from inside. He has revitalized her life. With this she could generate the feeling of purity within her. For Winston, Stella is brave, smart, and straight forward to tell what she wants. For Stella, he is an innocent boy and the relations between them will be considered scandalous. On the one hand Stella has made him clear the differences between them; on the other hand she is always worrying about age difference that may take Winston away from her. This entire bustling in Stella's mind denotes her need of a companion in her life.

According to Terry there are a large number of African American women who are single and crossed their age over thirty years. There is rumor that these black women could go close to anybody. Stella doesn't want to be one among them. She also doesn't want to lose her individual identity in her love relations with Winston as it has been threatened earlier by her husband. Before leaving for Jamaica, Stella Came to know from somebody that if you would have physical relationships with Jamaican youth, he would expect you to stay at home and look after kitchen, produce children, and take care of them. Stella doesn't want to be like Jamaican women. In African American families women earn money. They also take care of children and maintain house. Though Stella is a courageous woman, in case with Winston she feels becoming emotionally handicap. She is in the middle of her life and she wants to have better than what she had.

Stella has shown emotional strength when she has been terminated from the job during her absence in the office. Because the job has made Stella loose self, the incident makes her free and relieved. Stella now decides not to enter into corporate world again. "So the search is on to find a place where I can be me and still make a living... Since I no longer have a job to distract me perhaps I'll pay closer attention to what used to give me pleasure in a major way" (245). According to Stella though she doesn't have a job, she still have her life.

When Stella receives a mail from Winston expressing love for her, in an excitement Stella books return air tickets for him. She is very happy at that moment because she is doing something for herself. Maisha, Stella's friend appreciates it. She said "Do you realise that as women we've been programmed to do the right thing since we were little girls..." (353) According to Maisha there should not be double standards separate for men and women. She doesn't see any difference between what Stella is doing today and what men have been doing for years together.

Winston's presence in the house pleases Stella. That is something Stella doesn't have in her past. She receives words of appreciation from Winston for her skill in furniture making. She is quite satisfied that she is paying attention to something that pleases her. Winston proposes to marry Stella. She has a doubt that marriage changes the nature of people and she doesn't want to. Winston assures her that "she would be marrying someone who appreciates the differences between them..." (442). Stella realises that she has with her something she wanted. Stella knows she deserves it and decide to enjoy it. Stella finally gives Winston her consent to marry.

Conclusion

Busy work life and incomplete family life has taken away fascination in the life of Stella. Absence of life partner, increasing communication gap with her only son, inability to explore self, monotony of work style are some of the reasons behind her growing sense of incompleteness in her life. It has generated in Stella a strong feeling of need to explore internal identity. It leads her to take decision to go on long vacation to fill up emptiness in the life with a loving companion, to get exposed to hobby, and to find earning source wherein individual identity need not lose.

Stella has always given preference to wellbeing of her small family wherein there are only two members including herself. She doesn't allow her racial identity to overpower her. For better education of and to imbibe good culture in her only son, Stella prefers to live in white neighbor. As she decides to look after her internal self, she becomes more alert that nobody should dominate her life. When she decides to leave for Jamaica she takes note of the rumour regarding Jamaican men. If you will have physical relations with Jamaican youth, he would expect you to stay at home and look after kitchen, produce children, and take care of them. She doesn't want to be one such and takes care during her interactions with Winston. As she is doing things for herself only, without giving second thought she booked return tickets for Winston. During his stay in Stella's house, appreciation of her art and creative skills by him gives Stella sense of satisfaction and makes her happy. Instead of all this when it is asked by Winston about their getting married, Stella gives her consent but a thought remains in her mind that it brings changes in person.

References:

1. Baldick, Chris. "Novel." *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Oxford University Press Inc., 2001, pp. 173-174.
2. <http://www.notablebiographies.com/Ma-Mo/McMillan-Terry.html>, January 2017.
3. <http://www.terrymcmillan.com>, September 2013.
4. "Identity." Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus, 2018, Cambridge University Press. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/identity>. Accessed 28 May 2018.
5. McMillan, Terry. *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, New American Library, Penguin Group, 2004.
6. Pearce, T. M. "The Legacy of Robert Bridges: A Review of "the Testament of Beauty." *New Mexico Quarterly*, vol. 1, issue 4, 1931. pp. 393-404. URL: <http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol1/iss4/17>. Accessed 30 May 2018.
7. Porter, Evette. "My Novel, Myself." *Village Voice*, 21 May 1996, pp. 41-42. Disheroon-Green, Suzanne. "Terry McMillan (1951-)". *Contemporary American Women Fiction Writers: An A-to-Z Guide*, edited by Laurie Champion and Rhonda Austin, Greenwood Press, 2002, pp. 247-251.
8. "Quest." Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus, 2018, Cambridge University Press. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/quest>. Accessed 28 May 2018.
9. Richards, Paulette. *Terry McMillan: A Critical Companion*, Greenwood Press, 1999.