Alliyah Allen

Professor Anne Dalke

Big Books of American Literature: Revising Racial Fictions

October 2, 2016

Reading *Beloved* in Womanist Thought

When reading Toni Morrison’s *Beloved,* many may express that they might reach a point in which they hit a wall. From the form and style to the actual content of the text, *Beloved* is not an easy read and requires support when reading it. Morrison is known for writing to unpack truth, and the road to truth is not always easy or comforting. It evolves going into the pain that may be present, and relying on the feeling and story to make better sense of what happened and how that might apply currently.

With *Beloved,* readers are able to enter a text that pushes past the facts that many learn about slavery. Morrison provides a story that deals with love, death, murder, pain, suffering, haunting, healing, and more. Reading this novel on a surface level defeats the purpose and work that Morrison offers. However, unpacking the themes of the book can evoke a certain level of trauma, which leads to confusion and not a full appreciation of the story.

My first encounter with *Beloved* was my senior year of high school. I had no context as to what unveiling truth might mean and what the power of the story could do to my psyche, emotions, intellectual curiosity, and overall well-being. While I was able to appreciate the literary richness that *Beloved* offered, there was still a disconnect with appreciating the fruit of the content. My second encounter with *Beloved* was my freshman year of college, in my Black Religion and Womanist Thought class. This class was important because it allotted a space to comfortably meet theory with praxis. Womanism encompasses theory, spirituality, literature, politics, social theory, and more. Therefore, I was able to apply the principles of womanism to *Beloved,* which allowed for an opening to understand how *Beloved* works as a literary text and commentary on American history.

The text, *The Womanist Idea* by Layli Maparyan, outlines a framework that can be used in both a theoretical and practical context. Relying on Alice Walker’s coining of the term in her literature, *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens,* Maparyan defines womanism as,

Womanist’ encompasses ‘feminist’ as it is defined by Webster’s, but also means instinctively pro-woman. It is not in the dictionary at all. Nonetheless, it has a strong root in Black women’s culture… Womanist 1. From womanish. (Opp. of 'girlish,' i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) a black feminist or feminist of color. "A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually... Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually... Not a separatist, except periodically, for health.' (Maparyan 20)

This definition and claiming of womanism allows for an expanding of how many understand all that encompasses the woman, more specifically the black woman. In a society that relies so heavily on categories, grouping, and identities, womanism is essential. It provides a set of tools and methods that help women both advocate for themselves and build a platform for change. It is rooted in the principles of motherhood, that being love, care, protection, relationships, growth, and support. *The Womanist Idea* outlines an axiology that delves into the both into the aesthetic and ethics of womanism on both a community and personal level. For example, one of these values would *self-actualization.* Maparyan explains,

The process of self-actualization presents an alternative to the dehumanizing domestication process that currently passes as socialization, breeding conformity and dumbing people down to the ultimate peril of themselves and the larger society. Preconditions for self-actualization are self-knowledge (which requires both exploration and introspection), self-love (which is fortified when people receive significant love and validation from others), freedom to explore, express, and create from the place of one’s own vision or inner light, and a baseline of physical health. (Maparyan 43)

Concentrating on values, like self-actualization, is key to womanism. Unlocking the true self and trusting in one’s inner light and vision grounds a foundation that actually helps many to understand structures and even do work to dismantle them. What’s particularly notable about Maparyan’s text is that actually takes many of the methodologies and axiology and applies it by providing her own testimony, which allows readers to understand womanism and how experience how it might be applied.

In the last chapter of the text Maparyan gives her testimony about how her daughter, Aliyah, transitioned. At the age of 22, Aliyah decided to jump off the roof of a building. Maparyan does not think of this event as an act of suicide. Maparyan does not think of this event as an act of suicide. She does not believe that her daughter was depressed or deprived of life and humanity. Her logic and feelings follow the same premise that womanism is based in and also that Morrison follows in *Beloved.* That premise is that if one is a human being, breathing, thinking, and feeling in this space, then one is not dehumanized.

This thinking and perspective allows for many to *see* people who are perceived to be dehumanized. It allows for many to delve deeper into the complexities of the what ifs and the truth of what happened. For example, Maparyan was able to recognize her daughter’s transition as “an event” caused by psychological and religious awakenings, including mania, a condition that causes people to develop a superhuman sense about themselves which makes them feel invulnerable. Furthermore, with this conclusion, Maparyan is able to raise questions of prophets. She writes, “What if Jesus came back in the body of a middle class Black girl from urban America? Would we recognize and embrace her? In a world that suppresses young Black girls… could she even recognize herself?... Was their [Jesus, Muhammad, the Buddha] Godlike consciousness real, or were they ‘out of their mind’? When they saw things that others didn’t see, were the people who believed in them ‘crazy’ or ‘chosen’?” (Maparyan 303) Clearly, womanism has allowed Maparyan to deconstruct the simple but also loaded notions of crazy and chosen. Here she is able to see her daughter’s life as more than a suicide or time leading up to death. However, she is able take on this traumatic event to mean something along the eyes of being beyond human but also a servant of God.

In the spirit of motherhood, I am choosing to focus on the actions and development of Sethe. Sethe is one of the most problematic characters in the novel, as her actions to kill her daughter instead of giving her back to slavery has questioned her humanity, civility, and ethos. With a first read, many might feel as if slavery has completely dehumanized Sethe. Her connection with her mother is only visible through memories because she saw her mother hung. Sethe also chose to run away from the plantation, Sweet Home, because the slave master’s stole her breast milk and whipped her back. Her time as a slave and her journey running away towards freedom turned her cold and stone like. She lost an appreciation for color and “haunted” by the spirit of the child she murdered.

While it may present itself to be easier to understand Sethe’s narrative as another slave who has lost any sense of humanity and has done crazy and incomprehensible things, womanism provides a context to conceptualize, vocalize, and feel Sethe’s story on a grander scheme. For example, one passage about how Sethe and Paul D were discussing the murder of the child reads,

“’Your love is too thick,’… ‘Too thick?’ she said… ‘Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all.’… ‘It worked,’ she said. ‘How? Your boys gone you don’t know where. One girl dead, the other won’t leave the yard. How did it work?’ ‘They ain’t at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain’t got em.’ ‘Maybe there’s worse.’ ‘It ain’t my job to know what’s worse. It’s my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that.’ ‘What you did was wrong, Sethe.’ ‘I should have gone back there? Taken my babies back there?’ ‘There could have been a way. Some other way.’ ‘What way?’ ‘You got two feet, Sethe, not four’ he said, and right then a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet.” (Morrison 165)

This interaction between Sethe and Paul D breathes into the very core of womanism. Clearly, Sethe is deciding to stand strong in her decision to murder her child. Her confidence hints towards the process of self actualization, one of the values presented in the womanist axiology. While her actions are hard to deal with, she knows that they are correct. She has an understanding of the world works and she knows how to protect her children from it. Even when Paul D suggested her actions being bestial and inhuman, Sethe easily knew how to separate from these assertions. She did not agree with him. She understood the power of her love and she knew how to use it. However, her mind, energy, and physical body was operating in structure that could not expand its views to understand how Sethe’s love worked. She was considered crazy and a monster, and there was no space, room, or process that allowed anyone to see her as actually having a high amount of power and knowledge.

The difference that arises between Sethe, Maparyan’s daughter, Aliyah, and the forces and people that oppress them is the fact that they are black women. These women possess high and vibrational energies. The love that flowed through them gave them sight that many do not experience, nor have the capacity to experience. Therefore, I question how wrong was Sethe’s killing of her daughter, and how wrong was Aliyah’s transition? When driving past the surface and aesthetic of Morrison’s writing, the actual values and messaging of the narrative opens up the possibility of Sethe being a literary prophet. Her story, her love, her actions, her motherhood, her energy are all evidence that builds a foundation to explore this what ifs and the magic of the black slave woman, and furthermore the black woman. Black women have survived, sustained, built, and held families together repeatedly through time. Many just sit in awe at the work, however, writers and thinkers like Toni Morrison and Layli Maparyan give us context to vocalize their efforts and comprehend their contributions to the world as fully functioning human beings. With womanism, readers are able to see and think of characters, like Sethe, as they would for Jesus, Muhammad, or even the Buddha. They are able to throw away over-simplified notions of crazy and dehumanized, to arrive at conclusions that highlight the totality, high potential, deep knowledge, and thick love of the black woman, enslaved and free.

Works Cited

Maparyan, Layli. *The Womanist Idea*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2012. Print.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved: A Novel*. New York: Penguin Group, 1987. Print.