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Tish Survives Beale Street: The Gender Dynamics Portrayed in Barry Jenkins' *If Beale Street Could Talk*

Despite showing the build-up and consequences of the injustice which sent Fonny to prison, Barry Jenkins tells a love story through the perspective of a young colored female in the '70s, thereby making Tish a symbol of Black female strength. While this movie is an adaptation of James Baldwin's novel of the same name, this essay will analyze the dynamics of gender in Jenkins' 2018 film. The film is a testament to both the beauty and cruelty of love. One of the more fascinating discussions to be had about this film is responsibility and how it relates to gender. Granted, the way Fonny gets thrown in jail is one of the worst imaginable. The audience is made to bear witness to the epitome of racial injustice as an innocent Black man gets sent to prison through no fault of his own. However, and even similarly to Fonny, through no fault of her own, Tish is left in a nightmare of a situation. For the most part, it is this struggle which the audience gets to see. Tish is in a position where she does not know when her child will be born. She does not know when, or if, her husband will get out of jail. She does not know how she will support this child without its father. She does not know how she will make ends meet on her own. And yet, as we see at the end of the movie, despite it all, she does survive. But what does this all mean and what message does it convey about the Black female in 1970s Harlem?

According to White, "feminism makes salient the category of gender and gender hierarchy in all forms of knowledge and areas of inquiry" (117). The concept of hierarchy is relevant as it relates to Tish. Despite bearing the burden of pregnancy and the impending birth of

her son, this is not enough. Tish is forced to undergo intensive labor, sometimes under abusive conditions, in order to make ends meet while her husband is unfairly locked up in jail. What should be interpreted when considering Fonny and Tish's situations? "The Black women of the novel enact and embody the power of life in the face of death, demonstrating the myriad ways Black women's bodies are a critical part of the Black nationalist desire for liberation that was prevalent during the 1970s post-civil rights movement" (Smith 50).

Even though Tish is free, certainly in comparison to Fonny, she is still somewhat just as chained down as he is due to their connection, embodied by their son. As the female in the relationship, and due to the tradition of Black male incarceration in the United States, Tish, like so many other women in this country, is forced to be the sole caregiver of her child. Smith continues, "The imperatives of Black nationalism relied upon standardized arrangements of kinship centralized in the heteropatriarchal nuclear family, with women as caregivers and mothers" (50).

There is a scene which further explores the complex and layered dynamic of gender for a Black woman in that time. It's a brief scene, but it is also very telling. As with most of the film, Tish is narrating an experience she had after Fonny's incarceration. "The store thought it was very progressive to give this job to a colored girl," she explains as she is seen, visibly pregnant, running to her station, where she is to stand at the perfume counter. Tish goes on to explain that she does not have to feign a massive smile only for old white ladies. We see that men sometimes approach her counter as well. As Tish continues to narrate, we are given a fascinating window into the gender hierarchy of 1970s Harlem and how it varies depending on the pigment of one's skin.

The position of a female at the perfume counter in those days is a veiled one that, when lifted, can reveal something appalling. Tish and her colleagues (all female) stand behind the

counter all day as they continuously spray perfume on their hands so that others can judge whether they wish to buy said perfume. Their body, their flesh, becomes a vessel for which others can make a decision on their olfactory purchase for that afternoon.

“Perhaps for a Black cat, I look like a helpless baby sister, and he doesn’t want to see me turned into a whore,” Tish says. This quote is profound as it can imply that when a Black man sees Tish at the perfume counter, he seemingly understands her struggle and even takes some sort of pity on her because he knows what—or whose—world they are in. Suddenly, a Black man walks toward Tish’s counter. “Yet some Black cats come closer, just to look into my eyes to check out what’s happening, and they never smell the back of my hand. A Black cat puts out his hand and you spray it. And he carries the back of his own hand to his own nostrils.”

Then, a White male customer approaches Tish. Their interaction differs from that of the “Black cat,” as Tish would say. While it’s seemingly subtle, the difference speaks volumes. The White client does in fact have Tish spray her own hand. “He will carry your flesh to his nostrils, and he will hold it there. He will hold it there for a lifetime.” In this instance, the White customer perpetuates the notion that, yes, the female behind the perfume counter is there for his convenience. Why would he spray female perfume on his own hand when he has someone like Tish, for example?

These are the subtle displays of gender hierarchy with which Tish had to fight while pregnant and while she prayed that her Fonny would come home to her. In the end, the film leaves us with a broken family. Tish and Alonso must visit Fonny in jail. Unfortunately, this story of American in the ‘70s still rings true to this day. While this continues, mothers across the country continue to be placed in positions where they are forced to be the caregivers of fatherless children.

Works Cited

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