Mother’s Madness: The Silent Struggle of Mothers in African American Literature and Film

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While existing in a racist, patriarchal society, women are not in control. The mother is responsible for the duties of the home and children. In Octavia Butler’s "Bloodchild," Toni Morrison’s Beloved, and the television miniseries THEM directed by Lena Waithe, sociopolitical and cultural pressure to perform physically traumatizes and mentally destroys the mothers of the house. Each of the matriarchs of these texts and program are tormented by the situational circumstances of their lives. Oppression and the illusion of freedom keep these women in unstable mental states. The silent struggle of these mothers drives them to insanity, self-destruction, child abandonment, and experiences of various forms of death.

The coupling of what is socially acceptable and what they know is wrong gives birth to their behavior and, as a result, a generational curse. In “Bloodchild” by Octavia Butler, Gan's mother, Lien, is constricted by her internal conflict. She watches and is arguably complicit in the age-inappropriate courting and ultimate rape of her youngest child by an alien creature. She does this because of a pact that she made with this creature for status. As much as she hates the idea of what is going to happen to her son, she raises him to honor his captor and to believe that his sacrifice is an honorable elevation instead of a condemned social station. She assists in the grooming of her child to elevate the rest of the family but denies herself any of the available comforts during the process.

The aliens, called Tlic, provide sterile eggs that act as an age-defying intoxicant for humans. Lien refuses to partake in the nectar's comforting effects as not only a silent act of rebellion but also as self-flagellation. Lien hates the alien T’Gatoi and the calamity that her family is in. She struggles through the story not sleeping or eating enough, which expedites her aging process and leads to her eventual death. This is an act of defiance that Lien exhibits as her own way of protesting. She refuses the nectar but is coerced to partake in it. T’Gatoi gaslights Lien constantly saying, “this place is a refuge because of you, yet you won't take care of yourself” (Butler 5). When Lien takes the bare minimum, the creature disregards her volition, forcing her to ingest more.

Against the wishes of the matriarch, the creature captures and stings her. In a venom-induced lull, Lien babbles that she wishes she would have killed T’Gatoi: “I should have stepped on you when you were small enough” (7). While this is presented as a joke between the two, Lien suffers as she bears the knowledge of what is to befall her child. The sociopolitical climate renders the humans (called Terrans) inferior and at the disposal of the Tlic. Lien promised her youngest child to the creature to secure provisions and safety for her family out of obligation, not by choice.
Absent the intoxication-induced admission, she never discusses the exchange. In the stupor of the sting, Lien futilely protested, “Nothing can buy him from me” (7). She is only mocked and stung again.

The family’s social ascent is dependent on Gan being the carrier of T’Gatoi’s eggs. For fear of harming herself, Lien is forced to facilitate his impregnation through sodomy. When T’Gatoi takes Gan outside the designated area for his people, his mother instructs Gan to “take care of her” (5) even though he is only a child. When they do get out of the compound, there is chaos. Terrans are fighting and clamoring in fear and filth while the aliens are arguing for access. In fear of the unknown terror of the outside world, Lien becomes an accessory in the victimization of her son. Rather than risk her family being exposed to the unknown, Lien decides to protect her family at the expense of her youngest child.

In Toni Morrison’s Beloved, Sethe is physically aware of the horrors of the plantation Sweet Home, where she was formerly enslaved. After the overseer’s nephews rape pregnant Sethe, by stealing her milk, she escapes enslavement. After a tumultuous escape, she reunites with her mother-in-law to live in a false sense of socio-political and economic security. When the overseer, schoolteacher, comes looking for Sethe and her family, she decides to free her children eternally to prevent her daughters from suffering the same plight. When faced with the possibility of losing her children to the torment of a known oppressor, Sethe sacrifices her baby’s life to keep her safe. Haunted by the memory of the dead child, Sethe is tormented by her past and her actions.

When Paul D, one of the formerly enslaved men of Sweet Home comes into town Sethe is comforted by his presence. They share the history and because of it they connect and communicate with each other. When Paul D calls into question Sethe’s choice to take the child’s life, “a forest sprang up between them” (Morrison 194). While he tried to defend his statement or offer other options, he insults her saying “you got two legs not four” (191). Sethe explains that she not only knows what she did but made the choice with the surety of knowing that anywhere would be better than Sweet Home. “I stopped him . . . I took and put my babies where I knew they’d be safe” (193). Sethe denies herself the love and comfort of a partner in standing by her decision. Like Lien, Sethe refuses herself pleasure and sacrifices her child to keep the family safe. The rejection of pleasure and comfort is often the cost of security for mothers in oppressed situations.

In the television miniseries, THEM, directed by Lena Waithe, a 1950s African American family decides to move to California from South Carolina after the mother, Lucky, is raped and the youngest son killed. The intention behind their move is to give the remaining children access to a more progressive environment and better education. Although they have family in the Watts area of Los Angeles, Lucky’s husband buys them a house in predominantly Caucasian Compton. From the day they move into their new home, the racist neighbors begin to harass them relentlessly. Lucky expresses her unease in their new place. After realizing that their neighborhood had previously prohibited African Americans from living there, she explains to her husband, with a gun in her hand, that if any of her neighbors get too far out of line, “they ain’t getting’ a warnin’”
(“Day 1” 19:34). The decision to stay in Compton wears on her mental state.

To cope, Lucky seeks refuge in the familiarity of family. Taking a day to visit relatives in town, Lucky goes to her cousin's house to fellowship. What starts as relief ends in a triggered escape. In the scene, Lucky is getting her hair done by a cousin who also offers children's services. During their conversation, she asks Lucky about her son's age and hair length. “What his name . . . Chester right?” (“Day 4” 21:15). Lucky panics and leaves hastily in a mentally foggy state. It is obvious that her cousin was uninformed of the situation. After being brutally raped and having her child murdered in front of her, Lucky silently suffers that trauma alone.

While being tormented at home by neighbors, the children are also taunted at school. The eldest daughter, Ruby, is mocked constantly by her classmates and haunted by an imaginary friend. The apparition that befriends Ruby helps her navigate the social climate of her new school. Ruby's suffering is compounded by the treatment of her family and particularly that of her mother. When she paints herself white at school to fit in, Lucky blames herself and begins to insist that they leave that house and neighborhood. The homes in Beloved and THEM are both vehicles of fear and suffering for their matriarchs.

In these texts and in the television series, the mothers sacrifice their peace to do what they think is best to protect the lives of their children and families. While these characters represent various points of contention on the oppressed freedom spectrum, they are all similar in the sense of sacrifice. None of them are willing to allow the harshness of the outside world to invade their homes and negate the little bit of control that they have. At the cost of their safety and sanity Lien, Sethe, and Lucky are willing to suffer the consequences of extreme actions for the sake of preserving their families.

Works Cited


“Day 1.” THEM, created by Lena Waithe, season 1, episode 1, Amazon Prime, 2021.

“Day 4.” THEM, created by Lena Waithe, season 1, episode 4, Amazon Prime, 2022.

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