

Exploring Love and Self-identity in Terry McMillan's *Disappearing Acts*

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ABSTRACT

This research article examines the intricate problems of love and self-identity in Terry McMillan's *Disappearing Acts*. The relationship between Zora and Franklin in the novel illuminates the challenges faced by them in reconciling personal identity. It also reviews Zora's efforts in rediscovering herself in the adverse circumstances around her. She frequently fails in bringing a sense of completeness in her life that is either through getting permanent male companionship or in taking decision to become a mother. Based on psychological and socio-cultural frameworks, this research paper explores how both protagonists navigate their emotional complexities and desires, leading to a deeper understanding of the human need for love and the ongoing journey toward self-identity. This article explores McMillan's contribution to contemporary African American literature, emphasizing the interconnectedness of self-identity and love.

Keywords: Identity, Love, Self, Sacrifice.

Terry McMillan's *Disappearing Acts* is a captivating novel that explores the intricacies of love, identity, and personal growth. It is an urban love story which talks about the struggle of a black woman and her husband Franklin Swift to find their unique and shared identities in life. Zora Banks, the protagonist, is a graduate, and teaches music in a junior high school. The hero of the novel, Franklin Swift, is a high school dropout with an alcoholic father, a sad sister, and an incredibly rude mother. Through the relationship between the protagonists, McMillan explores the challenges of self-discovery and the struggle to maintain individuality within their life.

Love is a complex theme that delves into deep emotional bonds, desires, and relationships between characters. The challenges of love in the novel are the imbalance in power and ambition between the characters. The author presents a raw and realistic portrayal of a relationship shaped by race, class and gender, ultimately highlighting the resilience required to sustain love amidst personal and societal challenges. Zora, an educated and ambitious teacher, and Franklin, a struggling construction worker, come from different backgrounds and have differing aspirations. Her love for music is portrayed as, "And when I'm singing, I'm not lonely, just overwhelmed by desire" (26). The author portrays love as a dynamic force that can both uplift and challenge individuals. Their love is passionate but is filled with difficulties, as they grapple with financial instability, infidelity, and emotional baggage from past relationships.

The author suggests that love is not simply about finding the right person but about learning to love oneself. Zora, a woman balancing her career and romantic life, embodies the tension between professional independence and personal vulnerability. Her talent in the field of music has been encouraged by Franklin initially but later he becomes envious of her skill and development. This makes him deny when she requests help, which hurts her mentally. Her weakness for black men and her desire to have a permanent partner for her in future are additional advantages for him to threaten her emotionally. According to the American writer Barbara Christian, McMillan's work illustrates how women

are “positioned at the intersection of race, class, and gender, yet their survival often depends on their ability to navigate these treacherous intersections” (122). Due to the challenges of managing the cost of living, the obstacles she must overcome to achieve her career goals, and her repeated pregnancies by Franklin, she seeks internal harmony through the support of her friends and other means.

The novel offers a comprehensive view of the transformative impact of love on individuals by exploring the themes of gender expectations, and economic disparities. Franklin has no respect for his parents Felix and Jerry. He is born and brought up in a family amongst female siblings and so is not paid any attention by his parents. His mother says, “You’s just lost, boy, always was, always will be. Why don’t you just go somewhere and leave us alone?” (10). His love experience starts with a relationship with Gloria, who works in the Welfare Department and next with Theresa, a bank employee. Pauline who works in a Secretariat school is the last one who breaks his heart. When he is twenty years old, he marries Pam of Jamaica and becomes a father of two children. He works in the post office at night and as a construction worker during the day. But his temper and lack of cooperation fail to sustain his job permanently, and so he is not respected by anyone in his family.

Franklin’s character is deeply shaped by his past, particularly the trauma he experiences because of growing up in a dysfunctional family. He faces significant challenges with commitment and emotional availability. Finally, he falls in love with Zora. At the time of Franklin’s closeness with Zora, through her words he comes to know that she does not trust men anymore because of her bitter experiences with many men. He acts as if he tries to take away the fear from her and says, “This time, baby, don’t be scared. This man ain’t interested in breaking your heart—he’s interested in giving it back together and keeping it for his self” (81).

Self-identity is portrayed throughout the novel which brings out the struggles and the painful reality of relationships. The concept of self-identity refers to how individuals define themselves in connection with

their internal values and beliefs and the external social forces that influence their roles and self-perception. According to Erikson, a German psychoanalyst, identity is “a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image” (18). In the novel, both protagonists must navigate their individual identities while confronting their desires for emotional intimacy. Zora, who is independent and career-driven, finds herself questioning how much of her individuality she must sacrifice for love. Franklin, on the other hand, battles feelings of inadequacy due to his financial struggles and lack of formal education. His self-worth is deeply tied to his ability to provide, and his insecurities often lead to tension in his relationship with Zora.

The author positions her protagonists as survivors, as they are often forced to redefine their identity in a world that seeks to limit their potential. Their financial struggles create additional stress and often serve as a catalyst for their conflicts. The author uses their socioeconomic differences to highlight the impact of financial instability on romantic partnerships, particularly within the African American community. Zora constantly fears that motherhood will be an obstacle to achieving her goal. As she feels that motherhood will keep her away from achieving her goal, she engages herself in writing many good songs. She realizes, “not only can you sing, Zora, but you can write” (330). The relationship between Zora and Franklin forces them to confront and reevaluate their own identities. The novel also explores how external societal pressures, particularly related to race and class, shape the characters’ approaches to love and self-identity.

The book *Disappearing Acts* shows Zora Banks shouldering her burden to the maximum, which is not realized, considered and appreciated by Franklin. Instead, she is blamed, oppressed and physically tortured and all this makes her seek relaxation through friends. The novel illustrates that true love depends on understanding and accepting oneself and others. McMillan portrays relationships as complex, showing that passion alone is not enough to sustain them. The novel highlights that true love

should be uplifting rather than exhausting and discouraging others in their decision. Ultimately, Franklin starts to accept his mistakes and works towards improving himself, while Zora learns the importance of independence and self-worth. In the end, *Disappearing Acts* highlights the necessity of true love for both people to grow with love and understand themselves to cherish a happy life.

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