

Gender Under the Moonlight

Our society has been constructed based on a fundamentally simple and binary view of gender, and this view is exacerbated by societal norms which we consciously and subconsciously adhere to in our everyday lives. The way we act out these societal norms can be described as the sociological concept of “doing gender”. In the film *Moonlight*, directed by Barry Jenkins and set in 1980s Miami, young Chiron is surrounded by other boys who are constantly policing masculinity through the use of bullying and discrimination, and grows up in an environment where he is unable to truly express himself and suffers from loneliness and isolation. The film explores this concept of “doing gender” through the eyes of a young black boy and his journey through adolescence and adulthood, navigating his own sexuality while facing external pressures from family, peers, and societal expectations. The way in which the film is split into three parts representing the distinct stages of Chiron’s life allows the viewer to understand how an individual’s understanding of their own identity changes and the influences that play a role in this process. The interplay between identities of class, race, and gender create an uncomfortable environment which leaves Chiron with little autonomy in the courses of action he must take throughout his life. Chiron’s experiences at a young age, heavily influenced by “fag discourse” and policing of masculinity, hinders his ability to truly express himself throughout the later phases of his life and show the negative consequences of gender policing and how masculinity is often used to battle these intersecting struggles of identities.

The opening act of the film is crucial as it really delves into the confusion in trying to understand yourself and coming into your gender identity at a young age. Chiron lives with his mother and with his father being absent, his mother is often out working and also dealing with drug addiction which causes her to often neglect Chiron. At school Chiron struggles to fit in with

the other boys and faces bullying, exemplified by the opening scene in which he is being chased by boys berating him with words like “faggot”. This is a direct example of CJ Pascoe’s work on discussed in the article “‘Dude, You’re a Fag’: Adolescent Masculinity and the Fag Discourse”. Pascoe explains how fag discourse, especially among young boys, is not forwardly homophobic and often not even directed at individuals who actually identify as homosexual. As discussed in lecture, it is more so about this idea of “policing masculinity” and the desire to not be labeled as this hypothetical “fag” (Winder, Lecture). In Pascoe’s words, “becoming a fag has as much to do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess and strength or an anyway revealing weakness or femininity, as it does with a sexual identity” (330). There is a scene in which Chiron is having a conversation with his friend who is asking him why he is so “soft” and allows himself to be bullied and they get into a wrestling match which changes his friend’s perception of him. This idea of being “soft” is often seen as a failure of masculinity which often results in being demasculinized. Chiron’s friends and even Chiron himself do not know whether or not he is actually homosexual. Although, Chiron is subconsciously doing gender through actions he participates in like dancing, and even actions he does not choose to participate in like the sports and rough-housing done by his peers. He most likely understands that he is different from his peers in some ways, but is still faced with confusion surrounding his own sexuality.

We find out early in the second act that Chiron’s father figure, Juan, who would watch over him and provide him a sense of comfort away from his home, has passed away so Chiron is suffering from isolation. This act of the film takes place when Chiron is in high school, and he is still facing harassment from his peers. They make fun of him for his pants being tight and he is just overall shy, so the bullying is still revolving around masculinity and not targeted

homophobia. We still see Chiron trying to fight this by trying to appear as tough and using a deep voice to possibly ward off some of this harassment. This is just one example seen during this act that signals how toxic masculinity starts becoming pervasive in Chiron's life. Many black communities often find themselves at the intersection of class struggle and racial struggle and this will sometimes lead them to adopt traditional ideals of masculinity, whether this is through ideas of needing to be "tough" as a man or even through the church. In Chiron's case, he is pitted against class struggle, racial struggle, and gender struggle which adds a new unique dimension to his experience. He feels pressure from multiple different angles to present himself in a more masculine fashion, as it fully becomes a sort of defense mechanism metaphorically and in the literal sense, as well. In this act we see him develop an interest in his best friend Kevin, who he eventually has a mutual sexual encounter with. In their article "Doing Gender", West and Zimmerman expand upon Erving Goffman's idea of gender display by explaining how displays of gender are present in almost every aspect of our lives within our interactions – conscious or subconscious – and we typically do not have full control over how our gender is perceived by others (130). Chiron's friend Kevin is assumed to be LGBTQ+ like Chiron, yet he does not face the same discrimination as Chiron because he has relations with women, acts "tough" and embraces more traditionally masculine traits than Chiron. There is a scene that takes place very soon after Kevin and Chiron's sexual encounter, where Kevin is essentially peer pressured into helping the bullies brutally assault Chiron. Kevin is reluctant because of his feelings for Chiron, yet in a social setting where his masculinity is being sort of "tested" by his peers, he feels he must follow through to prevent himself from facing further scrutiny. This can be seen as utilizing masculinity and "doing gender" as a defense mechanism or survival tactic that is necessary, but also reproduces harmful toxic masculinity.

The third act skips far ahead into Chiron's future, presumably in his 20s to 30s, and he is fully immersed in his environment, as he becomes a drug dealer who presents himself in a very masculine manner. His life in this stage shows parallel to Juan's life which makes sense considering Chiron spent a significant portion of his childhood around him, and Juan was the main example of how a man in their environment should behave. Chiron's display of gender here is used as this "survival tactic" because there is this need to always be tough, especially when it comes to street life and the drug-dealing world. Monetarily, it is also sadly one of the most effective methods to making money when growing up in an underprivileged community like Chiron did. Looking through an intersectional lens, Chiron had to make a decision between being an openly queer black man in an impoverished community versus keeping his sexuality concealed and conforming to gender norms. He chose the latter which required him to sacrifice his mental well being and longing to openly express himself in order to maintain his own safety. An early scene in this act shows Chiron's friend asking him where girls are at, and similarly to an earlier scene between Chiron and Kevin discussing girls, Chiron seems both uninterested and possibly uncomfortable. His true self is existing in a metaphorical shell that represents the tough exterior he must keep and refuse to let break down, at risk of facing dire consequences. In the closing sequence of the film, Chiron visits his old friend Kevin, who is now working at a diner. Kevin was able to go on with his life and have children while Chiron was still struggling internally because he never lost his feelings for Kevin. Chiron also explains that Kevin was the only man he has ever been with which demonstrates the possible mental torment that he had to endure throughout the years, while he was not able to openly express himself emotionally or sexually. The film closes with Chiron in Kevin's arms, where he can finally crack this tough

exterior shell he has been trapped inside, and can finally experience the intimacy and love that he never was able to receive.

Deviating from traditional gender stereotypes and norms not only leads to physical damage in the form of harassment and bullying at a young age, but also long-term emotional damage if you are forced into displaying your gender in a certain way in which you are uncomfortable with. Chiron is a great example of this and shows how when these kids are policing gender and masculinity at such a young age, before they often even understand their own identity, it can lead to confusion and cause them to consciously or subconsciously reproduce these traditional gendered ideas. The fear of being the “other” is valid, especially when you exist at the intersection of several marginalized identities like Chiron is. It creates this phenomenon of trying to “fit in” where one must utilize gender display to provide a layer of protection against potential harassment, which usually is mentally taxing on the individual.

Works Cited

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